

[Transcript] Honestly with Bari Weiss / America Needs a Self-Help Book. Tim Urban's Got One.

Hi guys, it's Barry with a really exciting announcement for you.

As listeners of the show will know, one of the reasons that this exists in the first place is to embody and promote honest, frank conversations and good faith debates, both of which feel increasingly rare in our polarized country.

That is why I'm so excited to announce that the Free Press, along with FIRE, the nation's leading defender of free speech rights, are hosting a live debate on a very sexy and contentious subject on Wednesday, September 13th at 7 p.m. at the historic Ace Theatre in downtown Los Angeles.

The proposition? The sexual revolution has failed.

Arguing for the proposition is co-host of the podcast Redscare, Anacachian, and author of the case against the sexual revolution, Louise Perry.

They're going to be facing off against musician and producer Grimes, and writer and co-host of the podcast A Special Place in Hell, Sarah Hader.

I'm going to be the moderator and I couldn't be more excited.

This is going to be an amazing night.

It's a chance to meet other people in the real world who also like thinking for themselves and who listen to this show.

You can get your tickets now by going to [thefp.com backslash debates](https://thefp.com/backslash/debates).

Again, that's [thefp.com slash debates](https://thefp.com/slash/debates).

I can't wait to meet some of you guys in person.

And now, here's the show.

I'm Barry Weiss, and this is Honestly.

Tim Urban is the only cartoonist who has elicited an existential crisis in me.

It's not because he's some great illustrator.

Tim's drawings are comically simple.

They're of stick figures, or if he's feeling fancy, maybe he'll do a chart.

What makes him so affecting is the way he's able to capture and distill the most complex and profound questions we face.

Questions like, what does it mean to be a human being?

What is the purpose of our lives?

Are we spending our finite time on earth wisely?

And do we even grasp how short that time is?

By capturing the length of our days and say the amount of times we have left to swim in the ocean, or the books we have left to read, or the dumplings we have left to eat, assuming we live to the age of 90, Tim takes an abstract subject like time and makes it tangible.

In one of my favorite blog posts of his,

Tim breaks down the amount of time, realistically, that we have left to spend with our parents.

Do you know that by the age of 18, you've already used up like 95% of your parent time?

It's something that stuck with me.

So Tim's done this sort of thing for years on his singular and must read blog, Wait But Why, which is full of everything from posts on AI to aliens to the Fermi Paradox to marriage.

But a few years ago, like six years ago, like many of us,

Tim was troubled by what he was seeing going on in the world around him.

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He noticed that while technology was progressing in unbelievable ways, people were going to the moon on private rocket ships, computers were the size of Starbucks coffee cups, and foraging was a thing of the past. Yet we were seemingly more unhappy than ever before.

We were petty.

We were turning against each other.

And the very things that have allowed for this kind of progress, things like democracy and liberalism and humanism, those were under siege.

Why, Tim wondered, was everything such a mess?

When did things get so tribal?

And why do humans do this stuff to each other?

His new book called *What's Our Problem*, a self-help book for societies, is an answer to those questions and more.

Tim looks back at hundreds of thousands of years of history.

Trust me, it works, he condenses.

And he argues that we are living through more change more rapidly than at any time ever.

And the stakes of that are almost too high to comprehend.

But what he argues is that the danger we face in the end is not global warming, it's not an asteroid racing toward Earth, it's not an impending alien invasion.

It's ourselves.

And Tim argues that we got ourselves into this mess, but he's pretty sure we can also get ourselves out of it.

Stay with us.

Hi, honestly, listeners.

I'm here to tell you about an alternative investing platform called Masterworks.

I know investing in finance can be overwhelming, especially given our economic climate.

But there's one thing that will never go in the red, and that is a painting from Picasso's Blue Period.

Masterworks is an exclusive community that invests in blue chip art.

They buy a piece of art, and then they file that work with the SEC.

It's almost like filing for an IPO.

You buy a share representing an investment in the art.

Then Masterworks holds the piece for three to 10 years, and then when they sell it, you get a prorated portion of the profit's minus fees.

Masterworks has sold \$45 million worth of art to date, from artists like Andy Warhol, Banksy, and Monet.

Over 700,000 investors are using Masterworks to get in on the art market.

So go to [masterworks.com slash honestly](https://masterworks.com/slash/honestly) for priority access.

That's [masterworks.com slash honestly](https://masterworks.com/slash/honestly).

You can also find important regulation aid disclosures at [masterworks.com slash cd](https://masterworks.com/slash/cd).

Tim Urban, welcome to Honestly.

Thank you for having me.

So you just published this book called *What's Our Problem*?

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A self-help book for societies.

And you've been working on this book for more than seven years, I think.

Is that right?

About six and a half.

Okay, so you're sort of a famous procrastinator,
which we're going to get to later in this conversation.

But that is not my sense of why this book,
which is made up at least half of cartoons,
took so long to get into the world.

What was so hard about getting this book out into the public?

Well, if you're trying to assess what's going on in a society
and why things are the way they are,
there are so many other topics that feed into that.

So it was an overwhelming amount of material
to try to kind of put together and synthesize.

But also on top of that, I just had all of this resistance to it,
saying anything besides politics.

And then other people would feed into that.

They'd say, are you crazy?

Don't write about that.

You don't have any haters right now.

Why would you go and write about politics?

Just write about anything else.

And that to me was interesting.

This is like, I write about whatever I want, right?

I write if something's important in society.

I wrote when AI first became a big topic in 2015.

I wrote a huge thing about it.

Whatever I'm thinking about, I write about.

So this one topic, which is so important,

it's how we all are living together.

It's how the fate of our society,

there's this incredible incentive to stay away from it.

What is going on there?

And that got me thinking, this is part of the story,
the fear I have of talking about it.

That's, there's a much bigger topic here.

You recently wrote in your wonderful blog,

Wait But Why, about this six and a half year journey.

And you said this about starting the book in 2016.

Something seemed off about the society around me,
like there had been a subtle foreboding shift
in the balance between reason and madness.

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It felt like we were losing our grip on something important.
Let's talk a little bit about that shift.
What were you starting to witness in 2016
that made you feel like the balance
between reason and madness was tipping into madness?
And to what did you attribute the shift?
So think about middle school and how people act in middle school.
There's popular kids and then there's unpopular kids.
And there's kind of like,
the most popular person is often kind of a mean person
that everyone's a little bit scared of.
And then there's real in group and there's out group.
And people are cruel, right?
And I started noticing that the grownups were acting like this.
We all have that middle school persona in us somewhere.
Whether we were the person who was the bully
or the person who was the sidekick of the bully,
sucking up to the bully,
or the person who was the target of the bully,
or if you were especially grown up at that age,
maybe we were the person who stood up to the bully.
But either way, that person's still in us.
And something was bringing it out.
And the shift I noticed was not just that
more people were acting this way,
but that people that would normally criticize this kind of behavior,
that would criticize cruelty or overt tribalism,
or gross stereotyping of giant groups of people,
or just kind of old school bigotry,
the people that would normally stand up and criticize
that we're all doing it only in private.
And it seemed like the power shifted
where the people acting kind of in that unadmirable way
had some kind of power that everyone was scared of.
And it felt like something crazy news story would be happening
that any reasonable person watching it would say,
well, that's ridiculous.
And but no one's saying it out loud, right?
We're all either saying it in private or in some cases,
you find even in private, a private dinner party,
you see that people are even,
then no one knows who's thinking what at that dinner party
and everyone's kind of

