

**Neil**

Okay. I just hit record. Hi Kevin.

**Kevin**

Hi. Thanks for having me. It was such a pleasure to be here.

**Neil**

Thank you so much for coming on three books. I know you are a podcaster as well, and you are a podcast consumer. What do you makes a good podcast conversation?

**Kevin**

I think I listen to podcasts a lot and I really enjoy when, um, the conversation gets me to a place that I did not know existed in a, a level of detail. That's just right. Meaning, um, not too much that it's over my head, but just enough, um, that I'm learning. So, so I, I, I tend to want to maximize learning in my life and other people's, that's a question I often ask people it's like, what are you trying to maximize? What, what are you trying to optimize? And for me, a lot of the optimization revolves around learning. I'm a self-learner. I like to help other people learn. I like to, you know, share to learn. And so, um, I listen to podcasts and I actually watch documentaries on things that I follow to kind of optimize how much I'm learning. And in fact, when I take vacations, when I travel, it's also to optimize learning. And so to the short answer, the long answer to your short question about podcasting is I, I like to learn.

**Neil**

And when you say that you use the framework of learning on vacation, can you open that up for just a second? How do you think about planning a vacation to optimize learning?

**Kevin**

I think there's kind of like three general vectors. So general categories of a, uh, people going on vacation. One is to kind of like, um, relax the people who want to be pampered. The, you kind of want to relax and recharge and, um, you know, a, a rest period and you kind of maybe get to a spa or, or, or even somewhere that's, uh, traditional family vacation where you can kind of really be centered. And then there's, then there's the, the kind of, um, sabbatical where you are, um, um, I mean kind of a vacation where, where you are trying to, um, have fun in entertainment and to, um, adventures, right. Uh, in that kind of, maybe you you're, you're your it's kind of maximizing the, the, your enjoyment. Uh, and then the third kind is, is where you travel to be confronted with otherness.

**Neil**

Mm.

**Kevin**

To, to, to be put somewhere where you have to kind of, uh, struggle a little bit and keep learning. And you're you, you're, you're, you're changing your mind and you're discovering new things and it's a little bit challenging in that sense. And that's the kind that I prefer.

**Neil**

I love that to be confronted with otherness. Well, right now we are confronting each other with a little bit of otherness cause we haven't met before, but you've been wonderful to work with as we've prepared for this conversation, going through a lot of books that have been formative to you. And I have loved listening to so many conversations, Kevin and reading your reading The Inevitable, and I've plucked out three quotes that you've said that involved books. So before we get into the formative books, here's three quotes you've said for you to expand, uh, elucidate as you see fit. Um, the first quote is from page 100 of The Inevitable you write, "the printed book is by far the most durable and reliable long term storage technology we have." What do you mean by that?

**Kevin**

I'm uh, co-chair of the Long Now Foundation when we've been, um, encouraging and fostering long-term thinking for 25 years. And one of the projects we looked at was, um, the concern of moving information into the future. And as we looked at this general trend in our society, which my book was about of going digital, the, the, the, the realization was a lot of this digital information is not very permanent at all. It's very susceptible to being obsoleted by the next generation of things. And, um, when we then turned to look at books, we realized, oh my gosh, comparatively books on paper are amazingly durable. They, if you keep them dry yeah. <laugh>, they will last for thousands of years, unlike your floppy disc, which, you know, nobody can read right now. So that's what we were talking about, that, that as a technology, if you stand back and look at the bound sheaf of paper, that actually, this is one of the most archivable durable technologies that we have. And in a certain kind of weird sense paper books may be seen mostly in the kind of, uh, uh, used to back up information rather than the digital, because the problem with the digital is that it, um, the machines that run it, um, you know, go away and they stop working.

**Neil**

It's like trying to stick a 3.5 inch floppy disc into a computer today would not work. And we don't have any way to interface between that technology from only 20 years ago. So we've got a little bit of context on the durability of books. I know you yourself have a two story library, uh, in your home, on the west coast, which I I'd love to.

**Kevin**

I would just show you right here. I'm in, I've got books, books, books, books, serious. Uh,

**Neil**

Wow. Okay. So for library, for people listening

**Kevin**

To this, you can't see books over here.

