

The Great Simplification

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[00:00:00] **Nate Hagens:** Greetings, good humans. Time for another Frankly. This week is Climate Week in New York City, so frankly, it's kind of a thought experiment. I want you to imagine a world leader, not the leader of any particular country per se, but maybe a generic leader of all of them, someone with no election to win or donors to, please, and no border to defend.

[00:00:32] And imagine this person decided to give the population of Earth a series of honest addresses using the words and tone that politicians usually use, but saying the things that no politician today would probably actually say. So here's my take at a state of the world address

[00:01:07] My fellow citizens of Earth, we leaders, elected or not, have known what I'm about to tell you tonight for a long time, at least most of us. We just did not believe we could politically survive saying it out loud. You have heard two stories about our blue-green planet, the third rock from the sun. In some places, your leaders tell you there is no problem at all.

[00:01:39] Earth's climate has always changed. The scientists exaggerate, and your job and your truck are under attack from elites who fly private jets to conferences and speak about muzzling your carbon footprint. That story is one that wins elections, but that story does not change the chemistry of the atmosphere or Earth's oceans.

[00:02:04] In other countries, your leaders tell you there is a problem and that we are solving it. We will swap out the bad energy for the good energy, the solar panels and the electric cars, and your life will continue exactly as before, but cleaner. That story also wins elections, and it is a bit closer to the truth, yet it

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treats an ecological emergency on our planet more like a product recall, where we just have to swap parts, but keep driving in the same direction at the same or even faster speeds. Neither of those stories is true.

[00:02:51] Tonight, I'm going to tell you the truth as best as we currently understand it. To get to the truth, I must first start with the ancient sunlight that we have built our current civilization with. You know this variously as fossil fuels, coal, oil, and natural gas. We have been spending this one-time fortune for two hundred years, the sunlight sealed inside every calorie on your plate.

[00:03:20] A single barrel of oil trades today for roughly the price of a good dinner. But when you combine what's inside that barrel with the various machines that it powers, it can do the equivalent of five years of one human being's physical labor, digging and hauling and lifting and pumping and pushing and pulling.

[00:03:44] Five years of it in a small drum we could roll across the floor. If you hired a person to do what that barrel does and paid even the lowest legal wage, it would cost you tens of thousands of dollars. We pay under a hundred for everything it does. We pay somewhere between one-hundredth and one-thousandth of its economic worth, and we burn through roughly one hundred million barrels of it every single day, plus the coal, plus the gas, which is why when the price of energy rises, the price of everything rises with it.

[00:04:24] However, tonight I have come to tell you what a century of that burning has been doing to the sky and to the sea. The heating of our planet is not an accident, nor is it a conspiracy. It is the exhaust from our material success. When we burn these fuels, a little bit of heat stays on Earth, but a little bit of it also acts as a blanket around our atmosphere.

[00:04:56] And over time, this reduces the amount of outgoing heat that can escape into outer space, slowly raising the total average temperature of Earth's

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entire system. The felt effects for you and me are unevenly over space and time, but over the coming decades and centuries will transform this world which we call home.

[00:05:26] Carbon dioxide in our atmosphere is now higher than at any point in millions of years. The oceans, which cover most of this world and gave rise to all of our life, have absorbed the vast majority of the extra heat and roughly a third of the carbon, and they are becoming warmer, more acidic, and less alive. The heat waves and the floods and the fires and the failed harvests you have watched on your screens are but the leading edge of this, and more is already in motion no matter what we do next.

[00:06:05] Next year, twenty-seven, will be the warmest year of our lives due to the super El Niño on top of the existing warming, and within some near-term error band, it will likely be the coolest year of the rest of our lives. Things like this are usually said in science fiction movies. This is science, but alas, it is not fiction.

[00:06:32] There is a deeper layer to this crisis, one that even few leaders will acknowledge. In addition to the ecological waste that hydrocarbon combustion has created, we are also entering decades in which energy will move from the background of our lives back into the foreground. The inheritance is not gone, but the richest part of it is long past.

[00:06:59] The cheapest barrels have already been burned, and what remains costs more to reach with every passing year and is unevenly distributed around the planet. The fossil miracle which has created what we might call modernity will not be here forever, radically changing what life looks like for billions of us.

