

#96 Kevin Kelly



Kevin Kelly, ([@Kevin2Kelly](#)) joined James Altucher to talk about 1,000 true fans, the long tail, and what eating lentils in Asia teaches you about life.

Kelly is on the show to talk about his new book – The Silver Cord – and James says he “highly recommends this graphic novel.”

From the Amazon summary, “Financed by fans, this huge graphic novel is the coming-of-age story of a teenage girl. Set in a unique and original world filled with both angels and robots, her story is a page-turning techno-epic that recounts the clash between self-conscious robots and a million different species of angels.”

Kelly covers a lot of ground in his talk with James, starting with his theory of technology.

“Technology is an extension of the very same organizing forces that run through the universe and throughout the earth that made life, that make life more complex.” – Kevin Kelly

For example, Kelly says, consider the light bulb which was invented by many different people. Each incarnation may not have been the same as Edison’s, but the concept was there. “Simultaneous invention is the norm.” Kelly says.

In the early 1900’s Guglielmo Marconi saw this. He was experimenting with sending Morse code signals over radio waves – and having some success. But he wasn’t the only one, engineers and scientists in Germany, England, and America were competing with this Italian working in England. Marconi had the least theoretical training of the group, and looked to separate himself in some way. Not being able to control the radio waves in the air (though he lied and said he could), he tried to control the equipment on the ground. Ship operators had to buy a radio and rent an operator

– a package deal. And one radio operator doesn't do much good, so you needed another "Marconi Man."

This is the evolution of technology that Kelly mentions to James. Simultaneous development. Kelly's own bent on this was the "hippy" one, but he's not alone. Steve Jobs was the most famous counter-culture figure that wanted to make things that people – not companies – could use. It was about empowerment. For Kelly, part of that technological empowerment was to form communities.

Community was also what A.J. Jacobs ([episode #94](#)) was speaking to with his Global Family Reunion project, "why would we bomb our cousins?" he asked James. Kelly is speaking about the online tribe and he cites research saying the right size for a group is about 150. This is the [Dunbar Number](#).

On my first listen, as often happens, this idea slipped by me, but upon further exploration it proved to be a grotto of digital gems. The original research by Robin Dunbar compared brain size to social group size, and showed that the bigger the brain, the bigger the group. Dunbar found that if you fit this ratio to the human brain like a hat, we should have groups of about 148 within which we know each person and how each person relates to another.

Facebook researchers have found a similar scope of friendship circles and it confirms an observation I had about Twitter. If you are following 18K people, you're not really following anyone. Instead what we are doing is advertising ourselves more to our acquaintances, while keeping the same primal group.

What Kelly applauds, is that with technology is it's easier to find your group. For example: [r/GreenDawn](#).

James moves on to a popular article Kelly wrote, [1,000 True Fans](#).

A True Fan is defined as someone who will purchase anything and everything you produce. They will drive 200 miles to see you sing. They will buy the super deluxe re-issued hi-res box set of your stuff even though they have the low-res version. They have a Google Alert set for your name.

Kelly says that the article started out as a "theoretical sociology" thought experiment. If it was true that the gatekeepers were gone, what did that mean for people who were creating things? From a

financial angle those people could start lifestyle businesses – which Kelly thinks are “way underrated.”

The theory goes that if you have some number of people who will support you, you can create things. The 1,000 number was just a starting point for Kelly and his series on this idea includes other ranges, from 50 to 5000 depending on who your fans are, and what you sell. A painter who sells high dollar canvases needs fewer people. Bloggers need more. The key is to connect with them and give them what they really want. This is not easy. Amanda Palmer ([episode #82](#)) wrote an [entire book](#) about the idea of connecting with her fans. It’s not easy.

Palmer wrote, “I chatted constantly online, and listened to the input and feedback from the fans. If they wanted high-end lithograph posters, I make high-end lithograph posters.” But artists shouldn’t do this, some people say, many specifically about Palmer. She was criticized for asking for donations of time and skill after a highly successful – and visible – Kickstarter campaign. These critics were not Palmer’s true fans. The true fans are those who don’t care that you tweet about a new jacket, get volunteers for a show, take a vacation. Those true fans, Palmer writes, only care about the “art coming out the other side.”