**Neil**

Wow.

**Kevin**

So, um, yeah, I'm, I am surrounded by books and having those as my companions. Well, when I think and write, and I'm here most days has been transformative. There's something incredibly comforting about

having them again, I have books in our bedroom. I have bookshelves in the, in the living room. So yeah, we probably have about 10,000 in total.

### **Neil**

Nice. I'm I'm, you know, the J George's quote, uh, "I cannot sleep unless I'm surrounded by books," and is that love of books and that bibliophilia Kevin, that we are hoping to tap into today, you've given us four of your formative books, which I'm thrilled and delighted to go through right now. The very first one that you gave us is called the next whole earth catalog specifically. I believe it's the access to tools addition, which I'm holding up here is it is got to be, I want to say four or five pounds. Uh, uh, you know, I don't know, to 12 inches by 18 inches, big is gigantic totemic. And it was published in 1980 by random house written by Stewart brand that covers this beautiful marble image of the earth taken from space with the next whole earth catalog written on top in a rainbow kind of color Stuart bra born 1938 in Illinois, still alive today, age 83.

### **Neil**

He's the founder of not only the whole earth catalog, which published through 1968, 1972 regularly, and then more sporadically until 98, but also founder of The Well, Global Business Network, The Long Now Foundation and other groups that are centered around themes of group think and problem solving. This is a compilation of the Whole Earth Catalog, a magazine featuring essays and articles, primarily focused on product reviews. The editorial focuses on self-sufficiency, ecology, alternative education, DIY, or do it, yourself, ethos and holism and feature this Logan access to tools, Steve jobs famously compared the whole Earth's catalog to a paperback, Google and closest Stanford commencement speech with the final lines from the catalog, stay hungry, stay foolish. Kevin, please tell us about your relationship with The Next Whole Earth Catalog.

### **Kevin**

So, in he, first of all, the, the setting that I want to convey that it's actually very difficult to convey is when I was growing up in the 19 six fifties and sixties, um, the amount of information that was generally available was like, N you had a couple, uh, maybe a little bookstore that might have some best-selling books in it. You had a library, a public library that again, compared to what kind of information we have today, um, would seem to be just in poverty in terms of information. And for instance, if you wanted, if I wanted to learn how to fix a car or to build something, where would I go to there, there was literally nowhere that you could ever find that out. And then in 1969, Stewart started The Whole Earth Catalog called access a tool. And it was both telling you tools and then giving you books about how to do things that the library didn't have.

### **Kevin**

The bookstore didn't have some weird guy in California was self-publishing this information. And then the magazine and the catalogs, which came out, started to publish people who knew a lot about something writing in. I saw in high school, maybe it was a senior high school was like a revelation because I had been learning about mail order catalogs, obscure mail order catalogs. As a kid, I had built my own chemistry lab with, with very little information. I had made a nature museum with very little information and then something, there was this thing yeah. At intersection of my interest in science and art. And it was about how to do things.

### **Neil**

Exactly.

**Kevin**

Yeah. Right. How to build a house yourself. How does, how

**Neil**

To heat, how to heat your house, how to buy a wood stove, how to build a toilet, how to, how to do craft weaving, how to, how to forage for edible plants.

**Kevin**

Right. And so when I saw that, and, and that was a much smaller version in 1970, when I saw it, I was immediately like, it was like, my bell had been wrong. It was like, it was resonating with me deeply. And I said, oh my gosh, this is, this is it. I wanted to contribute. But I was a kid in New Jersey who knew nothing who had no, no insight information, uh, who had nothing to offer. But I, I, I subscribed and I was, I read each version that came up cover to cover, and I read everything, all, all of it. And what, so several things happened from that one is I eventually, right after that one was published, I eventually wound up working for The Whole Earth Catalog, working with Stewart. And some of the things that you mentioned that, um, he was involved with, I was partnering him with him as we did it.

**Kevin**

And so, um, so it shaped me very early on by giving me permission to invent my life. So I dropped out of college. I, um, I was traveling in Asia as a way to learn. I was photographing again, kind of being self-taught. And when photography was a lot of chemistry and optics, it was not just holding your camera up, uh, your phone up, you had to actually develop the film yourself and print it. And so, um, for me, it was sort of this golden ticket to, to, to, to self-learning, to self-education, to lifelong learning and to ha to doing things. So eventually I wound up there and I wound up editing. And then eventually,

**Neil**

And you were the first person ever hired online in 1983?

