

[Transcript] The Ezra Klein Show / Best Of: A Weird, Wonderful Conversation with Kim Stanley Robinson

I'm Ezra Klein. This is the Ezra Klein Show.

There's no way around it. This has been a heavy show lately. So it's nice today to be able to have had and to be able to give you a conversation that's a little bit more joyful that makes you remember this is a dazzling world to get to live in that we're lucky to have a chance to experience it and that there's a politics that can be built around that kind of awe and that kind of gratitude.

Kim Stanley Robinson is one of our great living science fiction writers. And one thing that makes him great book after book is the way geology is a character and a context in his work. Whether that is the terrain of Mars, the coastal structure of New York or the glittering mountains of California. And Robinson's attention to land in his fiction turns out to be rooted in his attention to land in his life.

He has this new book on unusual foray into nonfiction for him, which is about his lifelong relationship. And I mean the head of the more human sense of the term with the Sierra Nevada's. It's right there in the title, the high Sierra, a love story. This is his love story, but it's also a lot more than that. It's an exploration of what he calls psychogeology, the way the places were in shape, the ways we think.

And this conversation too is an exercise in psychogeology in his in mine. Maybe when you listen to it, you're going to see some of yours. And hopefully you'll hear one day, all of us, what would a politics that was more attentive to the place we lived in, the place we get to experience, look and feel like. As always, my email is reclined show at NYTimes.com.

Kim Stanley Robinson, welcome to the show.

Thanks, Ezra. It's good to be back.

You all can't see us, but we're across each other across a somewhat long table and it looks like I'm giving Stan a quarterly performance evaluation.

I hope I passed the audition.

It's looking good, I think.

What led you to move your writing set up outdoors? It's a bit of an unusual decision.

Yeah. Well, I do live in California in the Central Valley, so it's physically possible most days, but I was getting, I was feeling burnt out and feeling like my writing life was coming to an end somehow. I had struggled with my Washington, D.C. trilogy that was a two or three or four year struggle and I felt mired in the swamp in the classic Washington sense, but also as a writer and I was thinking, well, gosh, it's been, I don't know, 30 years. Maybe I've just come to the end and then I moved outdoors into my front courtyard, which is got a fence around it and is filled with plants and a patio, a cafe table, a comfortable chair now.

Started tapping on the laptop out there, realized immediately that I needed shade to be able to see the laptop screen. Even through deppled tree leaf light, it was messing me up, so I slung a tarp as I would in the mountains over me, got the shade, and then when it rained, which in Davis is pretty rare, the rain ran off the sides of the tarp and I was still working rather stubbornly out there and realized I liked it. The rain fell off the tarp like a bead curtain. I was typing away, the laptop's hot and it kind of steams off any raindrops that fall on it. My wife was highly amused and was taking photos of me stubbornly staying out there, but I realized my writing day was an adventure day, an outdoor day, like as

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if I was in a meadow in the Sierra, but I was getting my work done and I realized I quite enjoy writing. I love it, making a novel. It's what I do and it's a peculiar monastic life, a same day by myself, same seat, and not many people do that and it is weird, but I thoroughly enjoyed it. So now in the winter, I wear my backpacking gear at down hood, at down booties, a little electric pad and perhaps because your feet go first and even 50 degrees, if you're just sitting there, you're going to chill out, but you can wear warm clothes and just type away. Even a laptop is a little heater. In the summer, it's much worse. You roast, slow roasting, over 100 degrees and you, even with a fan on you, you begin to heat up and your brain overheats, you can't write very well. So in the summer, I work in the Marines or I don't work at all and I try to work spring, winter, fall, but in any case, heat is the real challenge for an outdoor worker in the Central Valley. So let me then go back early, early before even the career, really where the High Sierra book begins. Tell me about dropping acid in the Sierras that first time.

Okay. It was fun. We were hippies. It was a 73, very long hair and very anti-Vietnam war. All of our draft numbers were under 100 and we were staying in college and it was kind of crazy. And I think recapturing the feel of the early 70s now would be a remarkable act of creative, you know, psycho-archeological excavation. It was, it really felt different. In that structure of feeling, well, we had started taking acid along with many others at UC San Diego and we didn't know what we were taking really and eating little pieces of construction paper. God knows what was in them, but something was going on in that culture, some kind of bizarre honor system in that the effects were consistent. You could tell that most of the time you had taken some number of micrograms of lysergic acid and it would derange your senses a little bit. Your visuals were blurry or it wasn't flat out hallucinations. You wouldn't have a pink elephant stirring at you, but the wall would crawl a little bit. Wallpaper would kind of creep and crawl on you. And this was interesting, but insignificant. So what was more important and especially up there in the Sierras with the mountains kind of bouncing a little bit and seeming gigantic because I'd never been in them before, was that there was a significance factor. Things meant something. I was walking in a world of meaning and that is the best way I can put it because it was a little more mystical at the time. In retrospect, I would just say I was walking around going, oh my God, the world is real or it's more than real. And that extended through that whole day and then that night I couldn't sleep and I was just looking at it, listening to a stream, was in the moonlight. There were rocks, there were little trees. It was High Sierra at its finest, although for me it was more like dropping into some, I don't know, some fantasy novel, some space I didn't know existed on the planet at the time. The Southern California mountains are scrubby, dry, chaparral and sandstone and dust. And the High Sierras are clean and chiseled and filled with bonsai plants and are stupendously beautiful compared to what I had expected. So I joke that I just never came down from that day and now they're talking these brain scientists and people studying LSD are saying, well, it actually does change you. How could that be? 25 micrograms, I'm a strange chemical and your brain has that brain blood barrier anyway. I don't think anyone knows what's going on and I myself am long retired. I'm not the slightest bit interested. I would be scared. I'm surprised people are so bold as to take it now, but I was whatever, 21 years old and it changed me. I have a lot of thoughts on that.

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I want to go back to the way you described that first experience because it reminds me of this quote from William James on the noetic qualities of mystical experiences where he writes, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth, unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations full of significance and importance, all in articulate though they remain. And as a rule, they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after time. And I thought about last line when I read the way that moment imbued the Sierras with deep meaning for you. It seems forever. Yes, and James is so good on these things. That's a great quote. Now I'll just tell you a story because it happened last week. I was walking in a Swiss village. I had had a tremendous day hike high above the village on a north slope in the Alps. It was like a temperate rainforest, very unlike the Sierra, very beautiful, extremely beautiful, and came down into this village and there was an old barn or tool shed and an old bicycle and been tacked to it. And to left and right of it were two words that were in wrought iron on this side of this barn, iron maw and then emmer. So that means I think once and then always. Well, I had that same kind of Jamesian mystical moment of this is I take to be a religious statement that everything that happens is somehow also caught in an eternity. And so and I'd like the fact the German seems to give it a poetical quality or romantic quality like like Schiller or Novalis. I'm all emmer. And I walked back down to where my wife was on a zoom that she had to be on her or she would have been with me.

