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Welcome to the Making Sense podcast. This is Sam Harris. OK, well, I want to say a few things about my hopes for the new year here. Like all of you, I'm happy to get 20-20 behind us, but of course, there's no guarantee that 2021 will be better, right? I mean, this calendar dates are just concepts that have very little connection to the dynamics of what is actually happening out in the world, apart from the tenuous connection of all of us hoping to reset our lives on January 1st.

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Which is not nothing, but it's not a lot either. As for whether a virus mutates or a hostile foreign power hacks our government and major corporations and steals or manipulates sensitive data, these things happen on their own schedule, as you know. And both of these things appear to have happened in the last few weeks. To what end? It's not yet clear. But it's natural and useful, I think, to use the change in calendar as a device to clear one's head and attempt to get one's priorities straight.

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So like many of you, that's what I'm doing. In fact, the madness of this last year has already helped me get my priorities straight or STRADER, I now have far fewer browser tabs open in my life. And I think this will be true going forward, there's a spirit of triage. I now feel. What is worth paying attention to personally and professionally? I'm living with this question more and more. If you can think back to January and February of last year.

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How are you planning to spend twenty twenty and how startling was it to discover that the world had other plans? There's been a Sunni army of private pain, even for fairly lucky people and for the unlucky 20-20 was just brutal. And publicly, there's been a failure, especially in the United States, to cohere around a feeling of shared purpose and shared sacrifice, and that has been beyond disappointing. It's really been unnerving how fully we failed here. And in its place, we've witnessed a level of estrangement from one another, which has often been described as hyper partisanship in a political context, but that doesn't quite cover it.

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The level of hostility and the degree to which it's been fed by lies and misinformation seems genuinely new to me. And not at all compatible with our building a good society. And of course, the interaction between technology, in particular social media and politics has been the main story here. We've seen vast numbers of people born away on a tide of misinformation and conspiracy thinking and has rendered them totally unreachable. In fact, our society appears to have shattered itself into competing cults.

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The cult of Trump ism, with its especially crazy core of Kuhnien and the cult of Wackness with its crazy core of critical race theory. I'm not saying these problems are precisely the same or or necessarily proportional, but they are the same in being constituted almost entirely by propaganda to a degree that should only be possible in dystopian fiction, like we've come ashore on the proverbial island of liars. And it's just to Rangin. And all of this seems caused by and further causes a breakdown in social trust and trust in institutions.

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On one level, a breakdown in trust is understandable. The conjunctions of competence and incompetence we've seen have been fairly breathtaking. We've had record breaking vaccine development alongside a total failure of political leadership on both the left and the right and at all levels to successfully manage a pandemic. We have literally seen the time course of medical research cut down to almost nothing, the Moderna vaccine was created in a weekend. It was created before there had been a single death from covid in the United States.

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Yes, it depended on many years of prior work, but going from a viral genome sequence to a vaccine in a matter of days is astonishing. And yet our most prestigious medical institutions like the CDC and

our most prestigious medical journals like the New England Journal of Medicine have worked extraordinarily hard in the last year to destroy their reputations. The contamination of public health and scientific communication by political dogmatism on both the left and the right has been catastrophic. We've had our most respected medical voices either capitulate to Trump and his messaging or capitulate to the weakness.

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And if you don't know what I'm talking about, you haven't been paying attention. And now we're botching the distribution of the vaccine. At the time I'm recording this, it will take a decade to vaccinate the entire country at our current pace and we've had nearly a year to prepare for. This moment is just incredible. Thousands of people are dying a day as vaccine risks spoiling on our shelves. I mean, we're great at molecular biology, but we appear to suck at everything else.

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And surely information and misinformation is at the core of this, something like 50 percent of our society appears to be quite sanguine about getting the novel coronavirus, but terrified to get the vaccine for it. I've heard reports from hospitals where 50 percent of the frontline health care workers are refusing their doses of vaccine. Throughout the pandemic, and especially through the election and its aftermath, it has been amazing to hear from people on both sides of what seems to be a mass hallucination, a pseudo spiritual awakening that has engulfed the minds of most of the people in our society.

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I mean, left and right have broken down as concepts in many ways. But whatever you call them, the political extremes have gone mad. Perhaps they were always mad, but the madness has crept inwards and it's tainted vast stretches of the mainstream. Mainstream Republicans have capitulated to Trump and Trumpism to a degree that I wouldn't have thought possible. And the ideological capture of the media and our other institutions by weakness has been just as amazing. One has to reference the behavior of cults to begin to understand what's going on here.

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It's worth asking yourself, are you in a cult? Are you actually thinking clearly about anything? Are you getting good information about anything? I ask this about myself to it has become genuinely hard to find a path through information space that leads to anything like daylight now. Do you think there was a massive voter fraud in the 2020 election and Trump actually won. And Republican election officials, secretaries of state and judges are all in on the plot. Well, if you do, you're in a cult.