**Kevin**

Yes, I was

**Neil**

For this job

**Kevin**

With Stewart because we were, we became very involved in the early, um, online version. So, what The Whole Earth wanted to be actually was not to be printed on newsprint. It really wanted to be an electronic information service. And that was one of Stewart's kind of original ideas, but it took many years until that caught up. And then once the internet did come, the catalog kind of disappeared because it was basically replaced by the internet.

**Neil**

Wow. And you said what The Whole Earth Catalog actually wanted. And when you said that sentence a minute ago, it implied that The Whole Earth Catalog, I don't want to, I'm going to stumble on the words here, but either it was conscience conscience or it, it, it had some determining properties. I mean, I can't help, but think of your 2010 best seller, what technology wants right. Where you speak about technological determinism or the idea that the technology we use is its own in its own realm that, um, influences our culture. Could you just briefly summarize that for the people listening, who haven't heard of that, that thesis?

**Kevin**

Yeah. It's, it's, it's a complex idea that I, um, mainly to slow down a little bit to, to unravel. And I, I, I, I think the, um, using the word want is, is kind of a loaded word. Um, because we, we tend to think of it as a conscious deliberate want, and, and I use it much more in a way that a plant wants light. It's a, it's a tendency, it's a leaning towards it's a bias. Um, and, um, so, so, so, so I'm not at all suggesting that the, the catalog was conscious or even that technology is conscious, but it does have biases and tendencies in it. And, um, it, it, and, and using the word, want's kind of a little of rhetorical trick, but, but it's helpful in trying to think of this in, in a more objective way. Books really didn't want to be the telephone directory that that's something that another media can do a lot better books. And so, kind of like, what did books want to do? It's like, you know, they, they want to be kind of, um, in your hand, maybe they're, there's something where you're kind of taking you to a different universe, or, you know, mm-hmm, <affirmative> immersing you in somewhere that you haven't been as a companion or, you know, someone like Nick Carr would say, books want to, to take you to this thinking space, this literary space, which is a place you can't get to in

**Neil**

Ordinary life, mm-hmm <affirmative> author of The Shallows.

**Kevin**

Right. And so, um, and so I would say, you know, so that's kind of like, say, well, what do books want in the sense that they may not in their words? The idea is that the, the medium itself, the, the, the shape of the technology itself tends to be better at some things than other things. And sometimes we were kind of forced them to do things that they don't want to do in the sense that they're not really built to do. It's not really in their grain. That's what I mean by what the Catalog wanted was that, um, it, the information in it and what it was trying to do may not be best accomplished by being a big fat book in newsprint, but it might be better accomplished as the internet.

**Neil**

It's interesting though, about your point that no matter what the laws say to that point, while I might go on a stage and say, you know, we've got to regulate social media to people above 16 years old, instead of 12 or 18, you're saying, Hey, it's regardless. It's what technology wants. It's what, it's, it's a dramatic pulling towards this future, where we combine our species with artificial intelligence and AI, just a massively migrate. You know, that one thing we love to do in this podcast is bring in questions from other past guests while we had another early internet inventor on the show, Douglas Rushkoff back in chapter 83. And he said, make sure you ask, make sure you ask Kevin, what, what does he think technology will choose to do. Will it choose to take care of us or even keep us around once it is in charge?

**Kevin**

Yeah. I don't think technology is going to be in charge. Okay. I, I think we have a very, um, we humans have a very peculiar, um, relationship with technology in which we are both the parent and the child, the master, and the servant, the creator, and the created at the same time. Hmm. Because I believe that we ourselves we've invented our humanity. We were the first animals we domesticated.

**Neil**

Right

**Kevin**

We domesticated before dogs before, before dogs, before cows. And so we have created so, so we've invented our humanity. And so we are already the creator, but we are the creators and we will continue to create technology and technology will shape us. And that tension of being both the parent and child, Sandy will never, ever cease so forever more into the future, we will always be struggling with this dual nature. We're always going to be embedded in it in a very strange way. And so, um, it's, it's, it's a cocreation we live.