And I described it to her and she was laughing at me again. But in an affectionate way, it had a reminder and it was similar to that early Sierra experience. And I think the mountains are a space where you are taken outside of your ordinary urban mind and are thinking a little deeper or no, that might not be the right way to put it. Things are coming together in your head in a different way. Let me ask you one more question on unsychedelics before I leave the topic because it relates to some other things I'm going to ask you about. I've thought since our first conversation about a term you turn me on to which is cognitive estrangement. And the term is from science fiction, the way science fiction can let us see our world but not see it as our world. It estranges us from it, it makes it feel different. And so when I was reading the high Sierra and I realized you'd actually had a quite serious when you were younger period where you were using psychedelics, I wondered if that had a role in your fiction because it occurred to me that the fundamental thing that taking a few micrograms of a chemical which completely upends your unconsciousness does

is it cognitively estranges you from seeing your world as as fixed as it is. That's what I've noticed from it. I think what a lot of people appreciate about it that it is a it loosens your grip on your own certainties. Was there do you think there's been any relationship between you know your career as a writer in that period of your life?

For sure. Yes. And cognitive estrangement is one way to put it. It's good. It comes out of Brecht and Darko Souven applied it to science fiction as an aesthetic effect and Brecht liked in the theater to do the what I think he called the very fremden effect, the estrangement effect. It's what you take to be normal like in what a play would be like in the theater and then suddenly the actor is talking to you directly about the aspects of the play that you need to think about. Well that estranges you from the willing suspension of disbelief that you go into when you enter a work of art and the artist then kind of slaps you in the face. Well now we know this

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is fairly common in theater and in art life partly because of Brecht. But in life itself with this psychedelic experience of my youth it was impossible to believe that American reality as understood in the 1960s or 1950s was the whole story. If you could take just a 25 micrograms of a chemical and then suddenly everything was changed what was reality it obviously is a relationship between our biochemistry and the outside world. So then you're into oh my gosh epistemology and ontology and deep philosophy mystical feelings and of course we were young at the time and I was reading Ram Dass and Aldous Huxley to try to understand the psychedelic experience but also Gary Snyder the great California poet who was teaching me how to how can I say it. There's a kind of California New Age hippie Zen Buddhism. Buddhism in America came first to California and I was reading also D.T. Suzuki who was a Japanese Zen master writing for the American audience also Alan Watts and that whole stream of California culture and thought was doing its best to make an intellectual construct a way of both understanding and then putting to use in life these lessons out of these experiences. So for me I mean when I look back on it I see I was kind of formed or forged in a fire that had to do with psychedelics also Buddhism also the Sierras also science fiction which I discovered late in the game I was like a freshman in college when I ran into Asimov and Simac and then the new wave generation of science fiction writers who were on fire and if you think of all those things hitting one young man at once and how I thought of myself as a poet even before that writing Shakespearean sonnets in high school and then in understanding that actually Free Verse had come along it coalesced and it launched me and I've been unwinding it since then. But what any good psychedelic guide will tell you is that it's all about the integration it's all about whether or not you change your life after many people were in that milieu and they went on and they work on Wall Street or they do marketing for snacks or something you really reordered your life to be near the Sierras you estimate that you've camped a total of about two years in the Sierras you're 70 years old that's actually a not insignificant portion of your life how has that much time in the mountains changed the way you see the world? So when I was writing I always thought my original perceptions of reality might be coming out of these mountain trips so let's try to find ways to write the mountain experiences into my novels not always easy not always even appropriate but I did it and beyond that I wouldn't want to claim too much I've loved it I've gotten in as much as I can given the rest of my obligations in life and it's been good and lovely it feel like it's kind of a privileged a suburban even maybe a white male experience although luckily you see lots of women up there and now more and more people of color

I don't want to tell you your business but as a reader a Kip Stanley Robinson reader I wonder if you make a little too little of that and I wonder that in this sense one thing that has always felt unusual to me about your work is that the geography is often the main character now it's not written from the point of view of the geography although occasionally you'll get a chapter from the perspective of an atom or something but but nevertheless you seem to think in terrain in a way that is unusual among even science fiction writers I'm aware of well I'm into it for sure but I would say that actually science fiction is an urban literature and an literature of ideas and hasn't been good on what I would call settings so you know characters plot theme style setting these days people talk about world building I think that's a little ancillary or not a derivative effect of a novel working well and that one in a novel not to be world building but in fact following characters through a plot so for me

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it's about characters in a plot but why are you moved by your characters in their plot that's an interesting question and one answer is well I believed it while I was reading it I was there and being there implies that the setting matters and the characters in a plot are moving through some kind of a landscape or situation you might say that is particularized and the more particularized it is the more the reader is well reading there like I believe this I'm living it and I thought science fiction when I came into it had a problem that I called the cardboard sets and I'm thinking of Star Trek 1967 where you could see that the bridge of the starship enterprise was made of cardboard and plywood and a lot of science fiction was written as if the sets were just unimportant and were cardboard and plywood and then you got into your exciting adventure with whatever and I thought what I can bring to it is the reality of a planet and of other places and of landscapes and that will help the novel be a better novel I want to talk about an idea you bring up a few times in the high Sierra which is actor network theory can we just start with what is it yes and thank you for that and it's funny too because Bruno Latour and French social scientists who's become a philosopher and it's very important and he revolutionized science studies they talk about the laturization of science studies which went from philosophy of science and history of science to science studies precisely because of Latour's innovations and the main one was actor network theory so that if you were say Louis Pasteur then amongst his collaborators were the bacteria he was working on and then if you were doing John Muir's Sierra work or the Sierra Club as an actor network the Sierra is an actor and now actor network theory comes maybe out of the

1980s and many critics have come up to say it's not right because some actors have agency and others

don't have agency so when you take straight actor network theory you are obscuring who decides and

who acts in this actor network because agency is important but I think Latour's point still holds that we are in collaborations with the bacteria inside our body that are part of our our self and our mind and our consciousness this is a revolutionary and Latour created a framework of understanding

by which when we were told 50% of the DNA in your body is not human DNA well that's mind boggling

you have to think about that for quite a while and it's a little terrifying because everything has to go right in this collaboration that you're not in control of yeah I don't like thinking about my microbiome no your microbiome is a is a is a the alien within you or you're in an actor network with a whole bunch of little creatures who have their own program and it all has to go well and and eventually it doesn't and you fall apart and die but the actor network is a useful way I think of including the things that aren't humans and human laws and human decisions that get them the rest of the birth biosphere are intense inner penetration with the rest of the biosphere such that it's our extended body and we rely on it to stay healthy we pay better attention by way of actor network theory well let me key on that pay better attention because I want to push you down a level of profundity because I can imagine somebody hearing this and saying oh so the theory is that when I write I'm in collaboration with my pen and the paper yeah okay I'm in yes there's a pen in the paper when I write what is it that it is saying to you that is not an obvious when you embrace it as a way of thinking about it you write in the book that you need an actor network to make real