Kelly suggests that this 1,000 true fan niche is an open opportunity because big organizations want things that scale and this “leaves out most of the opportunities in the world.” Jason Fried, founder of Basecamp (37 Signals) writes “small is not just a stepping-stone. Small is a great destination itself” he writes in [Rework](#). The cumulative advice is this, start something small, find true fans, grow as needed.

And the best part?

“*You don’t have to ask permission.*” – Kevin Kelly

But you do have to bring value. Gary Vaynerchuk ([episode #2](#)) told James much the same thing – even down to the same metaphor- the gatekeepers are gone, but they are gone for everyone. Seth Godin took a bit of a softer tone in [episode #86](#), adding that there still is a cultural pollution holding people back in the same way geographic boundaries worked in the past. But all the of the guests would say that you can do it. It won’t be easy and you’ll have to work like crazy, but:

“*We all have the ability to manifest from scratch.*” – Amanda Palmer

Okay, you're ready to do it. To manifest, to find fans, to start small. Kelly tells James that you want to find the "hard middle." That is, to occupy the internet space between the rock stars and computers. James proposes that it's a long tail application, but Kelly says that isn't quite right. The spot you're looking for is the hard middle. The number ranges, but to find some number of people who are willing to support your business. Whether is a dry-cleaner, author, or accountant. There's a number out there for everyone.

Past guest Chris Guillebeau wrote a book about a number of these people, the The \$100 Startup. Guillebeau's idea was to show how people started with little, but worked their way up to enough.

James then asks Kelly about what he's bullish about, to which he replies, the future.

*"The most important invention in 25 years hasn't even been invented yet." –
Kevin Kelly*

His best specific guess is Artificial Intelligence, reasoning that it's the electricity of the next century. Look back, he tells James, and a plethora of modern innovations were just *something + electricity*. He thinks AI will be the next additive. This short part of the interview touches two key ideas; looking back to look forward and Venn Ideas.

1. Looking back to look forward is a key element of effective thinking – literally according to this book.

Whenever you face an issue—whether an area of study or a decision about a future path—consider what came before. Wonder how the issue at hand landed in front of you. Ask where and what it was yesterday, a month ago, a year ago, and so forth. Everything, everyone has a history and evolves.

2. The second big idea that Kelly draws on is Venn Ideas (AKA idea sex). Venn Ideas has been a thread that's run through many of the interviews. In episode #53 Ted Leonsis talked about how AOL got their sign-up CDs everywhere: combine CD technology with shampoo samples. Marni Kinrys told James that her business coaching business was a mix of PR and people.

The podcast conversation moves to Kelly's graphic novel, *The Silver Cord*. The few Amazon reviews are positive. About the book, James wonders if we're approaching a negative tipping point, where bad things will start to follow the technology we've created. Kelly guesses no, but says it's not all good. A lot of our current problems he says (I'm guessing he means CO2 emissions from power plants, nuclear proliferation, etc.) are from our old technology that seemed great at the time. This is a natural lag that we should get used to Kelly suggests.

One of my favorite parts of the interview is when Kelly says **the opposite to a bad idea isn't no idea, it's a better idea**. It was partially profound to me because of my domain dependent thinking. Nassim Taleb writes about domain dependence and here's what I mean. In mathematics it's very clear that the opposite of -1 is not 0. The opposite of -1 is +1. When you think about ideas though, it's much harder. For example, if you think about pizza, what is the opposite? The opposite isn't no pizza, it's something else. There's no point in us figuring out the opposite of pizza, but this inquiry is very valuable in other areas. Taleb's third book proved the difficulty of this quest as he searched for the word antifragility. About that search he wrote:

“There is no word for ‘antifragility’ in the main known languages, modern, ancient, colloquial, or slang. Even Russian (Soviet version) and Standard Brooklyn English don't seem to have designations for antifragility, conflating it with robustness.”