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virtue signaling to each other at the dinner party.
And so it didn't feel like it was always like that.
It felt like this was happening more than it used to.
Meanwhile, as I'm right as I'm thinking about this,
Donald Trump is ascending in power.
And this is as the primary was going on.
And he has a total disregard for truth
and a disregard for a lot of the kind of norms
that most other politicians had to follow.
And he was rising up, right?
And so there seemed to be things happening
across the political spectrum, across society
that again felt kind of foreboding.
Like we were losing our grip on the kind of things
that keep a liberal society kind of healthy and strong.
To me, it seems like everyone has what I think of as their,
I guess it's like a play on woke,
like they're waking up moments
where they realize something's a little off here.
Like right, for me, it was the Tom Cotton op-ed
and my boss, James Bennett,
being like struggle session and fired.
And then ultimately leaving the New York times
and sort of looking at the capturing of the institutions.
For other people, it was the Trump years.
For other people, it was the COVID lockdowns.
For others, it was the moment where Kenosha was burning,
but CNN had the Chiron saying,
fiery but mostly peaceful protests.
Did you have a kind of like aha moment?
Or was it just kind of a series of dinner parties,
like the ones you just alluded to?
Yeah, so when you talk about these aha moments,
I think the way they work is,
you don't just see one example of something for the first time
and suddenly your whole world view shifts.
It's more that there's, we have these priors, right?
You have a prior world view,
but it's somewhere in your subconscious.
You've been noticing things that conflict with that prior.
And maybe it's in your subconscious
or maybe your conscious notices it and disregards it.
And you keep noticing things and saying,

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well, that's a freak incident, noticing.
And then the aha moment, I think,
comes at the end of a bunch of these.
It's that moment when you realize that,
you know what, I might have to question that prior.
And suddenly all those other examples
that you had been pushing away
or that you're only your subconscious have been noticing,
they all come into your consciousness
and you realize, wait a second,
this is a whole pattern.
I've been wrong about this whole thing.
And now it's like all these other things
fall into place in your head.
And so for me, the closest I can come to that exact moment
was Greg Lukianoff, who's the head of FIRE,
took this video.
He happened to be walking through Yale campus
of Nicholas Christakis getting essentially
struggle-sessioned out in the quad
by a bunch of students over an email his wife had written
which was suggesting that the school had gone too far
in telling students what they should
and shouldn't wear for Halloween.
And she in very gentle wording basically said,
I don't think it's our job to tell students
what they should or shouldn't wear.
And maybe even if a student wear something
that's kind of offensive, maybe that's something
that college students should be able to do.
And if the other students don't like it,
maybe the students should talk to them
and not the administrator, whatever.
Meanwhile, that turns into now her husband,
Nicholas Christakis, being screamed at.
And this happened to be captured by Greg put on YouTube
so it went viral.
A lot of people saw it.
But it was watching that video.
It was noticing what kids were saying,
which was stuff like, this is supposed to be a safe space,
saying that he's disgusting, in that word, disgusting.
Basically, subhuman.

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And snapping.

And what I mean by that is when one kid would say something, all the other kids would snap in unison.

And I know if I were there and I'm one of those students, whether I agree or not, it's going to be hard to not snap or at least to say silent.

Because that's scary when everyone is kind of, that snapping is saying, the group is behind you.

We are behind you.

We are one, right, against this man.

And so it was looking at that and saying that Yale is so safe.

And the idea that this woman's email, it makes things unsafe.

That is just so counter to everything that I think.

And the way I think a college campus should be.

So now I'm thinking, though, but the prior I had for a long time was kind of blue, good, red, bad, right, in the US.

Just in general, not that not blue is perfect,

but like the people on the blue side were the ones

who were pushing the country forward in a good direction.

The people on the red side were the people holding it back.

You know, I grew up in a progressive suburb and went to progressive college and lived in LA and then lived in New York.

So I was surrounded by this.

And I wasn't an independent thinker in a lot of areas, but these priors, especially with something like politics, can be very strong.

Everyone around you thinks this thing.

It can make us otherwise independent thinker pretty beholden to this other framework.

And I remember looking at that and thinking,

like, if this is what blue is today,

then something is incredibly wrong.

And I don't think that it just kind of,

it's that moment when your head explodes a little

because the house of cards that was my prior,

that was based basically on a kind of on tribalism,

on a feeling that I'm part of the good team.

And that whole thing just kind of shattered over the next couple of months.

And I was reading and I was thinking

and I was reflecting on everything

and looking back at my own emails,

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like a year earlier, two years earlier.

And man, I was like, wow, I was really close-minded about this stuff.

So then I said, okay, this is something I have to write about.

You describe your book, which I love, as a self-help book for societies.

And I want to get into the self-help portion in just a minute, but first I want to talk about how we got to the place where we need help.

You start the book in this wonderful way by giving a brief history of humanity, which you call the story of us.

And you say this, you say, if we wrote the story of us out in a thousand pages, here's what it would look like.

From page one to page 950, there's basically not much going on.

And then on page 976 of recorded history, it begins-ish, as you put it.

And Christianity isn't even born until page 993.

So basically, the first 95% of the book of human history is so, so unbelievably slow and boring.

And the last 5% is a page turner.

Why is that?

What is the spark that creates the propulsive change that we see in those last few pages?

Yeah.

So one of the things that separates humans from other animals is language.

And the ability for people to take what's in their brain and put it in a very detailed way into other people's brains.

And then people can pass the idea on through language to their children.

And so if I learn something about the world, I can tell my whole tribe who then can tell their descendants.

And the tribe now knows that.

And it's like this kind of collective knowledge, like a tower of knowledge in the middle of that tribe that kind of grows and builds and builds.

And then right around page 975, you start having writing.

And so now someone can take an idea and put it on a tablet or later a book and send it into the minds of millions of people.

And it can last for centuries.

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And it can last in the exact wording.
It was meant to be transmitted in.
So you have instead of a tribe of 150 people's collective knowledge,
you now have 10,000 or 50,000.
And so that knowledge tower becomes a skyscraper.
And so things start happening very quickly.
You start being able to do things that no individual human
or no small tribe could ever do, like build giant temples
and understand that the world is round
and start to come up with governing structures
that are based on trial and error
of hundreds of years of governing structures before that.
And so things start to advance much faster.
But the craziest thing is this has an exponential kind of effect
because a more advanced species with a bigger knowledge tower
makes progress faster than a less advanced species.
So not only do things keep building,
but they build faster and faster and faster.
And eventually this comes to a point
where things are soaring ahead
and you're making more progress in a century
than you did in all of human history before that
when it comes to tech and knowledge building.
The reason I like the 1,000 page book thing
is it allows you to look at the last page alone,
just page 1,000.
So now we're not talking about the last 5% of the book.
We're talking about the last 0.1% of the book.
And that goes from like 1770s to today, right?
250 years per page.
And it is a total anomaly compared to all the pages before it.
And it's again, I don't think it just happened on its own.
It's what eventually happens
if you keep this pattern going of exponential growth,
exponential growth, which is awesome, right?
I mean, we have an amazing quality of life.
Modern tech is great.
And none of us, I don't think, want to go back to the 1600s.
It's also really scary.
It's also really scary
because when things start racing forward ahead,
you can get very reckless
and you have a lot of godlike power from all of this tech.