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Do you think that racism and sexism and other forms of bigotry are our main problems in society now and that they explain all current inequality? Do you think that great companies and medical schools and the entertainment industry and other desirable places to learn and work are currently in the business of excluding qualified people of color and women out of a preference for white men? Is that really what you think? Well, then you're in a cult. Do you think the COVID pandemic is basically a hoax and that the lockdowns were imposed to destroy the economy and defeat Trump?

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Do you think we're being told to wear masks just to get us to comply with arbitrary limits on our freedom? Well, then you're in a cult. In the new media landscape has not helped matters. Well, I think I've seen in many of my fellow podcasters and writers is the phenomenon of audience capture. My friend Eric Weinstein came up with that phrase for undoubtedly an older phenomenon. But it's when you begin telling your audience what they want to hear and you get rewarded for it and the cycle becomes self reinforcing.

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So some of this is probably inevitable. We all gravitate toward messages that we like and to people we find persuasive. And these people tend to keep doing what works. You know, it's nice to be liked, especially when the business model depends on it. But audience capture is a real problem, and I have

consciously guarded against it ever since I discovered that whole sections of my audience were outraged by one or another position I've taken. I decided not to be concerned about that and not to do anything differently.

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And I don't think I'll ever understand those of you who claim to love what I'm doing here on the podcast and who have read my books and followed my work for years, who imagined that I would have been a fan of Donald Trump or wokeness. I mean, both of these grotesque objects are the antithesis of everything I care about. Both are purely divisive, purely misleading. Both represent a near total embrace of error. Trumpism and wokeness are like two doors leading to alternate hells from my point of view.

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And between the two, I think I've offended 50 percent of you in the last few years and many of my guests have done likewise. We really need careful, principled, intellectually honest people to help sort through the rubble now and begin building again. And these are the types of people I'm eager to speak with on this podcast. I realize all of this sounds a little gloomy, but it seems important to acknowledge how fully things have unraveled over the last year.

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Of course, on another level, it's amazing that things work as well as they do, and to even have the expectation that things will work and to be appalled when they don't is a testament to our progress. We expect airplanes to not only take off and land safely, but to serve decent coffee. We have come a long way in 100 years, 100 years from now, if we don't annihilate ourselves in the meantime, we will view everything I'm complaining about today as just a few growing pains on the way to a glorious future.

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I really want our children to inhabit that glorious future and it appears to be within reach, so much of our suffering is obviously unnecessary. So many of our losses are the result of spectacular own goals. And of course, politics is the area where the worst of this happens again and again, but the problem is much larger than politics. Ask yourself, what are we doing here as a species, for the most part, we're creating and consuming culture.

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The near term goal should be pretty obvious, we have to build a culture that is conducive to sanity. We need a culture that is at minimum compatible with our long term survival. And we have serious problems to solve infrastructure, pandemic preparedness that would have a nice, bright climate change, cybersecurity education, wealth inequality, our relationship with China. Wouldn't it be amazing to just get busy and sort this stuff out without all the animosity and conspiracy thinking and dogmatism and perverse incentives and everything else that makes sane policies and compromises impossible?

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And the issues are at once so complex and yet so simple. Just consider our current moment through the lens of a single variable wealth inequality. There are good faith debates to be had about how much inequality is too much, but there really is no question that this is a problem that decent, compassionate people or even merely self-interested people are now wise to worry about. However rich and insulated you are, if you don't think that you've lost something when the level of homelessness and crime soars in your city, well, then you've lost your mind.

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Honestly, even a sociopath should be able to recognize that his own selfishness is best fulfilled in a context where others are doing at least reasonably well, where the sidewalks haven't come to resemble free fire zones or refugee camps. I've been worried about wealth inequality for at least a decade. I wrote a few articles about it in the aftermath of the 2009 crash and it's been a recurring topic on the podcast. And I worry about it from a place of not wanting to stigmatize wealth at all.

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I think that people who are railing against the mere existence of billionaires are just confused about economics. But everyone who is railing against increased social welfare in all its forms. Anyone for whom terms like inequality and redistribution have become radioactive is just confused about ethics. What kind of world do we want to live in? It seems to me there are pretty uncontroversial answers to this question. We want to live in a world where people are incentivized to do creative work that makes the world better and better.

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We want cures for terrifying diseases, we want to be able to distribute vaccines faster than we are at present. And we want a space program just for the fun of it, and also to ensure that human life continues indefinitely, if we discover there's a massive asteroid on a collision course with Earth, we want to be able to divert it and save our species and every other species. We actually want to be that competent. Therefore, we want to massively fund science.