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change in the world what is it saying beyond their connections between you and whatever you're working with whoever you're working with whatever you're working on well there might not be much

more to it than that but that's important to remember if say you're a writer and you're thinking you can change the world by your sentences and that's not really true and having tried it a couple times and seen it fail or maybe my whole life trying it and seeing it fail you need other people to be teaching you things you need language itself but also you need the laws to change and that's collaborative that's working with a whole bunch of people in a network that real change comes not from just the idea being expressed you can't express an idea eloquently enough that everybody's going to say oh wow I never thought of it that way before so now I'm going to change everything else has to come into play and then you have to do politics in effect I like the line about about paying attention in part because one of the things that I think it encourages us to pay attention to is it even if you take the corrective that a lot of the actors in these theories don't have agency in the sense that maybe they are inanimate maybe they cannot choose maybe they don't have free will maybe they're subjugated you know like if you're experimenting on animals in a scientific situation on the other hand we often miss that we are being changed by things even if the things are not intending to change us and you know speaking earlier when you were talking about California culture in the 70s it has only been something I've realized you know in the last five or ten years how influenced I am by that as somebody who grew up in California and basically holds all of those interests and thought they were my own and realized later and since moving back to California a couple years ago they're much more present in my work even though I had not intended to make them more present in my work and so paying attention maybe to the ways that the things we are working with working in the context

of change us seems to me to be a worthwhile pursuit and it I think offers an entry into something that you spent quite a lot of time writing about in the book which is psychology tell me a bit about what is psychology to you yeah it follows very naturally because it's a kind of an expression of actor network theory but back to psychology and actor network with these rocks I feel a distinct difference for instance if I'm hiking on granite or if I'm hiking on metamorphic rock which the serres has both and it's a different plant communities different I'm breaking patterns and different safety underfoot granite is very safe metamorphic rock not so much and then also the effects of verticality and fractalness these are special effects on the human mind and you have to pay attention you can't tell how tall things are how steep they are and both foreshortening is a psychogeological effect where the human eye even if you know you're being fooled in an optical illusion you can't overcome it just by knowing that so you wander up there in an intense relationship that you know is somewhat deceptive and particularized super particularized and once again you're paying attention so I talk about psychogeology as the trying to understand why for instance the serres feel so different than the swiss alps or the transcend arc fix or the himalayas these are the other mountain ranges that I've spent some time in walking around and they have their characters they and I say this even about the serra basins have characters why should that be it's just a rock and empty space in particular patterns and yet at least to my mind they coalesce into a particular feeling like in the Ionian basin you're going to feel a scared and oppressed and like something's

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wrong I mean you can try to explain it but it's more of a gestalt and that's psychogeology I found that idea very generative and it made me think about a lot of places I've been and I'll offer a couple of them here so we're speaking in downtown San Francisco the buildings here are bigger than we are I've spent a fair amount of time in Manhattan the buildings are much bigger than I am but I wouldn't say either environment changes my own psychic sense of centrality that I and human beings are the protagonist of the story I went backpacking last year in old growth redwoods completely different feeling right you feel like you're here you will die you're meaningless that there's a lot more going on right that's since many ways the point of Richard Powers the overstory being in big mountains right now I've spent a fair amount of time out in the Ansel Adams wilderness which I love you just feel small and I don't know anybody really who goes to these places and doesn't have that feeling of smallness and there's something there that's more than in size because big buildings don't do that to you in the same way why do you think that is I wonder um I know what you're talking about and I'm thinking about the cultures that we grow up in shape our perceptions even of the natural world and western culture this is a somewhat of an old story but they thought of mountains you can see it in Shelly's Mont Blanc and in Wordsworth the important thing was the stimulus these places gave to metaphysical thoughts and again the human was big in that story in those poems and then in Chinese landscape poetry it's like Chinese landscape art these teeny little humans are standing in these vast floating mountains with clouds and then forest and then clouds and then forest and the human element

is specifically pointed out to be minute and insignificant compared to the whole um I mean the fact that the Sierras are 14,000 feet tall that's pretty unusually tall and you can see it and go to the east side of the Sierra you're looking at a 10,000 foot high wall and remember that the skyscrapers in Manhattan even at their tallest are like a thousand feet or maybe now I guess 1500 feet so then you've got a mountain range that you can't quite grasp it's full size because of the foreshortening problem but you know in your mind that it's six times taller than the tallest skyscrapers and it isn't even one of the major mountains it scales you and then there's the you think there's the a feeling of sublimity which is like beauty and terror combined this is a very specific and important emotion and then there's a technological sublime like this morning I was flying over the bay at it should have been 60 miles an hour it was five miles an hour but I was listening to Astor Piazzolla who's been dead 30 years and I was also my iPhone was talking to me and and all this stuff is the technological sublime you have powers you are like a god god like things are happening to you but you know it was concocted by technology so that sublime is different than the natural one which is oh my gosh I'm just a little tiny primate I'm only alive a few years the universe in the Scottish Highlands the rock around you is 500 million years old and and learn enough and the psychology can begin to ping you because you can see the differences maybe and so these feelings as they sort out this reminder that we are small creatures in a on a big planet and that nevertheless we are changing it by our technologies in a bad way all this can squish together into one train of thought as you're walking I mean I talk about this that that we think at a kind of walking pace and when we're walking we think maybe better than we do if we're just sitting it's at least we're testing it's a there's an invention here too of not just space but time which is interesting to me so you have this lovely line that to be in

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the sierras is to have quote the touch of deep time and I think that's important to this feeling I think one of the reasons that skyscrapers don't have the feeling of old growth redwoods upon you is that old growth redwoods have this feeling of time like they are these these batteries of time you recognize they were there long before you they'll be there long after you well actually the white humans act maybe not but but nevertheless um whereas the skyscrapers they feel you can feel

the human time right you can feel that they are part of our cycle can you talk about a bit about that experience of deep time and and why it is easier you think to have in places like the sierras well I I think it it's probably fairly obvious but I will I do want to start by saying that Manhattan is superb and it what it is is a testament to human abilities of cooperation and mutual aid and amazing creativity so I walk in Manhattan and I'm the technological sublime is just blowing me away I quite love it but also speaking of time I'm often thinking about something that you wrote about quite recently okay they built the empire state building in a year that that's amazing but when you look at all the Manhattan you're thinking it should have taken more human work hours than the whole lifetime of the universe to build this place and so what it means is a whole lot of people are working every day to build something like that to be fair we cut a lot of corners it's the reason I ask this is not just to kind of trip out on the idea of time although I do I do enjoy that too but because I think of time and the experience of it as being a central political challenge and you've a a line we've said quote the coming century will bring to one degree or another a global ecological crisis but it will be playing out at planetary scales of space and time and it's possible to accept in big storms or food shortages things won't happen at the right scales to be subjectively experienced as crisis I think there's some real wisdom in that something when we look at climate models there are time compression device

we we experience even if only in summary a lot of calamities all is one calamity but because they'll play out in time they won't be experienced that way which is also one reason we may not respond the way we should could you talk about that that that insight you have that it may not happen at the right scale to feel like crisis yes although I probably should have said the right speed of the right pace of event but I day before yesterday I was up at my the home of Gary Snyder the poet and a real a friend and a mentor to me and his son Kai said something really interesting Kai Snyder said there's a disruption ecology has a notion of speed of crisis that if it's happening too fast like say Russia's war on Ukraine and so brutal and crazy the Ukrainians are not worrying about climate change right now because they're being blown up and so when things

are happening like maybe mid-storm even a natural event you don't have time to do anything but try to survive on the other hand if it's happening too slowly then you don't think you have to deal with it because it's happening on a scale of thousands of years and and you have more present concerns and what I think might be happening in a encouraging way is that the climate crisis is now beginning to hammer us human harm and extinctions of other creatures and build up the poisons they're all happening at a pace that is both hitting us and yet we can deal with so we might be actually in a zone of potential possible good actions and you see this across the board of governments and then private capital wanting to invest greenly because they would like the world to survive so they can continue to stay in business and on it goes like that so we might