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And so that's kind of, to me, it's exciting and it's scary.
The other thing that's anomalous about that page
from call it the mid 1700s till now
isn't just all of the unbelievable leaps ahead in terms of technology.
It's also the advent of liberal democracy.
You know, as being completely a historical and miraculous,
how do you understand sort of the rise of liberal democracy
in the story of us?
Because to me, that is the background to this entire book
is frankly your love and gratitude for a system
that I think you feel is really under siege
in ways that many people aren't appreciating.
A liberal democracy is a totally artificial invention.
And it's not that, you know, the enlightenment thinkers
of the 16 and 1700s,
it's not that they invented this from scratch,
but this is kind of the best crack yet.
And they finally, you know, came up with a way
to do it in a way that could last for centuries.
It was robust.
So it's this kind of, it seems obvious to us
because I think of it as a house.
It's a house that is built, right?
It has the support themes of the liberal democracy
and the structure and the roof.
All of this is an invention, right?
It's not the law of nature.
We made the house and so we now are growing up within the house
and so did our parents and so did our grandparents.
And so it's been a lot of generations
in a place like America, at least for a lot of people,
since someone has been outside this house.
My wife, she's Persian, her parents immigrated here
in 1979 or they left Iran then, like a lot of Iranians.
And they do not take the house for granted.
They think the liberal house is unbelievable, right?
And you talk to someone who's coming from a communist country
or coming from a dictatorship
and you will hear a love for this house
because they're saying, oh my God, look around,
this house is incredible.
And we're saying, huh, it is, I guess, I don't know.
It's the house, it's just the house.

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That's where we all live.
And that's all fine until the house is under threat.
And then this cockiness about the house
will always be here, of course.
We have to get rid of that and say, well, hold on.
Why is the house under threat?
What does that mean and how do we preserve it?
I think one of the paradoxes of the last page
of the book that we're on is that on the one hand,
we're enjoying more abundance, more progress,
more genuine historical privilege
than any group ever has before ever.
And yet that exponential progress, as you describe it,
is also the source of a lot of chaos, a lot of misery,
and a lot of our uncertainty.
And you really lay these out in a powerful way in the book.
So I want to kind of go through them.
One of the things that you write about in the book
is this distinction between what you call the primitive mind
and what you call the higher mind, right?
And the thing that sets human beings apart
from other animals is this higher mind
because the higher mind is rational.
It feels complex emotions like empathy and ego.
It makes long-term goals for the future.
It's able to look beyond itself.
And yet, like all other animals,
we also have another mind inside of us.
And that is what you call the primitive mind
or what a lot of people call our lizard brains.
And that's the part of our brains that hunts for prey,
that protects our kin, that privileges people
that look like us or animals that look like us above others.
And as you explained it in the book,
the higher mind's goal is to get to the truth.
But the primitive mind has a very different goal.
It's confirmation of its existing beliefs.
So in an era in which, Tim, there's just so much abundance.
There's objectively so much freedom.
And the structures that support the higher mind
are all around us.
Why is it that the primitive mind feels so often
like it's taking over?

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When did the higher minds become less powerful
than the primitive ones?
Yeah, I mean, the primitive mind is kind of our survival brain.
And it was programmed for a world living in a small tribe.
But what's cool about humans, like you said,
is that the primitive mind in our brain,
that's kind of the pre-programmed software.
And that will never, not just does it start off thinking
it's in 30,000 BC.
It will never understand that it's not there.
Meanwhile, the higher mind is this cool part of us
that can override, can see what's happening,
see that our instincts don't make sense here
in one area or another and actually override them.
I use the example of candy.
When we binge on candy and then we regret it
or any kind of unhealthy food.
It makes no sense, right?
We're mad at ourselves later.
And this is the thousandth time this has happened.
And what's happening is that the primitive mind
is programmed for a world where calories are hard to come by.
And if you don't eat this dense, chewy fruit
that you just came by, of course it's candy,
right now, you might not find calories for two weeks.
Binge, right?
Which makes sense then.
It doesn't make sense today.
And so our higher minds can actually get in there
and override this.
That's why we don't always eat unhealthy food
and some people can be really good
in developing healthy eating habits
and other ones not so much
because it's this kind of tug of war in our heads
between this one voice that wants to do what it's programmed for
and the other voice that says,
wait a second, wait a second.
In the world we live in,
what we're programmed for makes no sense here.
So it's a general concept,
but you can apply it to lots of things.
You can apply it to how we think, right?

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So you can say that it makes sense in today's world
to try to find the truth.
We don't want to be delusional.
And we want to play with ideas and change our mind
and get wiser as we grow older.
That makes sense.
But the other part of our brain,
the pre-programmed software,
is made for a world where the tribe has their beliefs,
their sacred beliefs.
And people who couldn't challenge those sacred beliefs
and were too independent thinking
and said, this doesn't actually make sense.
Where's our evidence?
They didn't fare very well.
And so it is our nature to identify with our sacred beliefs.
They're part of us.
They're part of who we are.
And they're part of our group.
The people like us, we believe these things.
And the last thing you'd ever want to do
is change your mind about that.
So you will go through all this effort
to confirm the sacred beliefs.
And you'll spend time with people talking
about how great the sacred beliefs are
and how bad the people are who disagree with it.
And that's the survival brain mode
we're in when we're doing that.
Or we can override that.
And we can say, you know what?
I know I have the urge to confirm my beliefs right now,
but that's unwise.
And I need to overcome that
and actually get better at changing my mind.
That's this kind of initial seed of a framework
that then I take into politics.
And I'll just talk about the higher mind's way of doing politics
and the primitive mind's way of doing politics.
And I think that that's a framework
we can add into our existing discussions.
What is the higher mind's way of doing politics
and what is the primitive mind's way of doing politics?

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I use a ladder because it's a spectrum, right?
It's not just one mind is doing the thinking, the other is not.
It's not as simple as that.
It's sometimes it's a mix, right?
Sometimes you're conflicted between two things.
You're doing honest research,
but you find a little confirmation bias there.
So maybe you're in the middle or whatever it is.
So the ladder is kind of a spectrum.
And when you're up in the high rungs,
maybe you have some conflict,
but the higher mind is running the show.
And down in the low rungs,
the primitive mind is running the show.
And then in groups,
the primitive mind's in the group will kind of band together.
And that whole group will be politically low rung together.
And it's very hard to get out of that once you're in it.
And likewise, a whole group can kind of work hard
to stave off those instincts
and actually stay up on the high rungs together.
So we just talked about ideas.
That's one way you can think about this ladder.
At the top, in high rung politics, people care about truth.
They're open to debate.
They're open to changing their minds.
And when they're right about something,
they will argue it fully.
But they're open to being challenged,
and they don't identify with the ideas.
If they're wrong about something,
they don't have this fight-or-flight instinct.
They will admit they're wrong and they'll move on.
But principles are consistent.
Again, because this is what makes sense.
So if you believe that government overreach is bad,
then you care about that when both parties are in office.
If you believe that discrimination,
based on skin color, is bad,
you care about that regardless of the skin color
being discriminated against.
And then finally, with tactics and politics,
you want to change things, right?

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You want to make things happen.
You do it via persuasion and the liberal democracy.
So there's a focus on truth.
There's consistency with principles.
And you try to get your way by persuading others
and building a mind-changing movement.
And these all go together.
When a group is doing one of those things,
they tend to be doing all three.
Now, low-run politics,
which I think is borne of our survival brain's instincts,
and when it gets, you know, banned together with others,
they do politics the old-school way, just pure tribalism.
So there's the good people and there's the bad people
with the good ideas and the bad ideas.
Completely not open to changing their mind.
There's tons of confirmation bias.
They don't give the other side a fair hearing.
They're really not usually open to an honest debate.
That's in the ideas realm.
And then again, with principles,
there's total flip-flopping on principles
based on whether it helps the tribe or not.
So there's total lack of consistency.
We've seen a million examples of this.
And then tactics, you know, again,
the old-school way to get what you want is not persuasion.
That's the way in this weird house of liberal democracy
that we do it.
The way we're programmed to do it is coercion.
We will try to force our way and force people to do things
with blackmail and fear and violence sometimes.
And so when I look around at low-run politics,
again, people who are doing one of those things
tend to be doing all three.
And I think this is just kind of like a vertical axis.
We can add to the left-center-right horizontal political axis
rather than saying, are you, you know, left-wing, right-wing,
far-right, far-left, are you centrist?
Well, how about like making it a square and being like...
Are you high-wrong or low-wrong?
Yeah. And you can now, now you can be far-left and high-wrong
or you can be centrist and low-wrong or far-right

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and in the middle somewhere.