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And we need a rich civilization to do this. We want a future of real prosperity and we are right to want that. And obviously we need a model for global growth that's sustainable. But the endgame for us isn't to seize innovating and improving our technology. We want our technology to become more and more effective and benign. So there's already ruled out some visions of the future. This can't be a hippie paradise where everything is made of hemp. Capitalism, for all its flaws, really seems to have this part right.

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We need to work with the grain of human nature and leverage people's selfishness and their desire for status in a way that brings out the best in us, not the worst. We need to incentivize people to build things that actually work. It's not enough to just play the didgeridoo on the sidewalk in Seattle or Portland. We need to get things done. And we want beautiful public spaces and brilliant works of art and great food and cars and smartphones. But we also want a world where the differences between good and bad luck don't cause us to avert our eyes in horror.

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We don't want a world where people leap to their deaths from the rooftops of the factories that are building our toys, we don't want an epidemic of homelessness in San Francisco or Los Angeles or New York. As we produce more and more wealth, we have to become more compassionate and more connected to one another, not more sociopathic. There are really two paths we can take here, and they are diverging steeply now, and the only thing that will determine which path we take will be the ideas that prevail in the culture.

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The ideas that win will affect each of us personally. There will be new norms to which we will effortlessly adhere because to do otherwise will be embarrassing. Wearing a seat belt is a norm that very few people need to rethink now, and yet it used to be a bizarre concession to fear. Now you're just an imbecile not to wear a seatbelt. We need new norms that anchor our deeper values. We need norms that make us better people. Let's be even more specific.

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It's been much noticed of late that there seems to be an exodus in the tech community out of California to states that don't have an income tax, in particular Texas and Florida. Now, there's some question about whether or not this trend has been overhyped. But I can personally account for tens of millions of dollars and probably even hundreds of millions of dollars of California's taxpayers drying up, simply judging from the people I know personally who are leaving the state and who are in some cases taking their companies and employees with them.

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In California, the top one percent of earners pay 50 percent of the taxes, so it doesn't take that many

rich people to decide to move before the state's revenue goes into freefall. Now, this is a very complicated issue, ethically and politically and even psychologically. Because, of course, it's rational for any individual to want to pay as little in taxes as he or she legally can. And if we have a system wherein simply moving to another state amounts to the equivalent of someone paying you millions of dollars a year to live, there is very easy to see why that would seem like an opportunity that's just too good to pass up.

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So I don't feel especially judgmental about these people moving, especially when you consider how mismanaged our tax dollars often seem to be. It would be one thing if the return on our taxes was undeniably good, but unfortunately the results are so mixed, especially now that it's very easy for people to become cynical. And many of these people have become cynical about the prospects of government ever functioning effectively. But there's an interesting needle to thread here. One can seek to pay as little in taxes as one legally can.

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Well, also believe in the taxes are necessary and that the tax rate should be raised, given the magnitude of the need, while also believing that tax revenue is often wasted and that government needs to be seriously reformed. I don't see a contradiction there, personally, I try to pay as little in taxes as I can legally, but I think taxes should be raised on everyone in my bracket. And I think this despite my certainty that some of that money will be wasted or spent in ways that I would judge totally counterproductive.

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A challenge one often hears from libertarians is you're free to pay more into the Treasury yourself, so why not just do that and shut up about raising taxes on the rest of us? But that misses the point, it misses several points. No one should be eager to make a solitary sacrifice that serves no purpose. The point is that waste and mismanagement aside, our infrastructure and education and everything else in our society needs to be funded. And there is no one in a better position to fund these things than the wealthy.

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Government mismanagement isn't an argument for not paying taxes, and it isn't an argument for lower taxes. It's an argument for better government. Of course, charitable giving is part of the picture here. Here's a new norm that we really must spread. If you're wealthy enough to have hired professionals whose primary job is to ensure that you pay as little as possible in taxes each year, well, then you should also be given a lot of your money away to the most urgent causes, not after your death, but every year while you're alive and while you can enjoy it.

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This goes to the question of what is wealth for? What is it good for? One thing it's good for is that it gives you the ability to help people very directly, and if you don't use that ability, given the excruciating need, people will begin to think that you're just selfish as they should. Actually, all the strands of this web converge on San Francisco in a way that's instructive. Recently, Mark Zuckerberg and his wife, Priscilla Chan, gave 75 million dollars to San Francisco General Hospital, and this is the largest gift to a public hospital ever, apparently.

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And yet the city's board of supervisors voted 10 to one to condemn the naming of the hospital after Zuckerberg and Chan. And they further vilified Zuckerberg in the process. So this moment contains the whole problem in miniature, Zuckerberg and Chan gave 75 million dollars to a hospital and obviously this is a wonderful thing to do. And the fact that this is the largest private gift to a public hospital ever tells you that it should be celebrated rather than sneered at, which is what the social justice lunatics on the board of Supervisors have done.