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have fallen into a good pace of change which partly means the emergency has begun but it hasn't yet overwhelmed us and so we could still do something about it and then I want to repeat something that I was said to me by another teacher Zaid Al-Rad Hussein a Jordanian who I met at COP26 and kind of taught me what COP was about as much as any can you say what COP is oh yes the Congress of the parties that was in Glasgow the meeting for the Paris Agreement improvements the annual meeting so Zaid said you know you don't have to be in a plane crash to know that it would be bad to be in a plane crash and that's so obviously true and so we make sure to try to make sure that planes don't crash and they rarely do because of our intense attention to that because the ramifications of it would be so bad like fatal so now climate change we know that a rise in temperatures high enough would be a kind of civilizational plane crash we don't want it to happen we have some time to try to avoid it so in in some ways I will say this I am more encouraged now than I was when I wrote ministry for the future in 2019 what I've seen what I've learned and what everybody's learned because of the pandemic these are lessons learned that have accelerated our responses to this emergency and it's by no means a done deal but more people are talking about it more money's being invested in it it's a different world than it was in 2019 I've been trying to think about well let me say two things so one I think your insight there that maybe we're entering a pace of crisis that is actually more aligned to human action not so fast that it feels like you can't act but not so slow that it feels like you can't see it I think it's really interesting I'll have to sit with that but I think it's a very very interesting insight one of the fundamental questions I think in politics is what kinds of crises do we experience that way you mentioned airplane crashes and the effort we put into making them not happen you know and somebody might say on the other hand and look how little we do about air particulates and you know in many places right kills about 10 million people a year how do you think about the experience we continue to go through and I know you just got covid with the pandemic and there's still both a lot of death happening but but also a lot of risk right another variant could come anytime we know there's a seasonality and a cyclicity there's many things we could do that we're not doing and it's just amazing to me how quickly we move from a period where it's like we would stop everything to period where we will kind of stop nothing right the the acculturation process to the pandemic threat was sort of remarkable on on both sides and so remarkable on both sides that I almost don't know what lessons to draw from it right it simultaneously shows how much can change and how little can and that's coexisting to me at least and I'm curious if somebody thinks about this kind of large-scale adaptation in crisis what you took from it as a as a moment of watching all this play out yeah well I'm still stunned I never got over being stunned by how quickly things changed in spring of 2020 and since then I've never felt caught up but I think it is explicable that right at the start of the pandemic it looked like it could kill many many millions and also for ordinary citizens it looked like they themselves could die on the other hand a lot of people followed instructions because I think out of fear and and but a sense of solidarity okay everybody's responding let's respond together that's what we do but we're such social primates that the order to stop socializing is impossible to hold to for long and then some risk assessment is going on okay how likely am I to get code pretty likely how bad will it be well I probably will just get sick and survive and that explains I think the slacking off on everybody's part it's worth adding that a risk assessment you you say how likely is it to happen and then how bad would it be if it did

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happen so likely hit of a plane crash we've made that really minimal because how bad would it be if it did happen is fatally bad now with climate change how likely is it to happen 100% we're already started it it's going to happen to some level another and then how bad is it going to be it could be really bad we break some of these planetary boundaries that Johann Rockström has defined and the whole work of the sciences is to try to find out what kind of physical boundaries if we crash through them we cannot claw back from no matter whether we decided to or not it would be irreparable and we're hitting those boundaries now so okay and that would be bad so in other words doing this risk assessment likelihood extremely high how bad would it be extremely bad we need to respond to climate change in a rapid way and that's the story of the 2020s and what I'm seeing is a lot of people have come to that same conclusions and action is beginning to happen at the level of finance and law and that's where it has to happen and then individual cognition and responsible action by developed countries citizens you know reduce your carbon burn you see that also

so I'm going to ask you to read something from the book now that it's going to sound a little off topic but but but I really don't think it is in fact for me it's coming to be almost like a bit of a skeleton key to some of how you think about this so you have a chapter in the book about gear what literally you should bring up to the to the high sears and there's somebody planning a backpacking trip I've been thinking a lot about that chapter but you have a paragraph the end that struck me is very revealing so it's a paragraph that begins with it's the younger hikers and I wondered if you could read it yeah sure it's the younger hikers who have simply gone into the adventure stores and bought whatever is offered that I find depressing I wonder about them as consumers and as critical thinkers I suppose they're strong enough to carry the extra stuff most of the time so it doesn't really matter to them and they get the joy of doing something hard but it could be more fun for them if they distrusted American commerce and thought it through there they are on the mere trail staggering under enormous backpacks hustling along to keep to a timetable having somehow managed to turn backpacking into a job they are the equivalent of commuters and SUVs on the highways of America a national weakness for overkill even for conspicuous consumption that they suffer for it when hiking uphill on their first day is often very evident when you pass them on the trail sweaty red faced dismayed getting desperate about to cry even actually crying we've seen it all but they haven't twigged that there's a better way so let's do this at two levels give me a little bit of context for what you're saying there about ultralight hiking and and these systematic mistakes you think people make but then I'd like to hear about what it seemed to me you're really talking about that the way our preferences and our society then are formed by the social and consumer society around us and in the way they might be fundamentally wrong that we might have the wrong preferences for the lives we actually want to lead well advertising capitalism and the culture of commerce sell things and the more and bigger they are more complicated the more you have to pay for them a whole national culture and maybe it's a global culture but it's definitely American because I just got back from Europe and all the cars are about one-third the size of your average American car and they get around just fine so this is something in our national psyche the bigger is better and people are generally urban or suburban there are the percentage of people that are farmers is tiny and then so you go out into the outdoors on an outdoors adventure you're still part of

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American culture and you go into one of the big adventure stores here it would be REI and you're being presented with equipment that has been designed to cost a lot and feel comfortable inside the store it's ridiculous it's too heavy it doesn't do what it's supposed to do now there's some people in the world who have decided they want to walk from Mexico to Canada in a single season that's 2,650 miles and I would never do that that's not on my list but for some people it is and so they're doing like a marathon that they walk every day for four months about a marathon's

distance and up and down on trails so they have become obsessed with weight if you used to think of backpackers as worrying about ounces these people are worrying about grams and a whole cottage

industry has developed where people start making their own gear and then little companies looking at these designs for ultralight equipment have started small cottage industries to make it and sell it online so you see a culture developing and they call it ultralight and there will be arguments amongst them people being people you can go too far with that and lose your comfort or cut corners in ways that are counterproductive and there's another line from my book we always carry our houses on our back and this is sort of a reference to the rose line that

all I need is a railroad box to live in I wouldn't be in as bad a box as many a middle class citizen is already what struck me about that part of the book is the idea that we are wrong about what we think we want you make the point in that chapter that people desperately want to get away and go into nature but then when they do they've weighed themselves down with so much gear with so much stuff that they've actually not done the thing they were hoping to do instead of feeling free and unencumbered to the extent at least possible they're me specifically I am weighed down under a 75 pound under a 75 pound pack and the well I don't know if I've ever had a 75 pound one but but nevertheless big packs the first day is tough and the it struck me reading that that a lot of your work actually seems to be about this idea at a broader level that the solutions the ideas the ways of living that we can come up with and thus the problems we can think to solve or the ways we can think to solve problems are very much bounded by the assumptions of the society in which