And I think it's useful.

Why in our culture right now do we so...

I wouldn't even say reward the low-wrong politicians, but I think people are actually addicted to them.

Like, I think people really enjoy watching the AOCs, watching the Marjorie Taylor Greene's.

Obviously, those people are very different.

I don't mean to compare them,

but what is going on in our current culture where the low-wrong people seem to be the ones that get all of the attention, all of the rewards, and no one really seems to care very much about the high-wrong principled ones.

They're like the also-rans.

Yeah, people do care.

What happened is there's...

The media landscape has totally shifted and we're in a world now where 24-hour news networks exist. They didn't used to exist.

Used to be a half-hour of news at night on three networks that broadcast to the whole country.

Now you've got 24-hour news networks going all day to one political tribe.

And these networks realize you could make...

I think Fox News probably pioneered this and then other ones have caught on.

This idea that you can make a lot more money if you kind of say what you're doing is news and what you're really doing is kind of political entertainment.

And I use the example of reality show.

A reality show is interesting all the time, even though the actual reality is not that interesting, because the editors cut in a constant string of conflict with bombastic characters and it's fun, right?

It's our primitive minds get addicted to that thing.

The same way we get addicted to junk food, this is political junk food.

And so these stations realized the same thing that Mars Inc. realized about selling candy.

You could make a ton of money by selling junk food.

And so these news networks are really entertainment networks that sell to our primitive minds.

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They sell political junk food to our primitive minds.
And unfortunately, unlike candy,
this has major implications,
which is that the politicians who get cast on the show...
AOC is one of 400-something people in the house.
There are bills passed every week that never get talked about, right?
There's all these other...
But AOC is one of the characters on the show.
She's been cast on the reality show.
And so is Marjorie Taylor Greene, right?
And Trump is one of the major characters on the show.
And so they're going to be on all the time.
And so, of course, it incentivizes politicians to say,
well, getting on the show is a huge career break.
I need to be bombastic.
And so that's going to have a lot of effects on people.
Otherwise, normal people are going to get addicted
to this reality show, and they're going to be kind of sucked
into kind of hardcore political tribalism.
In addition to the sort of distinction you make
between primitive mind and higher mind, which I loved,
and the idea of sort of high-rung political thinkers
and actors and low-rung ones,
you also make a distinction
between two different intellectual cultures.
One that you call idea labs,
and the other that you call echo chambers.
I would love if you could give me an example of an idea lab
and an example of an echo chamber.
Yeah.
So every group of friends has a culture
that includes how they do birthdays,
how they do texting, how they do emojis,
how they talk between each other's backs,
what's acceptable, what's distasteful, right?
Every group, no matter what you're in,
you're full of rules about how we do things,
your social rules.
And an idea lab to me is a group
that has a high-rung intellectual culture,
where how we do things here is truth comes first.
Truth matters, and disagreement is great.
Respectful disagreement.

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People are to be respected.
Ideas are not,
where it's not cool to identify with your ideas
and get super offended
if someone disagrees with your idea,
where people call each other out
on bias and on logical fallacies,
and we're unearned conviction.
Someone who's acting like they're sure
and they turn out to be wrong a bunch of times.
That person is not cool in the idea lab culture.
They quickly lose respect.
People don't take them very seriously.
And so primitive minds in the group act up.
Someone will, again, get really offended,
but everyone keeps them in check.
And kind of the idea lab's immune system kicks in
and says, wow, you're upset about that,
like, you know, and they get made fun of for that,
and then they don't want to do that again next time.
And that keeps the whole group kind of up on the high rungs,
and it keeps every individual,
because all of us are subject
to this kind of internal tug of war,
it keeps every individual their mind up in the high rungs.
You can't really get away with slipping down too far
or the idea lab will call you out.
And so sometimes you can have a couple,
a married couple has an intellectual culture.
If one person knows that you just never disagree
with my husband on politics,
or it's going to be a nightmare,
that husband is imposing the other kind of culture
on the marriage.
And this can happen in groups.
One person in the group can,
if they have enough cultural power in the group,
can kind of say no one is allowed to disagree about X.
Right.
And so you quickly can slip into the other culture,
the echo chamber culture.
And groups do it together.
When one person starts doing it,

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sometimes everyone's just scared of them,
but often the whole group starts doing it together
without even realizing they're doing it.
And that's when the primitive minds have taken over.
And if you think the primitive minds goal in your head,
in an individual's head,
is to confirm the beliefs, your sacred beliefs,
while the group has their sacred beliefs,
and the primitive minds band together
to protect those beliefs.
So they're very hostile to someone who says,
I think we might be wrong,
or I think the other side is not so bad,
or is right about this thing.
People will call them a bat,
they'll basically be relegated to the out group.
They'll get a really negative reaction
because they violated something sacred.
In an idea lab, no idea sacred,
but in an echo chamber, there's very sacred ideas,
and it's like going into a church and slandering Christ.
You don't do that in a church.
And so I don't think this is,
some people do this and other people do that.
I think we all can think of different groups
at different times of the year.
And you find, oh my,
we're being really echo chamber-y about this right now.
It's one of those things
where we're all getting a little too much pleasure
all agreeing, and all,
we constantly are just all on the same side,
and we're always just talking shit
about the people who disagree.
And you know it's bad when you realize
that you see something's being a little distasteful
or going a little too far,
and you have this incentive not to say it
because it's gonna kill the vibe.
It's gonna, people are gonna be kind of like,
you know, roll their eyes at you,
and maybe they'll talk shit about you now behind your back.
That means that the group is slipped down,

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and down the rungs of the ladder into echo chamber land.

And that's fine, by the way.

In a liberal democracy,

you're welcome to be part of echo chambers or idea labs,
as long as you live and let live.

When you don't live and let live,

that's when there's a problem.

Tim, is there an example from your life

of being in an atmosphere that was really idea-lapsey

or like a moment over the course of the past few decades

that you feel like, aha,

that was like a high watermark of America

celebrating the idea labs culture?

Because I don't think anyone listening to this

would disagree that we're in a culture overall right now

in which it feels like echo chambers

are the thing that are actively being cultivated.

Maybe another way of asking this is,

when did the idea lab go out of fashion,

and are there any pockets of it, you know,

whether it's a friend group or an institution or whatever,

that you feel like are trying to revive it?

I think a ton of people, individuals, want to revive it.

And there are pockets.

Intelligent Squared is a great podcast.

It's a two-on-two Oxford-style debate.

And it's a classic idea lab.

Everyone's respectful.

It's two people taking one side,

two people taking another side.

And it's basically like, you know,

you have two attorneys in that courtroom,

and the audience and anyone listening can play juror

and listen to them clash

and learn a little more along the way.

And, you know, you hear really,

but everyone's really smart.

You hear really compelling ideas from both sides.

It's a fascinating intellectually.

And the way echo chambers get formed

is when it becomes the kind of social norm to say

that one side of this particular debate

is not welcome here because, and it's almost,

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it's never the same because we're an echo chamber.

No one admits that.

It's almost always because those ideas are dangerous.

Those ideas are harmful.

Or it's because we're moral and that's immoral.

Yes.

The idea that the other side of this debate is actively only bad people would hold it.

And actually, it's dangerous to even have it in the room.

And the key is that you live and let live, right?

So echo chamber, you want to go form that with your group of friends?