[00:07:24] What's more, those fossils still available for us to burn are also enough to accelerate the ecological disasters that are unfolding. And I probably do not need to say we are unlikely to choose restraint of using them by choice. And now I

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have to tell you why the governments of this world, including mine, have failed to act for fifty years.

[00:07:52] There are nearly two hundred nations on this planet. If all of us used less energy together, all of us and future generations would benefit together. But if one country restrains itself while its neighbors do not, that country falls behind. Its economy shrinks, its military weakens, and its leaders get voted out and replaced by someone promising growth, which requires energy from Earth's vault.

[00:08:24] What is best for all of us is not what is best for each of us. And this is not our only crisis. Decades ago, scientists began mapping the conditions that have kept this planet friendly to human beings for the last ten thousand years and have identified nine planetary boundaries, nine natural systems that need to stay within a safe range for civilization as we know it to continue into the future.

[00:08:52] As of tonight, we have crossed seven of these nine boundaries. The heating of our climate is only one of them, and it perhaps may not even be the most dangerous. We have cleared forests and plowed grasslands faster than they can ever recover. The nitrogen and phosphorus we spread in our fields to grow cheap food are running off into our rivers and creating dead zones in our seas.

[00:09:17] We are draining rivers and ancient groundwater faster than the rain can refill them. The population of wild animals on this planet has fallen by three-quarters since 1970, within my lifetime, and our plastics and synthetic chemicals now show up in the rain, in the soil, and in the blood of newborn babies.

[00:09:40] None of these statistics appear in any country's economic scorecard, yet all of it is the foundation those statistics stand on. Every one of these traces back to the same source: a single species using more energy and more materials every single year on a planet that is finite. So I must say that if we somehow

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captured every molecule of carbon and kept everything else exactly the same, we would arrive at the same walls from a different path.

[00:10:18] Now I have to speak about solutions, and this is where honesty, especially for a politician, becomes dangerous. If we turned off the fossil energy tap tomorrow, hundreds of millions of people would starve within the year because our fertilizer and our tractors and our ships and our trucks all run on hydrocarbons.

[00:10:43] If we throttled the tap in any meaningful way, economic chaos would ensue, plunging the world into a depression or worse. The reason this has not happened this year, twenty twenty-six, at least so far, it-- is because we are drawing down massive inventories of crude oil and products stockpiled for years before the US-Israel-Iran war.

[00:11:08] If we sprint to replace everything with machines that harness the sun and the wind, we will then need a mining expansion larger than anything in human history, concentrated in a handful of countries that would become the new Persian Gulfs, with all the rivalry and conflict that would imply, and mostly using the energy from the fossil vault redirected to power it.

[00:11:35] And yet, if we do nothing, the heating compounds, the seas keep rising, and the regions where billions of humans live will become steadily more difficult and eventually even to inhabit. So if every leader knows what I just shared and no leader is acting, then who is actually in charge here? We are animals.

[00:12:04] We came up in small troops, and we are still built for it. We watch our rank. We reward the loud and the confident. We take the reward today and let tomorrow look after itself. Now, one of us is easy enough to understand. The trouble begins when you put a great many of us together. A single starling turns

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for reasons of its own, but ten thousand starlings make a shape in the evening sky that no starling itself ever chose and no starling could stop.

[00:12:39] We're like that. Our wanting, multiplied by billions and wired together through money and trade and incentives, produces a behavior that belongs to the whole but to no one inside it. So tonight, I'm not going to ask you for optimism, and I'm not asking you to despair. I am merely asking you for maturity.

[00:13:06] There are no answers to what we face. There are only responses, and I cannot pretend those responses will be fair, because this was never going to be fair. The countries who did the least to cause this will likely suffer the most from it, and no fancy speech will undo that fact. But every response matters and can aggregate how we grow our food, how we use our energy, and how much and of what kind, and how we treat our neighbors, human and animal.

[00:13:40] When things get harder, each of these will move our future somewhere on the wide spectrum between the default and the possible. The default is what happens if we continue sleepwalking and in denial. The possibility is still very large. I cannot promise you the world your grandparents expected to hand you, because, my dear countrymen and women, that world is already fully gone.

[00:14:13] What I can promise you is that facing what comes next with open eyes and hearts beats every other alternative, and that the bends in the road ahead can still be navigated by people who see them coming. We were the generation that burned the ancient sunlight. Let us also be the generation that finally told the truth about it.

[00:14:41] Good night. Gaia speed, and good luck to us all.