we live and the difficulty is thinking things through from first principles that to me what was what was striking about that that line that it could be more fun for them if they distrusted American commerce and and thought it through and it'd be easy to read this as taking an anti-technological stance right that oh just modernity is bad but but you say that actually backpacking this way it is a very high tech game but it's high tech to try to be more immersed in nature it's technology in the direction of harmony as opposed to in the direction of disharmony can you talk a bit about that those different views of technology and the relationship that it could forge with us for the world in which we live yes and I do think it's important and it is applicable to our lives in general not just backpacking that they're both technological we are technological creatures there's no going back to some supposedly pretty technological state for human beings because we actually co-evolved with stone tools and fire so we've been technological

as long as we've been human it's a species thing but appropriate technology which is a very good book by Victor Peenach from the 1970s appropriate technology is an interesting question and because

it becomes philosophical what are you doing it for and say you're doing it for a comfort, safety and fun then you often can get by with less and it becomes a matter of becoming more sophisticated in your technologies so you don't have big clunky poisonous technologies what I called celebinsk 65 of a world referring to the old soviet poisonous industrial city which really is in more disguised ways describes a lot of what we've done you clean it up and and use as little as needed to get the experience that you want which is maybe more of a contact with the world out in the wind you know living a sleeping outdoors this is the wilderness part of it but in general less between you and the planet that we're on can be a heightener of experiences so that in aesthetic and even religious terms you're having a better time by using less in a smarter way so this is one solution to the problem of what do you say to the younger generation about we need to use less we need degrowth all these things I don't think degrowth is a good term at all for human beings we need growth of sophistication we need a matter of figuring out what we want and then actually doing things that suit it how do you figure out what you want though because isn't that that's so much more complex a question than I think we give it credit for because we think we have a lot of agency over what we want but but the insight here is that we don't our wants are socially constructed you know the mid-century economists thought a lot about advertising for some reason that's fallen out of fashion among economists now you have people on the right really like to talk about renaissance or art and memetic theory which I don't know I I know it's like the hot new thing but the idea that our wants are socially constructed by other people is not struck me as transformative than as people seem to think but that it does often seem to me that one of the difficulties of just being alive but also politics is being able to to actually figure out what it is you want what it is your society wants and so we've outsourced that in many ways simply to the market whatever the market kind of ends up showing want is what we want and then we accelerate that want through algorithms and advertising and and other things but it's something that it does seem to you've thought about in some of your books and and is kind of thrumming through some of your work here how do you think about the politics of wanting well it's worth looking inside and thinking it over and realizing that there are pressures on what you want that come out of a commercial society out of out of capitalism and advertising that aren't what you really want they've been blown up and you've been told that you want those things so there is that social aspect but I'd say this we are animals or mammals or social primates and what we want you can track back to that you want to be fed you want to be warm you want to not get eaten by a lion that night you want love you want to dance you want to have sex you want to look at fire you want to throw things at other things these are the ones I made the pre-lithic list I've written about it before and then you can mess with those ones because of the technological sublime no you actually want a helicopter to the top of a peak in the Canadian Rockies and ski down a 70 degree slope that's what you want well no you wanted a thrill well a thrill could be throwing a rock at a bottle on a post and hitting it and breaking it so thrills are susceptible to fine-tuning by paying attention to what's really thrilling which is usually a sense of accomplishment so it's something that you did yourself or you did in a team with other people like you and this shared accomplishment of a team is a huge buzz and so it's not that hard really it's a matter of putting a hand up and holding off the inrush of crap that comes out of commercial advertising society that wants you to buy a bunch of stuff to prove that you're having fun

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I'm laughing to myself because my older son who is three and some months and putting on a list of the seven things human beings want to throw things at other things I think feels a lot truer to me right now and I might have at another point it is so deep right I mean just half my life is trying to get him not to throw anything he can find down the stairs yeah and he's right because it's awesome to throw things down the stairs it really is very fun and to throw things at other things and see if they fall down I mean there is something very very deep to it the human brain blew up like a balloon over the last two million years what did that and look at the lifestyle they were living then and that lifestyle was blowing their brains up generation by generation it had to be good or human and then you look at those activities and you can kind of go back to them none of them are forbidden to you now although it's very hard to get as much looking at fire as people used to get we've hidden most fires I'm always fascinated by the ways in which we substitute kind of ancient wants for modern modern versions and I'll give two that that come to mind sometimes

one I've heard people who are evolutionary anthropologists or historians make the argument that it's quite deep to when the night falls to surround yourself with fire and tell stories that if you look at virtually all societies you can think of I mean that's what human beings did for a very long time so the idea that at night we get in front of something that gives off light and tells us stories it's really I mean it's poignant in that way but it's not really the thing we were looking for I mean it's a simulacrum of it it's you know we don't really have the community when that happens the connection watching tv at home alone watching netflix on autoplay is not the same as being in front of the fire and I don't want to be I don't want to suggest everything was better when you know you can die because you scratched your toe there are no antibiotics but there is something to that and then similarly the degree to which we have wants for community for love for status for acceptance and living pretty atomized lifestyles we end up going online to social media you know or to distraction right the the ways in which one one gets replaced by another or palliative for it is I think a pretty fundamental experience of our world that is very very hard to see happening in real time or even talk about it because it sounds like you're questioning the choices people are making which we don't love doing but but nevertheless I think there's something to that yeah for sure and it's so disembodied the world through the screens and and I mean embodiment as being important I mean my friend terry bison said this is why people liked going to movie theaters was that experience of it in the dark and a flickering in front of you and a story being told this was all very ancient and and watching your laptop isn't the same as the communal experience of being in a movie theater which is semi-gone away although I wonder if it will but the basic emotions are still back down there being felt by us as social primates it's worth thinking about as a sorting mechanism what in modern life is worth my time and effort and what is perhaps a distraction and is actually making me less happy rather than more happy

I was listening to a talk you gave recently at a conference with the Dalai Lama on building a better Anthropocene and I wanted to set it up with some of these ideas and quotes because I feel like that was really the center of that on you really were sort of estranging from the world we have and suggesting that we could build a world that better reflects what we want so before we get into some of the ideas of that talk I'd just like to hear quickly about that conference I mean

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let's send an usual life experience going and doing a conference with the Dalai Lama what was that like well it was amazing and strange and I got the invitation it was the international campaign for Tibet and the Tibet policy institute and they were gathering a dialogue about the climate change and the Dalai Lama said oh the Buddha would be a green and he said I love socialism but you have to keep both eyes open and he made a squeezing motion you can't squeeze too hard so all these things watching him were quite beautiful but I felt peculiar going to the other side of the earth and this is a kind of a pandemic thing that I mean stopped flying flying now seems really strange talk about the technological sublime and I did it because I wanted to meet the Dalai Lama who I'd seen give a talk once in Washington DC long ago but this was