Or you want to start an institution and they're openly dedicated to a religion or to a certain set of ideas.

Great.

You're welcome in the U.S. to go form your echo chamber.

Just leave everyone else alone.

And when you have that, if you scale that up, what you have is a lot of idea lab pockets and a lot of echo chamber pockets.

But that inherently makes the whole country a big idea lab because each echo chamber is going to argue their one position.

Idea labs are all over the place.

They're going to change their mind, but they're still going to be arguing different positions.

And you have this big mix of ideas.

That's...

It's the federalism of echo chambers makes a national ideas lab.

I got you.

Exactly.

And that's in general the idea with liberal democracy is that you can have this low rung stuff going on everywhere just as long, but it has to be contained.

It can't go and start messing with other people and infringing upon others.

So you have this grand idea lab.

And what I think the trajectory has been is that echo chambers have begun forcefully, kind of again using coercion, to not just police their own members, which is okay coercion.

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Again, it's not admirable,
but there's nothing wrong with it from a liberal sense.
They've been using coercion to forcefully expand,
which I compare to like the difference
between a benign tumor and a malignant tumor.
The first way is benign.
It's going to police its own people.
It's going to say,
no one can disagree with me or you're not my friend.
Okay, I can choose to be your friend or not.
It's this other mentality that's saying,
actually no one outside,
even outside of our friends is allowed to have these ideas.
And not only are those,
is that mentality increasing,
but it's been succeeding.
I call that idea supremacy,
which is just a distinct difference
from kind of the zealotry or just,
no one can change my mind.
Idea supremacy says no one else,
even whether I know you or not,
is allowed to express these ideas.
It's trying to kind of play cultural dictator.
And so you've had is echo chambers
expanding across the land
and kind of forceful coercive expansion
and kind of holding pockets
that used to be idea labs now hostage
and saying the new rules here
are the rules of our echo chamber.
After the break,
Tim Urban explains
why what happened to our universities matters.
Stay with us.
The ultimate idea lab is supposed to be the university, right?
The university is supposed to exist
for a singular goal.
Maybe they're a secondary,
but the key goal is the pursuit of truth, right?
And I think one of the ways that is most illustrative
to the point you're making in the book
is to look at what has happened to universities.

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And you dedicate almost an entire chapter in your book to the problem of universities today and the way that they've sort of been transformed from idea labs into either echo chambers or idea supremacists chambers. You'll tell me the difference. And you do this with this amazing illustration that you call the social justice horse. And it's sort of similar to the idea of the Trojan horse, right, except you have this social justice horse which you draw with this little very cute rainbow mane and tail. And the social justice horse says very, very lovely progressive sounding things. Like the horse will say an inclusive environment. And yet the actual idea that they're smuggling in under the idea of an inclusive environment is disagree with us and will smear you, for example. Or the social justice horse will say something like diversity statements. But really the thing being brought in under this rhetoric is, as you put it, McCarthyist political litmus test and loyalty oaths, right? And this sort of theory of the social justice horse or the mechanics of the social justice horse is happening all over the country, not just in elite schools, but in schools coast to coast everywhere in between. And we've gotten to a point in which something like 52% of college students, according to one recent survey say, they always or often refrain from expressing views on political and social issues in classrooms because of concern for how will be perceived, for concern to the reputation, for the concern to their grades. How did we get here? How was this social justice horse so unbelievably effective? So one of the first things I wanted to do when I was getting into this very spicy topic of social justice is I said, we need two terms here because there's two completely different things that are called social justice. The first is what I would call liberal social justice,

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liberal, meaning classic liberal.

And so we talked about the liberal house, right?

This idea of liberal, this house we live in
that has liberal rules and liberal norms and liberal laws.

And liberal social justice, its goal is to make
the house more perfect.

It says liberalism is great, the constitution is awesome,
but we don't always succeed in keeping its promises.

There are flaws in the house.

This awesome house has some, you know, some people
or policies or norms have made it weaker
and have made it actually some people in this house
are being treated unfairly in a way they're not supposed
to be treated in the liberal house.

This was of course what Martin Luther King, you know,
in his, I have a dream speech.

He talked about a promissory note and how the US
has defaulted on its check to black Americans, right?

So that's him saying, this house is great,
but black Americans are not being treated the way
this house is supposed to treat them.

Let's fix the house.

That's the goal.

Let's make it the best house it can be.

And so not only does it have liberal goals, right?

Which is you want more liberalism,
but it has, it uses liberal means, right?

The civil rights movement was all about free assembly
and free speech and, you know, protest
and all of these tools of liberalism.

They're tools that the house gives you to fix the house.

And, you know, this idea of colorblindness
is a very liberal idea, the individualism, right?

It's not about the color of your skin.

It's about who you are as a person.

This idea of your character is,
is another way of valuing individuals.

Each individual is a sacred thing, period.

Doesn't matter what else is, you know, about them.

And so that's liberal social justice.

This is the movement behind gay marriage in 2012.

This is the movement behind women's suffrage
back in the 1910s.

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So it's a great tradition in the U.S.,
and it's something that most Americans,
you know, for sure progressive,
but even a lot of conservatives
are very proud of this movement.
Now, what's the other thing?
There's another thing called social justice right now,
which is what I call social justice fundamentalism,
otherwise known as wokeness.
And it's important because wokeness itself
sounds derogatory.
It sounds like it's, you know,
it has a lot of cultural baggage there.
So I try to just use a different term
to describe what it actually is,
which I call social justice fundamentalism, or SJF.
And this movement is self-proclaimed
outside the house with a wrecking ball.
The house is evil
because the house was built by flawed people.
And it's rotten to its core.
It's the foundation is built
to uphold the power of the powerful.
In this case, you know, white supremacy
or the patriarchy and that liberalism itself
is an invention of those ideas in order that has the,
whether it was intended or not,
it has the property of being exploitative
and of enhancing inequality
and of entrenching the power of the powerful
and holding down the oppressed.
And so that's a fundamental disagreement.
Liberal social justice and social justice fundamentalism
have opposite, not different, but opposite goals.
One wants to make the house the better
and one wants to break the house down.
They use words like liberate,
liberate from this whole system.
It's very revolutionary,
much more revolutionary than liberal social justice.
Liberal social justice wants to overhaul
norms and policies and laws.
Social justice fundamentalism

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wants to overhaul the whole house,
just level it and build something new.
And that's okay.
That's the thing is what liberalism is awesome
because in a liberal democracy,
it actually has room for even critique of itself.
Sure, bring it in.
You hate liberalism?
Bring it into the discussion.
You're allowed to be here.
Go make your arguments.
Do whatever you want.
Try to persuade people.
Maybe we're all missing something.
Sure, go for it.
What's not okay is illiberal tactics.
And that kind of goes together
because if you think the house is bad,
well, you also think that the same tools
that were used by the civil rights movement,
those liberal tools like free speech
and all those things,
that those things are bad too.
Black feminist Audre Lorde says,
you can't dismantle the master's house
with the master's tools.
So there's a lot in that statement.
It's the idea that, A, this is the master's house.
It doesn't belong to all of us.
It is a house for slave masters.
And therefore, the tools themselves are rotten,
just as rotten as the house itself.
And so they will be hostile
to all kinds of liberal things.
Free speech.
So free speech is actually dangerous, right?
It's allowing the platforming of dangerous ideas.
Not the First Amendment necessarily,
but the culture of free speech is bad.
The US and the West, they're bad.
The group is what matters.
Much more than the individual.
And that's why they will make broad generalizations

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about white people and black people.
They treat these groups as monoliths.
There's a common enemy kind of tone to it
instead of the much more classic
liberal common humanity tone.
Equality of opportunity is a liberal staple.
But social justice fundamentalism believes that
because groups are the same,
there's no such thing as equality of opportunity
that doesn't lead to equality of outcome.
And so they actually are for equality of outcome.
That is very anti-liberal,
because you can't have freedom
with equality of outcome,
enforced equality of outcome.
So there's a lot of these examples,
but again, it is like you mentioned
with the social justice horse.
It's tricky, right?
They don't quite go out and say this.
They'll say we want to save space.
But really what they're saying is a space
that doesn't have free speech in it.
Where our ideas are treated as sacred.
And they'll use things like the harm principle
and saying that, well, this thing is harmful,
so therefore it must be stopped.
So back to universities.
That's, back to universities.
What's happened is this social,
SJF was a, in the 60s,
liberal social justice was the major thing
at universities, right?
You have Berkeley, you have free speech protests, right?
And we want more liberalism.
But there was also developing in the corners of universities
this concept of SJF, this neo-Marxist kind of
take on social justice.
And what's happened much more recently
is as universities have gone from kind of pluralistic
with some conservatives, more progressive
with some conservatives,
it's transitioned to be almost entirely progressive.

