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Notes on a Nervous Planet

by Matt Haig

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44 Highlights

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 422

The news unconsciously mimics the way fear operates—focusing on the worst things, catastrophizing, listening to an endless, repetitive stream of information on the same worrying topic.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 439

We've only had farms for 10,000 years. And writing has only been around, as far as we know, for a minuscule 5,000 years.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 473

According to Moore's Law—named after the cofounder of Intel, Gordon Moore, who forecast it—processing power for computers doubles every few years.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 479

The singularity is the point at which artificial intelligence becomes more intelligent than the brainiest human being. And then—depending on your inner optimism-to-pessimism ratio—either we will merge with and advance with this technology, and become immortal and happy cyborgs, or our sentient robots and laptops and toasters will take us over and we will be their pets or slaves or three-course meal.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 492

Just think. In the year 2000, no one knew what a selfie was. Google did just about exist but it was a long way from becoming a verb. There was no YouTube, no vlogging, no Wikipedia, no WhatsApp, no Snapchat, no Skype, no Spotify, no Siri, no Facebook, no bitcoin, no tweeted gifs, no Netflix, no iPads, no "lol" or "ICYMI," no crying-with-laughter emoji, almost no one had GPS, you generally looked at photographs in albums, and the cloud was only ever a thing which produced rain.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 527

In 2016, at the International Geological Congress in Cape Town, leading scientists decided that we were leaving the Holocene epoch—one marked by 12,000 years of stable climate since the last Ice Age—and entering something else: the Anthropocene age, or "new age of man."

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 544

All through our education we are being taught a kind of reverse mindfulness. A kind of Future Studies where—via the guise of mathematics, or literature, or history, or computer programming, or French—we are being taught to think of a time different to the time we are in. Exam time. Job time. When-we-are-grown-up time.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 739

For instance, in 2016, physicists in Germany built a clock so accurate that it won't lose or gain a second for 15 billion years.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 754

The thing is, we should have more time than ever. I mean, think about it. Life expectancy has more than doubled for people living in the developed world during the last century. And not only that, we have more time-saving devices and technologies than ever before existed.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 763

The problem, clearly, isn't that we have a shortage of time. It's more that we have an overload of everything else.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 792

We have multiplied everything, but we are still individual selves. There is only one of us. And we are all smaller than an internet. To enjoy life, we might have to stop thinking about what we will never be able to read and watch and say and do, and start to think of how to enjoy the world within our boundaries. To live on a human scale. To focus on the few things we can do, rather than the millions of things we can't.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 995

life isn't about being pleased with what you are doing, but about what you are being.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1072

"Facebook is where everyone lies to their friends. Twitter is where they tell the truth to strangers."

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1113

The difference now is that—thanks to camera phones and breaking news and social media and our constant connection to the internet—we experience what is happening elsewhere in a more direct and visceral and intimate way than ever before.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1153

Imagine if we had a day where we called human beings human beings. Not nationalities first. Not the religion they follow. Not British. Not American. Not French. Not German. Not Iranian. Not Chinese. Not Muslim. Not Sikh. Not Christian. Not Asian. Not black. Not white. Not man. Not woman.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1160

That we are here, right now, on the most beautiful planet we'll ever know. A planet where we can breathe and live and fall in love and eat peanut butter on toast and say hello to dogs and dance to music and read *Bonjour Tristesse* and binge-watch TV dramas

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1172

despite all its horrors, society is less violent than it used to be. "There is definitely still violence," says the historian Yuval Noah Harari. "I live in the Middle East so I know this perfectly well. But, comparatively, there is less violence than ever before in history. Today more people die from eating too much than from human violence,

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1211

we—have circadian rhythms. That is to say, our bodies react differently at different times of the day. They have evolved to function differently at daytime and nighttime.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1226

according to numerous overlapping studies and sources, not sleeping well: Runs down your immune system
Increases your risk of coronary heart disease Increases your risk of stroke Increases your risk of diabetes
Increases your risk of having a car accident Is associated with higher rates of breast cancer, colorectal cancer and prostate cancer Impairs your ability to concentrate Interferes with your memory Increases your risk of getting Alzheimer's Makes weight gain more likely Reduces sex drive Increases levels of the stress hormone cortisol
Increases the likelihood of depression

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1243

The chief executive of Netflix, Reed Hastings, believes that sleep—not HBO, not Amazon, not any other streaming service—is his company's main competitor.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1280

The problem is homelessness not houselessness. And when you are homeless you are missing more than just a bedroom."