going to be an audience with a small group of people talking to him in that format and I wanted it so I paid carbon credits for almost the first time and and pondered that as an action and went and it was fantastic so a group of maybe 30 or 40 people with a really excellent virtual presence online of people all over the world who were well connected with what we were saying in the room talked about these issues for a few days and on the day I was going to leave I got a positive test for COVID and I apologized everybody they all just said okay no problem they didn't get it they laughed I stayed my Tibetan hotel hosts took care of me they were beautiful I had an extra few days to watch life in India and from a Tibetan context it was I'm really glad I did it so you gave this talk there about how to build a better age of the human and there are a couple ideas in it that I wanted to talk about because I do speak to some of these underlying ideas you want to talk about your thoughts on having a one to ten wage limit sure and thank you for that um look our culture and structures of feeling are is Raymond Williams way of describing it we're in a structure of feeling right now that is kind of stupid why should there be billionaires remember after world war two rich people were in disrepute because it felt like many people had this feeling and again it's a structure of feeling that the rich had semi-caused world war two and also that they had profited from it and in 1953 the tax rate once you got past four hundred thousand dollars which would have been maybe four million today you were taxed at 93 percent and so progressive taxation was a real thing and we got the glorious 30 as the French call it um 45 to 73 you know it wasn't that glorious but um there was more equality then and then since the Reagan Thatcher counter revolution inequality has just ballooned to the point where we're in another gilded age and you don't need billions to be happy and it's too much money it doesn't do the person who hasn't any good and then for everybody else it makes them think I'm not even really part of this system I would say if you don't believe this you should meet some billionaires yes or just watch them on twitter for a day because that's very available to everybody like watch Elon Musk and then some of the people around him on twitter and see if it looks to you like having billions of dollars really makes people happy no and I like Elon Musk he's an interesting guy but I don't like his Mars fantasy but I like his car company and his rocket company but it's true and and I call it the Midas touch if you've got that much money when somebody comes up to talk to you you always are not trusting them are they talking to you because they're interested in you and your ideas are they talking to you because you've got a big number in the bank and they can never tell so it's the Midas touch it wrecks their lives and it does do anybody else any good either it's ridiculous to fetishize them or to villainize them it's the system that's creating them and they're ordinary people who have been in the right place at the right time and

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succeeded but a progressive tax rate here at Thomas Piketty really important if I was creating a shadow cabinet for world government he would be the finance minister Piketty and I don't know if you've talked to him he an episode with with him just came out when we released his probably a month ago oh I am looking forward to that he is teaching me things and I wish I had had him to read 30 years ago when my my books would be better because Piketty is finally doing political economy

rather than just economics which is to say he's not just analyzing capitalism he's proposing way to make it more equal and better and one of his books one of his most recent books called time for socialism well between that and the Dalai Lama saying I love socialism I was kind of startled but in a good way and I don't think we need to use that word in America we you could just say public utility districts or you could say you know government over business we need to control the economy to save our ass there are ways to put it that aren't inflammatory in our culture but Piketty says progressive taxation on not on assets as well as income on companies as well as individuals and on inheritance as well as your living wealth could do a lot to make people feel well one employed and then two a meaning to their life because they're in the same boat as everyone else and you might have brought this up because in my book ministry for the future I have a long chapter about the US Navy where the wage ratio so-called is one to eight so the able seaman gets \$25,000 a year but also room board education and the top paid admiral gets \$200,000 a year and there's a real esprit de corps in the US Navy and it has to do with them all being on the same page economically like if it's one to eight for the Navy and they work pretty well but in American corporate life it's one to 350 on average between the worker and the CEO that means the CEO makes

as much every day as the worker makes an entire year and so what do you get you get cynicism defeatism a feeling of alienation from the whole project of civilization like I'm just a wage I'm a wage labor person I can barely scrape by nobody cares about me certainly not the society or the government and you then you get all the toxic repercussions of of despair and cynicism and so the wage ratio is a amenable to taxation you know you can actually adjust it by choosing to do so so a few thoughts here so so one thing that is interesting to me about this uh you're mentioning

Thomas Piketty's work I've always been very influenced by the economist Robert Frank and his work on what he calls consumption cascades and basically his argument is that a lot of being rich is a positional competition with other rich people there's actually a story like this about George Washington where he either didn't want this is actually the British who were employing

him at this time he either didn't want them to pay him so he was volunteering to lead this regiment or wanted to be paid a lot more than they were willing to pay him but he didn't want to be paid at this kind of middling level that that was uh that he felt was undignified and you know Frank's point is that a lot of competitive pressure waterfalls down through society that when you have the deco billionaires they put pressure on the billionaires and the billionaires put pressure on the hundred millionaires and the hundred millionaires put pressure on the deco millionaires and so on

and that if things were capped I mean he thinks about its progressive consumption taxes the more you spend the the more you get taxed but if things were capped that one of the the reasons it would

make people a little happier is that they wouldn't be in these endless positional competitions they wouldn't have to worry about not where they have enough because at these levels we're not talking about that the issue is really are you valued by society as much as society values that guy over there or that woman over there right I mean these are points on a scoreboard at a certain point not not anything you're doing to spend money and I also it's a very interesting way of thinking about it to understand society actually going back to our whole conversation about socially constructed want to understand us all as in a lot of competitions with each other that make us unhappy you know they keep us running very very fast on a on a treadmill where the only real end point is trying to show that we had we'd outplayed the other people and so when you talk about things like a one to ten wage ratio or you can imagine one to 25 or one to 50 one to 100 would be very different than what we have now that some of what it seems to me you're talking about in how society would structure itself is actually trying to say we could be a little bit freed from some of the competitive pressures with each other that that again go all the way down down through society from from the rich that a lot of people pretty crazy right now maybe I would say that it's probably crucially important to focus on the one that the one needs to be adequacy and so if the person that is at the entry level or the lowest amount of compensation is adequately compensated and so that by that I

would say food water shelter clothing healthcare education electricity had all of those and knew that they were going to last to the end of their life no matter what happened that social security of a safety net well that that's a one that you can trust and if you had it you could even say I'm happy because I've got my own personal interest and I've got adequacy and once you've got the one

as a floor of decency and because it's such a scandalous situation that we're in how many humans are emissary and the precariat is indeed precarious and that's a whole lot of people are precarious one job loss one health crisis and they're screwed forever so if the one is solid then the top one isn't as important because adequacy if you begin to do it like like on my fingers here one adequacy and then let's go one to ten two adequacy you know twice as much as you need well that's a lot but then another one three times as much as you need four times as much as you need by the time you get up to ten times adequacy your brain begins to explode you're like well that's just luxurious you don't even need that because adequacy is adequate and yet we're in the one to 350 at which point it begins to look obscene so you have adequacy and then you just set something above it that seems acceptable and that should be the new structure of feeling that would be the utopian goal that we could work to from here we talk about the one percent and there is an amazing amount of wealth at the one percent but if you talk about the top ten percent getting squeezed from the top down but you talk about a floor of adequacy for all eight billion of us you've got a decent social order that people might therefore be um how can I say it patriotic towards they would believe in it they would work for it because they would feel they're part of the team well you have somebody thinks a lot about technology you think a lot about innovation for for the purposes of social purpose anything a lot about human motivation because your characters need to be motivated and I think the first place people go when they hear something like this is that well we actually need these remarkable rewards because they're what incentivize a human race to grow to reach these new heights for it's what makes Elon Musk you know