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And the numbers are stark.
You know, the ratio of professors left to right
has gone from like four to one to, you know,
in some departments, 17 to one, 40 to one,
sometimes 100 to one.
And so when an environment has, is kind of purple,
it has good defenses against extreme components,
both from red and blue.
But when an environment becomes bright blue
and things get really kind of tribal,
it becomes weak.
It develops a soft spot to kind of
illiberalism of its own color.
So social justice fundamentalism has taken advantage
of this transition to political purity at a university
and has been able to rise up and actually
institute its own values.
And so, like you said, the university
is supposed to be the ultimate idea lab, right?
Veritas is written on the gate above the university.
And for Veritas to happen,
you have to have not just ideas put out,
but people who will challenge those ideas, right?
Or else there's no way for a group of people
to become, to find truth together
if no one's allowed to disagree.
But as SJF has risen up, it has created new rules.
And as basically said, we live in a small echo chamber
that now actually is going to be the rules
of the entire campus.
And ideas that disagree with SJF in particular,
with our tenants, are going to lead to firings
or to ostracism or to investigation of students.
And that's the, and that completely
topples the whole point of a university on its head.
For the skeptical listener who's like,
I don't want to say SJF, but maybe sympathetic
to some of its aims, or who just believes
that what happens at universities doesn't much matter,
how has the triumph of the social justice
horse in what is meant to be the ultimate ideas lab,
what has been the impact of that
on the broader culture in this country?

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Well, it matters in two ways.
Universities educate young people
who then go and become our future leaders.
And are running the country 20, 30 years later.
And what universities are supposed to teach
college students is how to think,
is how to think, how to debate, how to find the truth,
how to be tougher, more robust thinkers,
and teach them a wide variety of lenses,
political lenses and other kinds of lenses
that they can then take into their heads and use.
It's kind of training for your brain.
So you go to college and you come out a better thinker forever,
which of course would serve our society.
But it also teaches kind of general liberal values.
It teaches students that disagreement is okay,
and it's supposed to teach students
that enforcing an echo chamber on an idea lab institution
is not a good thing.
So when an ideology like SJF,
which is kind of illiberal to its core,
takes over, instead of teaching students
a wide variety of lenses, it teaches them one lens.
So that's the difference between teaching them how to think
and arming them with a lot of tools
and teaching them what to think.
Teaching them there is one correct worldview
with one correct set of politics in it.
And if you try to bring a speaker to campus
that disagrees with it, we will disinvite the speaker
or shot them down.
If you try to teach us that wide variety of views in a class,
that professor is going to be reported.
And so students are soaking in instead of this thing,
this idea lab culture that makes them better thinkers
and more humble about what they know,
it teaches students to be zealots
and to be intellectual bullies.
It teaches them that the way to be a good person
who tries to fight against harm,
you need to punish anyone who shares harmful ideas,
which happen to be, of course,
the ideas that conflict with SJF.

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So it's kind of doing the exact opposite of what I think.
We want colleges teaching young people to do it,
about what they're teaching them
and also how they're teaching them to be as thinkers
and how they're teaching them to treat others.
So that's going to affect all of us.
Then those students then go enter companies
and start wreaking havoc there with this idea of
someone says something harmful and they need to be fired for it
and we'll start a petition and use our power
to try to get this person fired.
And eventually those people are our leaders
and they're making policies.
So that, of course, affects everybody.
The other thing that universities do
is they're supposed to be our primary truth finding centers.
Universities are the center of academic research and science
that happens at universities.
And what a society knows is basically
what universities produce for knowledge.
And when an ideology that does not believe
in Veritas culture takes over,
it starts to affect what can and cannot be researched.
And it starts to maybe lower the standards
for academic work that confirms SJF
and it starts to retract papers
or not publish them in the first place
or maybe even fire the professor
for having the nerve to write it
for ideas that conflict with its ideology.
And so that also harms everyone
because there's already a strain in this country
that doesn't believe the science, right?
And that's, no matter what, and that's not good.
But this gives so much credence to that whole idea.
And so it's really bad for knowledge production
and it's bad for education of our future leaders.
And often what happens at universities
ends up happening everywhere else a little bit later.
Universities start, social media started at universities
with Facebook and it soon was everywhere.
There's a lot of cultural fads.
And so when you see something happening at universities,

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people should take it seriously
because it very well might appear across society five,
10 years later, which of course in this case it has.
Tim, there are a lot of huge,
I would say almost existential themes to your work.
But one of the biggest themes that runs through everything
you write is the question of time.
And I think you do such an incredible job of making readers
aware of a thing that feels perhaps more abstract
than almost anything.
And you just do an incredible job of concretizing it
and making it real for us.
One of the things that you have talked about personally
is that you're an epic waster of time,
or at least you used to be.
In 2016, you gave this TED Talk
that I think now has something like 50 million views,
which grants it a spot on the most popular TED Talks of all time,
right next to Bernay Brown and Bill Gates.
And it's called Inside the Mind of a Master Procrastinator.
And it's all about how the procrastinator's mind works,
which as you describe it,
contains a rational decision maker
and an instant gratification monkey.
And the instant gratification monkey takes over
in the mind of procrastinators
and throws the rational decision maker part of the mind
out by the wayside.
But then toward the end of the talk,
you say that you had an epiphany,
which is that actually we're all procrastinators.
Why are human beings such skilled procrastinators?
Well, I think this relates to what we were just talking about.
I think that we're procrastinators for the same reason we
eat unhealthy food and fall into tribal politics,
which is that the primate we are,
the world we were programmed to be in,
didn't really have long-term projects that often.
You had to get food, you had to survive,
you had to mate, and you had to sometimes fight.
And so you conserved energy most of the time
and you expended it when you had to.
And now we live in this world,

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we've been kidnapped out of our home forest,
and we are dropped into an advanced civilization,
where the way to have a gratifying, successful career
is to think really long-term and to work hard on stuff today
that you might not see the fruit of for months or years.

It's to resist the marshmallow in the test.

Yeah, exactly.

We have to work really hard to override our sense of instant gratification,
because in the world we were supposed to be in,
you really didn't need to override it very often.

And so I think procrastination is a problem a lot of us have,
but I think there's kind of two kinds of procrastination.

There's the first kind,

which is the one that we usually talk about,
and people say 20% of people are chronic procrastinators,
is we talk about deadlines.

And people who get behind on deadlines
or they're late to a meeting,
they're unable to do the work until they absolutely panic.

Basically, there's this resistance in them
that will resist and resist and resist until this panic
gets bigger and bigger and bigger.

And eventually the panic threshold crosses
the resistance threshold and they will freak out
and cram for the test or whatever, do their work.