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1282

So, the people there, alongside a bed and a lockable wardrobe and access to a washing machine and bathroom, also get to sit around a table with other guests and eat a wholesome meal every day. Often the guests help to cook the meal themselves, and they also play an active part in cleaning the shelter and tending the garden and helping in the local community. The shelter is theirs. They are a part of it.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1332

She thought the cure to misery was to “decorate one’s inner house so richly that one is content there, glad to welcome anyone who wants to come and stay, but happy all the same when one is inevitably alone.”

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1385

“Instead of reaping the big rewards that come from sustained, focused effort, we instead reap empty rewards from completing a thousand little sugar-coated tasks,”

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1462

One 2017 study from the McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas concluded that the mere presence of your smartphone can reduce “cognitive capacity.”

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1490

And the great thing about this—the liberating thing—is that if our anxiety is in part a product of culture, it can also be something we can change by changing our reaction to that culture.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1608

Distraction is an attempt to escape that rarely works. You don’t put out a fire by ignoring the fire. You have to acknowledge the fire. You can’t compulsively swallow or tweet or drink your way out of pain. There comes a point at which you have to face it. To face yourself. In a world of a million distractions you are still left with only one mind.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1698

Then there is the issue of the “little brain”—a network of 100 million neurons (nerve cells) in our stomach and gut.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1700

When we get “butterflies” in the stomach before a job interview, or when we get hungry before a late lunch, that is our “second brain” talking to our first brain. So, in other words, this suggests that the idea of “mental health” being separate to our physical self is as outdated as Descartes’ dodgy wig.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1723

We also don't really know how to talk about suicide. When we do talk about it we tend to use that verb—commit—which carries connotations of taboo and criminality, an echo of the days when it was criminal.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1737

it would be nice one day if a public figure could talk about having depression without the media using words like “incredible courage” and “coming out.” Sure, it is well intentioned. But you shouldn't need to confess to having, say, anxiety. You should just be able to tell people.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1873

helps to know I am just a caveman in a world that has arrived faster than our minds and bodies expected.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1906

Fashion magazines and websites and social media accounts sell a kind of transcendence. A way out. A way to escape. But it is often unhealthy, because to make people want to transcend themselves you first have to make them unhappy with themselves.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1956

Do something somewhere in the day that isn't work or duty or the internet. Dance. Kick a ball. Make burritos. Play some music. Play Pac-Man. Stroke a dog. Learn an instrument. Call a friend. Get into a child's pose. Get outside. Go for a walk. Feel the wind on your face. Or lie on the floor and put your feet up against a wall and just breathe.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1963

The moment we want is the moment we are dissatisfied. The more we want, the more we will drip ourselves away.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2102

Set boundaries. Have times of the day and week that are work-free, email-free, hassle-free.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2109

Don't think your work matters more than it does. As Bertrand Russell put it: “One of the symptoms of an approaching nervous breakdown is the belief that one's work is terribly important.”

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2165

libraries aren't just about books. They are one of the few public spaces we have left which don't like our wallets more than us.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2189

Reading isn't important because it helps to get you a job. It's important because it gives you room to exist beyond the reality you're given. It is how humans merge. How minds connect. Dreams. Empathy. Understanding. Escape.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2205

We need to carve out a place in time for ourselves, whether it is via books or meditation or appreciating the view out of a window. A place where we are not craving, or yearning, or working, or worrying, or overthinking. A place where we might not even be hoping. A place where we are set to neutral. Where we can just breathe, just be, just bathe in the simple animal contentment of being, and not crave anything except what we already have: life itself.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2227

It's just a shame, I suppose, that it takes such major events in our lives, or in the lives of the people we love, for perspective to arrive. Imagine if we could keep hold of that perspective. If we could always have our priorities right, even during the good and healthy times. Imagine if we could always think of our loved ones the way we think of them when they are in a critical condition. If we could always keep that love—love that is always there—so close to the surface. Imagine if we could keep the kindness and soft gratitude towards life itself.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2308

But some of the stars visible to the naked eye are over 15,000 light years away. Which means the light reaching your eye began its journey at the end of the Ice Age. Before humans knew how to farm land.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2316

"The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of starstuff."

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2332

Ecotherapy or "green care" projects are on the rise. Many city farms and community gardens are now used for mental health work to lower stress, anxiety, and depression. Of course, in many ways this is all acting on old advice: "Get yourself some fresh air."