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create his car company and a space shuttle company and Steve Jobs and when you hear that what what do

you think that people say look we may not like it and I agree that this might be a nicer way of structuring society but what really matters for long-term human living conditions is innovation and and great effort from our most productive and this is simply the cost we have to pay for that yeah I'd say they're wrong they're wrong wrong wrong people don't do it for that they don't do it for these exceptional riches Musk would have done what he had done and made his car company if it had

made him you know two hundred thousand dollars a year driven people are driven I've watched my wife

work harder than anybody that I've ever seen for a federal scientist salary and many scientists are working like maniacs on their project because they love their project and they think their project has meaning now and sometimes this is a peculiar thing to follow a scientist that is trying to decide whether turtles came into being 50 million years ago or 100 million years ago and they are devoting their whole career to making that determination you're like whoa I wonder what

the significance of that is in the larger scheme of things but this is history I mean this is part of a larger project when I find out this then we'll find out more about everything else we'll understand the earth better we'll understand reality better there's something about that curiosity and try to understand more that I often pit science versus capitalism in my novels as being two giant mythic forces and the scientists are at least as hardworking and also making the innovations

that capitalism then profits off of by exploitation and appropriation and and also stealing from future generations as a systemic and legal thing to do so I think it's a right to say that people are driven to innovate for project based reasons that have nothing to do with wealth and if they have to do with prestige which I agree is prominent in many people's minds you want to be respected and all that well you need a national academy of science to get into that it's like oh my gosh or you get you know a little plaque from your co-workers from 30 years and it's like oh that's

great or maybe there should be a industrialists hall of fame and then you're you know you get your presidential medal for doing great work that's all you need and then a decent amount of money to feel safe and able to do what you want to in life you don't need more than that that's all there is to it I recently wrote a book that if you haven't read it I think you'd really like it called The Knowledge Machine by Michael Stravins and it's all about how do we get scientists to do what they do

he he takes this is central question it's fun just making fun arguments I know that better than anybody it's literally my job and yet we've had to somehow incentivize scientists to not sit around saying well if you assume that everything in the world matches the fundamental metaphysics of harmony

and so it must be most like a triangle right like the way sort of old science worked and instead it's people processing tons of pig brains to try to understand like the basic fundamental makeup of this one you know molecular mechanism in them or you know doing the the geological evidence taking to slightly better estimate when something happened how do you get them to do such

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painstaking

boring work as well as just coming up with fun theories all the time and his answer functionally is that we've created a set of rules he calls it the iron rule you need to bring evidence to an argument and the way to advance not in money really I mean a little bit of money but fundamentally in prestige you know status in science is to bring the evidence to arguments that people end up believing and through that we through that basically that simple fundamental rule like you need evidence and evidence is what will help you advance in the argument and the argument is what gives you status in your profession we've created all of science and you know you can argue with him this is one theory among many of how science works but it's very I think it's largely true actually and it's very inspiring in a way yeah it sounds to me I think that's right and it goes back to Galileo and to the birth of science as a method so the scientific method is to run a demonstration such that if you yourself were to run that same demonstration you would come to the same conclusion and there's actor network theory in this that instead of trying to make a point in argument by simply debating technique and rhetoric at which Galileo was very good by the way you run a demonstration where the other person has to agree because they've seen the same thing you have you set up an experiment a model a theory that gets proved by what everybody sees together that's the scientific method in a nutshell and it has been spectacularly effective in the world I often describe it as a utopian political effort that's trying to work under the radar of politics as normally conceived and scientists are just saying well let just let me do things and convince my fellow scientists who understand the game and if I manage that then we can let the rest of society decide what to do with it but I've managed to play my game and they aren't doing it as I mean a game in the sense of joy like a project that they're taking joy in because they've figured out how old those turtles are or how a piece of metal works when it's pressured the scientific project is huge and and it's worth supporting and saying this is a good human project it has done a lot there are unexpected bad side effects that can come you keep people from dying from diseases and in child in their first year and suddenly you've got a population boom you find a fuel that makes civilization go like anything and it turns out that the waste product is cooking the planet now so scientific achievements are not keros they're not magic you don't want to fall prey to scientism but it is a good method for entangling and and trying to cope with the biosphere that we're in I'm a big science fan speaking of the biosphere we're in you talking in that talk about Ea Wilson and rewilding and something I didn't really know about which is the rise of these 30 by 30 plans which california actually has and I feel a bit very inspiring can you can you run through that a little yes I can and I thank you because I love it it's so encouraging uh Ea Wilson proposes a biologist that we leave half of the earth's surface and the oceans to the wild creatures and congregate ourselves on the other half and then the world would

come out okay in biodiversity terms and we would dodge the mass extinction event I thought beautiful

idea it'll never happen people aren't like that we've got these 30 by 30 government policies in california the biden administration and made a statement in favor of it also where 30 percent of the land surface is given over to wild creatures most of the time it doesn't have to be pure in some cases a place like a cattle ranch the cattle are replacing the elk that are gone and doing the elk's work in the ecosphere so these the way that these land use attributions

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are being made is are quite flexible but 30 percent of the land by the year 2030 california is at 24 percent the head of the program is named jennifer norris and she was appointed by governor newsom

who's totally behind it it's something to be proud of and it's also hope for the future because young people are going to the cities and the countryside's emptying out the middle of spain the middle of poland the the kind of upper american west big patches of the american west villages are going away as the young people head off to the cities and they're doing it for jobs and for fun the social primate thing again well that empty land if it's managed right then people could become keepers of the land stewards of the animals it's another kind

of job and the wild creatures won't go extinct under our under the lash of our our bad work on the planet and and that would be amazing that would represent a success so huge that it equals the the carbon reduction project and the two of them are two parts of a bigger project and both of them were seen really substantial progress and that's what has surprised me since ministry for the future came out i'm actually both more scared but more encouraged at the same time i think the i think there's more reason for optimism than a lot of the public conversation is caught up to at this point well that's good because you're seeing more than most people i it's always tricky to even talk about this because i think there's a a real pressure not to seem like you are either understating the scale of the problems we face right or overstating the pace of the progress and and all of us i mean maybe the 30 by 30 plans fall apart or they're too flexible and you know i mean things can go wrong in a million different ways but i would say that compared to what i understood of the path we were on five ten years ago and i've spent a fair amount

of time talking to climate scientists about this there are people who disagree with this but but i think it was very plausible 10 years ago that we were on a path of fourish degrees of warming i think a lot of people who i trust did believe that and a couple things have happened one is that much better policy has been passed another is that the technological advances in solar in wind in battery storage and in all these different things have gone much much much much quicker than than anybody hoped the the price falls have been remarkable and here points about structure of feeling

just politics of climate is different it's not even that it it has led to less of the transformative legislation that people hoped but the fact that at almost every level of society this is something constantly in people's heads is changing decision making at every level of society in ways that are big and in ways that are small and cumulatively it's all having an impact and you know if you look at young people and how concerned they are as they rise into positions of power i'm watching that change institutions i'm what like the biden white house is a different white house because of how many young people formed by climate crisis are in it and staffing really matters and so you know i wouldn't say that we're in like the safety zone or that we've averted terrible things potentially happening but it really looks better to me across a lot of different dimensions and it did 10 years ago i mean i move from a place of being almost hopeless about the politics of this place of being pretty hopeful again not that we're going to get it all right but that we're going to get some things much more right than i thought we would yeah i'm seeing