And that often leads to obviously stress
and it's not healthy and often you don't do your best work
and it's a miserable way to live.

But the reason I said there was an epiphany
that I think that we're all procrastinators
is that there's a whole other much sneakier kind of procrastination.

And it happens in all the situations
when there's something important
that has no deadline at all around it.

So that's a lot of stuff at work.

Of course, it's like we're trying to improve on our skills
and to actually rethink the company culture or whatever.

There's a lot of examples at work of stuff
that you would call kind of important,
but not urgent, no deadline.

But there's a ton of stuff outside of work.

There's no deadline on seeing your family enough
and how many people regret not spending more time

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with their parents before they passed away
or not spending more time with their kids
before they left for college or whatever it is.
That is such a common regret.
Our brain is a tool and it's not often that smart.
And one of the ways that our brain is not that smart
is that we have this kind of delusion in our heads
that time is unlimited, that there's endless weeks ahead.
And that's not true.
And time is quite finite.
If there is a friend that you really love,
but you see them, I don't know,
once every two years because they live in a different city.
Every couple of years you catch up
and you have an amazing four-hour drink and dinner
and it was such a good time and then that's it.
You see them two years later.
Okay, well, just say you're 30.
And maybe if you're lucky, both of you lived into your 80s.
That's 50 years.
If you're seeing them every two years,
it's this crazy moment when you realize
that I'm seeing them 25 more times ever.
We have 25 of these dinners left.
What? The math doesn't add up.
And so I think that when it comes to a lot
of really important things,
when there's no deadline,
the combo of that and the delusion
that we have unlimited time
and unlimited rounds of something
makes us very complacent in a way that we shouldn't be.
So you have two things you can do with that information.
Going back to that friend example,
one is really savor that time with your friend.
Maybe that's true.
Maybe that's a sad but true fact
that you're going to see them 25 more times
if you're lucky and really enjoy it
and appreciate what you're seeing here.
You have 20, this is number two out of 25.
Oh, the next one is number three out of 25.
Or you can increase that number 25

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by prioritizing that friend more.
And maybe you're going to go
and try to see that friend twice a year.
Okay, you just expanded that number from 25 to 100.
So there's a lot of things you can do with time
when you look it in the face.
And when you look it in the face,
it's often different than what you think it looks like.
You have this blog post that I got kind of obsessed with
called The Tail End.
And you just, it puts in perspective visually
how little time the average person has
to do the things they love or spend time
with the people they love.
From how many dumplings you have left to eat,
you have like a whole graph of little baby dumplings,
to the amount of oceans you're likely to jump in
before you die.
And I think the most affecting part of it
is about your parents.
And you say, it turns out that when I graduated high school,
I had already used up 93% of my in-person parent time.
I'm now enjoying the last 5% of that time
we're in The Tail End.
In other words, you basically get 18 years
with your parents.
And then the whole rest of your life
is the additional year in terms of actual time
you spend with them.
And I wonder in doing all of these exercises that,
if I'm honest, have a huge impact on me
when I read them.
And then I kind of am lulled back into the sleep
that most of us go through life in
when it comes to something that seems infinite like time.
Has doing these exercises actually changed
the way that you function in the world?
Has it changed the way that you prioritize
time with your family, time with your wife,
time with your daughter?
Has it transformed the way that you live out your day to day?
Yes, but not as much as it should.
So I've been arguing on the side of more family vacations.

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And I used to think, oh, we're all going to be
in this house for a week.
And I'll make it for the last four days,
but I have a lot going on.
And I stopped doing that.
If there's a thing going on, I'm not missing an hour of it.
And then the other side of it,
when I am with people I love,
I do sometimes find myself thinking this is precious.
This is precious.
There actually aren't,
there's a very finite number of these moments.
And so yes, it does have an effect on me,
but I'm like you too, where I then go
and it's so easy to just fall back
into our happy human haze of thinking time is endless.
And by the way, another delusion that goes along with this,
which is this delusion that things are just,
I'm the way that I am.
Things are the way they are.
This is how much I see people.
This is the city I live in.
That's just what it is.
And that's actually not true at all.
You have a lot of agency over where to take your life
and you can make big changes if it's important.
And so yes, I can say all this.
Do I do it enough?
No, but because it's in my head,
I do feel like I can be on a path
getting 10% better about this every year.
You know, like I will say,
like my grandmother is very old, right?
And she's, you know, 98.
And I will try to make sure I spend,
you know, I probably spend double the time with her
that I would have before I wrote this post.
So I do think it has an effect,
but I think if you're really looking at it in the face,
people should be doing things like moving to the city
that their parents or friends live in,
even though they don't like that.
I mean, that's intense,

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but like that is kind of what's called for here,
but I don't do that.

And a lot of people don't do that.

How has the advent of this piece of glass
that I'm holding in my hand
made this challenge even more difficult,
the challenge of procrastination
and avoiding what's truly important in our lives?
Yeah.

I mean, the phone slash the computer internet,
all of that to me goes together.

Because for me, it's, you know,
if I'm trying to write,

I'm writing on the same exact device
that I procrastinate on.

I mean, the world,

I could go to into a prison cell for 100 years
and never run out of shit to do on the internet.

You're tempting the instant gratification monkey
much, much more.

If you're someone who struggles with unhealthy eating,
well, a great way to do that
is to not have any unhealthy food in the house.

But the internet basically is like filling all of our houses
just out there in front of us is just junk food everywhere.

It's gonna, now the willpower required is a lot greater.

So yeah, that's a big one.

Did people used to procrastinate on the typewriter?

Like will all human beings always find a way to procrastinate?

I do wonder how like people in the 1700s procrastinate on.

And it must have been, I mean, they had books.

So it must have been something,
but it was definitely less tempting.

But I think there's writers who for centuries
who have said stuff like,

I love having written,

but I hate the process of writing.

I mean, actually the word procrastination
is a Latin word.

It means to put off till tomorrow.

So we're talking about the Roman Empire.

This was a problem.

And by the way, there's another word called perendination, I think.

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And like to be a perendinator is actually
to put things off till the day after tomorrow.
So procrastination is put things off till tomorrow.
Perendinators to put things off till,
so they have a nuanced understanding of someone
who's a disaster or like a super disaster in this regard.
So yeah, like I'm sure Julius Caesar was a procrastinator.
I just don't know what he exactly did when he was procrastinating.
All right, let's talk a little bit about technology and happiness.
And the way that technology is either making us happier
or more miserable.
You once tweeted this 300 year old quote by Montesquieu
that says this,
if you only wish to be happy,
this could easily be accomplished,
but we wish to be happier than other people.
And this is always difficult,
for we believe others to be happier than they are.
And I think everyone would agree
that social media has made it impossible
not to compare ourselves to others, right?
It's what we do all of the time,
every single time we're looking at Instagram.
They're happier on their vacation.
They're skinnier than I am.
They have the better clothes, right?
How has social media put the human urge to compete
and compare it that Montesquieu talked about
300 years ago on steroids?
And is there any way to resist it?
I have a term I call like image crafting,
which is I think what people do on social media.
They image craft, right?
They're going to present a person that is not them,
but is who they want people to think they are,
which people, again, people have always done,
but social media, it's much, yeah,
it's like you said, it's on steroids.
A, people don't broadcast their failures
and they don't broadcast their shitty vacations.
So you're already seeing this distorted lens.
One of the crazy things about humans
is that how we feel about our own life