Does this matter? Taleb again, “Half of life – the interesting half of life – we don't have a name for.” Returning to Kelly, the meta idea about ideas then is this, when you encounter a bad idea don't think that the opposite is nothing, begin to think in terms where the opposite is something else.

James asks Kelly what his own narrative arc has been, from The Whole Earth Catalog until now. Kelly says that it all started when he learned that “you should invent your life. With the right tools, anything is possible.” Well that's easy for him to say, but Kelly makes the case that even a lack of some tools can help. For example, a lack of money helped more than hurt Kelly.

“The lack of money is often an asset because it forces you to innovate. People with money will try to buy a solution, but because you don't have money, you are forced to invent a solution.” – Kevin Kelly

This mindset – that a lack of money is an asset – started when he lived in Asia. He spent his days surviving on lentils and living in a house he built himself. Knowing how little he needed to satisfy the basic needs of life, he began to think about what else he might apply that idea toward. Just as a spade could plant a garden to feed him and a hammer could build a house to shelter him, questions could be a tool to provide income for him. He began asking questions.

And the final ingredient for success, luck.

“I lucked out to be at this moment when the digital culture and the nerdy stuff I was interested in became mainstream. And I really want to emphasize that there was an element of luck in that.” – Kevin Kelly

Now, Kelly was just being modest right? No, he re-emphasized some element of luck in success. It’s not that successful people don’t work hard or aren’t brilliant, he says, it’s just that, “there’s an element of luck.”

It’s not the first time that luck has explicitly been brought up.

- Jim Luceno wouldn’t have been a Star Wars fiction writer if not for a friend asking him to go see the first movie.
- Kevin Harrington told James that the George Foreman grill wouldn’t have been made without Foreman’s wife cajoling (and cooking a hamburger for) her husband.
- Alex Blumberg said on his podcast that his company Gimlet media is ramping up because of the impact Serial made to the podcast world.

The list goes on to include the same refrain from David Levien, Seth Godin, and Scott Adams. James asks Kelly for advice on how someone who’s listening in their cubicle can get lucky. Kelly suggests two things.

1. Be optimistic. A.J. Jacobs told James that “delusional optimism is a wonderful thing and sometimes it pays off.” Alex Blumberg said almost the same thing, that he had to be “stupidly optimistic.” Scott Adams wrote that we have to keep pulling the slot machine handle.
2. Learn about your minimal threshold. For Kelly living on almost nothing showed him what he really needed – almost nothing. What’s the worst that can happen when you can build your own house and grow your own food he asks. Even if you have kids Kelly has encouraging words for you, “I didn’t buy into the idea about the amount of money that it requires to have a kid.”

These two things have led Kelly to his grand calling in life, to use his privilege to do something only he can do.

One of those things is writing things like New Rules for the New Economy, which includes “embrace the swarm” and “from places to spaces.” I’d summarize it as, be nice and get ready for a faster pace of change. He also suggests to give freely, something Adam Grant talked about in episode #73.

Truly, thank you for reading. This post was a lot of fun to write, and hopefully read! If you see a mistake, let me know ([@mikedariano](#)). There were a few other things to add, here they are.

- If you feel squeezed as a parent, check out the Mr. Money Mustache blog or Becoming Minimalist site. Both have encouraging words about shifting your focus to do more good things.
- The Hard Middle might sound nice, but Taleb would probably caution against it. Another Taleb caution would be taking the opposite action. For example, the opposite of additional viruses in your body would be the subtraction of viruses from your body, but action isn’t always the best course. Sometimes time is all it takes. I’m speculating, but Taleb suggests that if you don’t take something that makes you sick, don’t take something that makes you better. To a point.
- The point about looking back to look forward was from The Five Elements of Effective Thinking, one of the best books I’ve ever read.
- About asking good questions, listen to the Tony Robbins interview with James.