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that too and i i've learned so much since ministry came out and i saw it in glasgo private capital which is really trillions of dollars of assets is interested and concerned in a way that i didn't know about and i think it's new and uh also you know you mentioned four degrees um that would cook

humanity and would be a plane crash that means cataclysm yeah so getting down and even the difference between 1.5 and 2 is significant at least the scientists are estimating that now so we need to work really fast and but that sense of necessity is getting so widespread that i think something's happening and i want to mention that you know this notion of being optimistic it has become a truism about me i am science fictions or this culture is great optimist well this is a coded critique and it's a way of saying you know the poor man is delusional and maybe a little bit obtuse or even stupid why would you be optimistic in this world or maybe he's just biochemically permanently got the what michael blendline called the happy gene uh which i think is true i got it from my mom but the situation is such that in our culture to uh say you're optimistic is maybe not the right thing but hope optimism this attitude of um is necessary political stance to take because we are in a position of privilege and the situation can be saved and given those two it's dereliction of duty to be pessimistic to be cynical is just a a chicken thing to do we need to be strong in a moment of crisis by saying yes it can be done and if we're in a race between bad catastrophe and some kind of beginning prosperity for all when you're in a race that intense you don't want to sit down on the ground and start crying oh we've lost already that would be a bad thing to do because you're in a race you actually need to run as hard as you can if you lose the race well that is a you know that's a dystopian novel and i don't really want to go there if we lose the race we're in terrible trouble and we'll be in emergency mode for years but if we win the race it's a big win for for the biosphere for the other creatures for humanity so it's worth um pretending to be optimistic or using optimism as a club and beating it with people yes we can succeed bang bang bang i don't follow this myself so pick it with a grand assault it's given but i've thought before that our public conversation about everything would be better if we just simply retired the words optimism and pessimism yes because i don't think of i mean probably i have a relatively similar view on trends here as you do i don't think of myself as an optimist on this or frankly a pessimist i think that i can chart for you that solar has come down really fast and we didn't expect it i can chart for you that wind has come down in pricing really fast we didn't expect it i can chart for you the progress in battery storage i can chart for you if you look at climate projections current policy climate projections they've gone from you know something well over three being very much in the middle of that of that probability spectrum to something that looks more like 2.6 is in the middle now and if you actually think we're going to follow the commitments made in the paris climate accords and what what has happened subsequently and i don't know that i do but but that would put us in about two and if maybe you think we're not going to do that but you actually think the technology is going to keep getting better faster than people have feared then that's another way of saying maybe we'll be at about two and that's not i say this in this piece i just did on on climate and children i don't think even if you thought we would get to two right two two degrees by 2100 that would still be a kind of horror right i mean that would not have been successful it would have been a kind of failure we could have done much better we shouldn't have done that to the

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world but i don't want apocalypticism to become an aesthetic no right because it like like you're saying among other things i don't think it's a politically useful view like the fact that we have made progress is a proof point that progress is possible to make and that's exciting right that that means you can do it um whether or not you're optimistic or pessimistic is beside the point the point is that it's possible yeah and if we did get to the end of the century and it was um the global rise was only two degrees that would be better than the alternatives to the point of you would have to say well not bad and and now we need to work harder than ever to bring it back down so there's going to be a lot of co2 withdrawal drawdowns that will be a giant civilizational project to suck co2 out of the atmosphere by natural and mechanical means a big industry but also a way of doing agriculture a way of doing aquafarming you can draw down carbon

in all kinds of ways and all of them will become super valuable because we'll be a little bit too hot and but hopefully not catastrophically where we reel off over some tipping points into breaking planetary boundaries i will say that there's something really interesting about that point because it's something i've noticed and it's what i mean a little bit when i say i worry about apocalypticism becoming an aesthetic you would think that the more i'm about to do it pessimistic that the less possible you think progress is the more intense you would be about carbon removal right that the people who are the most pessimistic sorry would be the people who are

just banging the table all day every day on putting everything into carbon removal because then you really need net negative technologies and it's kind of not it's the people in my experience in a way it's actually the people who think we're making progress who also want to put a lot of energy there because they think we're going to need that too there's something about the attitude that you can do this that seems to me to open people up to a lot of solutions or the attitude that it's done seems to close them off from a lot of them it's an observation yeah and um there's an old argument from the early 90s that says that if we think we can draw carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere that's a moral hazard then we will go ahead and just burn it like we have been this last 30 years so it isn't as if this thought has changed anything or maybe it has but in any case that argument's defunct now because ran an emergency and we might simply have to draw CO2 out of the atmosphere you could well imagine us semi-magically doing everything right from right now and still want to draw down quite a bit of CO2 out of the atmosphere and it's not supporting the fossil fuel industries and it's not their idea even if they see a business opportunity there that's good we need an exit ramp for them we need good work for them to do and they've got a lot of money and expertise so if the fossil fuel industry was actually put to the work of drawing carbon down and we paid them to do it that too would be a nothing to sneer at we need all hands on deck and every possible idea has to be considered as being something that might help enough that we may have to try some of it and see what works and what doesn't

as we sort of come to the the close here one of the the threads in high Sierra that I didn't expect going into the book is aging and you turn 70 this year what would you tell yourself at a 30 that not as a piece of life advice but but that it's true about the world that you believe now that you wouldn't have realized is true then oh god this is like that line from Peggy Sue got married you know take better care of your teeth I don't know you know 70 is really quite old it's

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a big number I feel good but I also feel like I haven't got that many years left just by the nature of life on earth and how long humans live so but on the other hand medicine has saved me twice I shouldn't really be here that's true of so many people my age and so I'm appreciating it more than ever and I think that might be the sign of things going well in one's life and they report this often for people in their old age that there's a sense of appreciation in the daily things that is heightened to the point where a lot else falls away if you've got your health and if you're lucky and have your partners a health also then well you're rich and things are good it's too bad it's of course too bad that that wouldn't just extend out very often I've written about lifetime extension as a science fiction device in my Mars trilogy in particular and I'm thinking you know damn I wish they were a little faster on that it'd be great that humans were living to 200 and 300 not gonna happen in in my lifetime although maybe some days but meanwhile I just have my fingers crossed my health is good and I hope to keep hiking in the sierras I have a couple more banger hikes that I want to do before my while my legs are still working well and so I sort of pitch my ambitions rather short these days compared the old days let me ask the reverse of that question because I rarely hear it hear it asked which is what did you know or feel at 30 or what do 30 year olds know and feel that gets forgotten or lost at 70 well maybe the sense that anything can happen a sense of potentiality I no longer think that at all but at 30 it can be such a powerful feeling at 30 that it's like a disorientation or a fear anything could happen oh my god but that's an opportunity to be seized and and there's a richness in that open field that goes away you get you're like a wedge in a crack and life keeps hammering you're deeper into that crack at least it seems that way to me no I've been lucky I like that as a place to end so always a final question what are three books you'd recommend to the audience okay so three books that's hard I've been reading a lot lately and it's all been good I would say Thomas Piketty's latest a brief history of equality and then I think it's interesting to read this last book by David Graber with David Wingrow called the dawn of everything it's a thought-provoking and it's also a form of archaeological science fiction there's so much guesswork and hope and speculative history going on in there but it does break the stories that we've

had about the past that are also deterministic and depressing and by showing that new evidence complicates that game and then lastly I'm going to say that Richard Powers one of our greatest novelists I recently reread one of his old novels the echo maker and as much as the overstory has blown up the world I still would I mean actually that's a big audience say to them go back and read the echo maker it's a beautiful novel I have to read the echo maker I'll say I did the same a similar thing and I read Orpheo by him and I don't think anyone has written better about music in the English language ever it's insane Powers is great he is one of our very best novelists I know him I like him Rick Powers is a friend and we we talk novel talk from the angle of being novelists it's which is a rare opportunity

Kim Stanley Robinson thank you very much yes thank you as well

here's a client show is produced by Annie Galvin and Roger Karma it is fact-checked by Michelle Harris Mary March Locker and Kate Sinclair original music by Isaac Jones mixing by Isaac Jones and Sonia Herrero audience strategy by Shannon Busta special thanks to Kristen Lynn Christina Samuelski and Jerry Canavan

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