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And they did this as their streets filled with homeless people and spent needles and the crime rate

soars. They're spitting on a 75 million dollar gift to a hospital. But beneath all this and beneath the animosity of the supervisors is the growing problem of wealth inequality, Zuckerberg gift probably seems more generous than it is, in fact, for someone with 75 billion dollars to cut a check for 75 million. That's like someone with 75 million cutting a check for 75000 or for someone with 75000 to give seventy five dollars toward some cause.

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That is no big deal at all. In fact, the richer you get, the more this proportion falls apart. Someone with a net worth of 75000 dollars is actually making more of a sacrifice by parting with 75 dollars, because that increment of money is still relevant to their budget. Once a person becomes fantastically wealthy, their personal spending, even on the most extravagant luxuries, represents a tiny portion of their net worth. So when you look at the details, this is not the sort of sacrifice one you be tempted to write newspaper articles about.

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Actually, looking at the Forbes list now reveals that Zuckerberg is currently worth one hundred dollars billion. He seems to have made twenty five billion when I wasn't looking. Given how quickly Zukerberg wealth has grown, there were many days this year, probably most days this year, where his net worth increased by more than seventy five dollars million. The wealthiest people in our society make millions of dollars a day every day, whether they work or not. Most people just don't have good intuitions about the magnitude of these differences in wealth, the richest people now make in a day what the most successful movie stars Tom Cruise and Will Smith and Scarlett Johansson make over the course of many years or even a lifetime at the absolute pinnacle of success in the movie industry.

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This is where we are in terms of wealth inequality. Again, I don't mean to demonize wealth at all. And it's worth noting that Zuckerberg and his wife have pledged to give 99 percent of their wealth away over the course of their lifetime. That's amazing. Right. And that should be celebrated without any reservation whatsoever. That's the sort of thing people should write newspaper articles about, assuming they actually do this and they don't just park all the money in a charity after they die.

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There will be total heroes for living this way, whatever else you might think about them. So there's a complicated set of issues to think through here politically and ethically, San Francisco is an extremely wealthy city which has been ruinously mismanaged, and the rich appear to be leaving for perfectly rational reasons. This is a death spiral. And the quasi socialist demonization of wealth of the sort that one hears from people like AOK and Elizabeth Warren is part of the problem.

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We just can't afford zero sum thinking in a positive sum game and prosperity can be positive some. That's not to say there aren't trade offs and inevitable inequality. But we need to find policies that lead us in a direction that benefits more or less everyone, and we need to incentivize people to really succeed and then use their taxes and charity to help others. It seems to me that what we need to solve our problems is both competence and compassion. We have seen so little of either lately.

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And merely dunking on people on Twitter won't produce these things. Becoming a single issue thinker won't produce these things. We have to recognize that we're living in an unhealthy ecology of ideas. It's become like a Superfund site of bad meems and we have to clean it up. Anyway, I intend to use my podcast this year to bring you useful conversations in this vein, not every episode will be about solving problems. Sometimes we just need to hear about interesting things in physics.

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But more and more, I want to drill down to ideas that actually have consequences for people's lives, whether personally or at the level of public policy. So I'm looking to speak with guests who can help me figure out what we should all be doing to make life better. And finally, I want to thank all of you who are subscribed to the podcast, you make it possible for me to do this. And if you're not

subscribed and you want to be, you can do that on my website at Sam Harris, Doug.

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As always, I want to remind you that if you can't afford a subscription, you need only tell us that and we'll give you a free one. And this isn't just my covid policy, this is always been the policy, I feel two things very strongly in this space. I believe that we should value digital content appropriately and that will ultimately get what we pay for online. As you know, I think the ad model has been incredibly destructive. But on the other hand, I believe that money should never be the reason why someone can't get access to my digital content again, I see no contradiction here.

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Most of my stuff is behind a paywall and needs to be for any of this to work, but it's free if you can't afford it. As most of you know, there are two places where I currently publish my audio on this podcast and on the waking up app and waking up has become much more than a meditation app. There's a growing library of lessons that are essentially applied philosophy. We now have tracks on Stoicism by William Irvine and more of those are coming and will soon have a section devoted to psychedelics.

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There's a lot going on over there waking up and much more happening soon. So I just wanted to invite you to download the app and check it out if you haven't lately. As you know, if you're a subscriber to the podcast, you get access to the conversations I have over waking up through my website, but there's much more to waking up than the conversations. And again, if you can't afford a subscription, you need only send an email to support waking up dotcom and request a free account is the exact same policy we have here on the podcast.

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Well, despite all the doom and gloom, I'm really looking forward to this year and needless to say, I wish you all a healthy and happy one. Thanks for listening.