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is almost entirely derived from comparison.
So it used to be, if your car isn't as nice
as your neighbor's car, you feel poor.
But now comparison is in our face.
Instead of seeing our neighbor and our couple of co-workers
and our friends and how they're doing,
we see everyone and we see the most six,
so instead of seeing, there's someone
who's the most successful person from your high school,
right, who you knew in high school.
Normally, you might hear through the grapevine about them,
oh, they're doing whatever, whatever, you forget about it.
You don't hear about them again for 10 years.
Now that person's in your face
because everyone's talking about them online
and they're there and everyone's forwarding their things,
and so it's kind of a nightmare of comparison now.
And then you combine that with the fact
that everyone's presenting the best version of their life
and you really have a recipe for misery and inequality.
That is always a problem,
but inequality is really rubbed in your face with social media.
There's this term coined by the sociologist Ray Oldenburg
called the third space, which is exactly what it sounds like, right?
It's a place outside of home or work for adults
or for kids that cultivates a sense of community.
Starbucks wanted to pride itself on being the third place.
And for some people, it's still a bar,
maybe a coffee shop or a community library
or a park or a playground,
but it's meant to be sort of like this common leveler
where everyone's welcome regardless of social class,
race, gender, et cetera.
But in our world today, I would argue that the internet
is that third space, right?
And you can use it to get lost in an app
or TikTok or Twitter or a game.
And in certain ways, it's incredible.
It attracts those looking for a community.
You know, if you're living in a rural place,
you can connect to people all over the world
that have a like-minded view to you.
But it can also be this extremely destructive thing

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in ways that I don't even need to go into
because everyone knows what I'm talking about.
Alienation, isolation, radicalization, all of those things.
How do we use this tool for the good?
How do we use this tool in a way that cultivates
our higher rung values, our higher mind?
How do we protect ourselves from slipping to the lower rungs,
from giving in to our primitive mind,
especially as technology is continuing to advance?
Who knows what's gonna be here six months from now
because of AI?
Well, people who want to lose weight,
it's very logical to keep only healthy food in the house, right?
Surround yourself by healthy food
and you'll probably eat more of it.
And you can do the same thing on the internet.
You can actually try to avoid junk food, internet junk food,
and surround yourself with influences that'll make you better.
Think about Twitter.
Twitter, you know, people rag on it as this, you know,
hellscape and it is, but not for everyone.
Just for us?
Well, yeah, I mean, certainly.
But if you're gonna tweet about politics,
you're gonna invite the hellscape into your world.
But the point is, you know, a lot of people, they log on
and they see a bunch of interesting people talking about science
and history and making, you know, comedians,
making funny jokes and then some of their friends.
And it's not a hellscape at all.
It's awesome, right?
One thing I did for this book is,
because I wanted to not end up in an echo chamber,
people who felt the way I did,
is I tried to follow on different social media platforms
a wide range of people.
If someone who was getting a lot of attention
and I just tested what they thought, instant follow.
I want to see what they're saying.
And then also if someone who I thought was a good thinker
and they disagreed with me, you know,
even more so instant follow.
So you can surround yourself by a wide variety of views

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if you want to get the full picture
and not let yourself fall too much in an echo chamber.
And we talked about idea lab culture.
You can choose to go to the sites and listen to the podcasts
and follow people that you believe kind of have a high rung approach,
which means they might be anywhere on the political axis
or any other axis, but they approach things like a grown-up,
not identifying with their ideas,
not taking, you know, not attacking people who disagree with them,
but attacking their ideas.
So you can curate your own internet world pretty well, I think,
to the same way, again, and then it's just like food.
You're going to sometimes go out or order, you know,
delivering, you're going to get some really,
you're going to still end up going into this,
you know, someone's going to send you a tweet,
you're going to end up scrolling down the comment section
and getting angry and all that.
But you can do a lot, you can go a long way.
Now, on a macro scale, how do we do better?
You know, how do we not, because, you know, collectively,
we can be very smart and wise.
And we can also be the lowest common denominator,
it can win out and we can be the worst of our human nature,
can come out collectively.
But what we can do is if we build enough awareness
about this concept and people already,
there's a lot more people talking about how social media is bad,
right? That's new.
People, you know, you said, you said that, you know,
you didn't even need to even list the things.
You said it was just obvious why the internet can be bad.
That's pretty new, actually.
This idea that these algorithms make us miserable.
And so, right there, you're going to start having some pressure.
You're going to start having some kind of shaming
of the people who own the platforms
if their algorithms are geared towards engagement,
which, of course, usually it means geared towards
amplifying anger and, you know, bombastic people.
And I think we could get to a world where that's very,
you know, that's no one would ever join a platform
that still has an algorithm like that.

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We all know that that's not so.
And in that world, everyone's suddenly incentivized
to make their algorithms better and more pleasant.
I think we could get there where there's kind of a mass shift
where it becomes the, it looks like the Wild West,
back when the algorithms were just going for engagement.
And now, of course, we don't do that anymore.
And it wouldn't be that hard for algorithms to find ways
to drive different behavior, to reward different kinds of behavior.
Just turning back to your book and the story of us
that we started this conversation with,
and where we are on your 1,000-page historical timeline
of humanity, you say that the disasters on page 1,000
of the history of us are exponential
compared to the disasters on page 999.
Why is that?
Technology is a double-edged sword.
I mean, look at the 20th century.
It had record numbers in terms of GDP per capita
and the eradication of disease and the fewest people ever
in extreme poverty and just general prosperity.
But it also saw the two biggest wars in history.
It saw the two biggest genocides in history.
And it saw the advent of the biggest existential risk weapon
in history, the nuclear weapon.
So the same century that was the best ever was also the scariest ever
and in some ways the worst ever in certain areas.
So what does that mean about the next century, right?
What does that mean about everything if tech is continuing to explode?
It means that we could solve everything.
Just advancements in AI alone.
I mean, we could solve all disease.
We could solve world hunger and eradicate poverty.
We could solve climate change.
We could solve aging even.
People could die when they want to.
This is all realistic.
This really could happen.
But the existential risk, now there's not just one.
There's many and they go together.
They feed on each other.
So you can look at that and when you could sum that up
and say the stakes are higher than ever.

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If we can kind of move forward wisely,
we can live in what would seem like a utopia to people today.
And if we don't, then if you live in this advanced society,
it might, the fall might be the worst ever.
So the point is people should be scared.
We shouldn't be cocky.
And the reason I like the liberal house and I talk about it a lot
is that I think that gives us our best chance to proceed wisely.
I think liberalism is the tool and the system
that can get us to a really good future.
And I think the destruction of liberalism
is the ultimate existential threat
because I think it enhances all the other existential threats.
And so, yeah, I don't want us to get cocky
about what we have and the stability we have
because we really need it going forward
and it should never take it for granted.
You have a baby daughter.
What is the biggest piece of advice
you could give someone maybe like her
when she understands words about the world
and the world she's being born into
as we move on to that thousandth and one page?
I would, I would try to teach her independent reasoning.
Conventional wisdom from 10, 30, 50 years ago
is often not accurate anymore.
It's not wise anymore.
Conventional wisdom does not stay wise for long.
And it's always going to lag behind.
And so I would encourage her to trust her independent reasoning
and when it conflicts with conventional wisdom
about how the world is, about where it's going,
about who the harmful people and the productive people are
to continually observe and reflect.
And when her, what she comes up with there
disagrees with conventional wisdom to trust it
and to continually stay humble
and so that she can continue to change her mind
because if you live in 50,000 BC, the world is the way it is.
Your great-grandparent lived the same life you did.
Conventional wisdom is the same
as it always has been and it's wise.
When the world is rapidly changing,

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you have to be nimble as a thinker and continue to adjust.

So I would want her to do that.

Tim Urban, thanks for coming on today.

Thank you, Barry.

Thanks for listening.

If you like this conversation, if it moved you in some way

or if Tim said something you appreciated

or disagreed with or were provoked by, it's all good.

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