**Neil**

Yeah. It's, um, we won't go deep into this now in the interest of time, but for those listing, yeah. I highly recommend the 2010 book, What Technology Wants and the 2016 book, The Inevitable, you even talk about how the invention of fire was an external stomach. Yeah. Which changed our jaw and changed our digestive system. So this is what you mean by broad scale technology changes. I feel optimistic when I read The Whole Earth Catalog. I sense optimism in there. Yeah. You know, the opening line of the opening page is we are as God's and we might as well get used to it. You call yourself the most optimistic person in the world, and then your 20, 21 Ted talk, you titled it, the future will be shaped by optimism. I'd love to just unpack that briefly. How do you define optimism? Why do you say optimism is a moral imperative, which is the first time I heard that. I love it, but I, first time I heard that. And, and what do you specifically suggest to cultivate this mindset? If we all want to be a little bit more optimistic, like Kevin Kelly, you know, what kind of daily or weekly practices are you putting in place to make yourself feel positive in this

**Kevin**

Right, right

**Neil**

world. That doesn't seem so.

**Kevin**

So I, I, I would say I, I define optimism as, um, a greater focus on opportunities rather than the problems.

**Neil**

Nice.

**Kevin**

So, um, so I think we gain over long term more by putting more energy into our opportunities and our strengths, um, more than focusing entirely just on our problems. Mm-hmm, <affirmative> now I don't deny that there is problems. In fact, what I would say is that most of the problems today have been generated by technologies in the past, and that almost a hundred percent of the problems, the future are going to be by the technologies of today. Right. So, and the more powerful the technology and the more powerful the problem. So, so, so, so I'm not anti, so, so I'm not denying problems at all, but I believe that problems are actually the path to progress. Mm-hmm <affirmative> that we get to progress through problems because they open up possibilities that we had not even thought of before. So, um, but I think that focusing, investing more into the opportunities is what optimism is about. And, um, I believe that it's a moral obligation because I, because our world is so complicated and complex, that if we want to make a world that is friendly to us, that is desirable. I don't think we can do it inadvertently and by accident. I think we have to actually deliberately envision it first in order to make it, and that believing that we can get there, that is optimism.

**Neil**

So if I buy those two things, the definition and the imperative yeah. Then how exactly do you cultivate it?

**Kevin**

Yeah. So, I think, um, one of, one of the ways is, is that we don't want to be distracted by the news. And I don't mean news like the worst news. I mean like the best news, because by definition news is reporting what has happened recently. And by definition, that's going to be primarily bad because bad things happen very fast and the good stuff takes a long time. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. So if you had headlines every 10 years, they'd be more optimistic. Okay. And so, we don't want to be distracted.

**Neil**

Doesn't say your child didn't get typhoid every day.

**Kevin**

Exactly. Right. And so, and so we don't want to be distracted. So one way to be optimistic and cultivate, that is not to be distracted by the negative news, which is not that it's wrong. It's just that it's hiding and obscuring the bigger, positive news, which is harder to see, except when we turn around and look in retrospect,

**Neil**

It's Enlightenment Now by Steven Pinker, kind of the, uh, long term trends. And, um, the only thing is that there's other big thinkers out there, like Nassim Taleb, who say, you know, the fallacy of that type of thinking is that in every situation where there was something worse than before it was unpredictable, it was a Black Swan, it was something we couldn't foresee, like, you know, um, the pandemic that, that we kind of are still kind of finishing up with fingers cross. Right.

**Kevin**

So I, I think I, I think of ourselves as the kind of on a fast moving race car, um, which is getting faster. Um, we need, we need breaks to steer. You have to have, you have to have someone focusing on problems and brakes and slowing down in order to steer it. But you just don't, you just want to make sure that the engine is stronger than the brakes. Right. I mean, so, so, so, um, so there have to be people

who are paying attention to the problems we have to, we have to deal with problems, but we have to remember that the problems are in the service of progress.

### **Neil**

Yes. Yeah. Yes, yes. Similar to, uh, The Obstacle is the Way, um, right. Or the, the same that exactly. Um, so you're a, you're a kid in New Jersey. You get, you get access to this catalog. You become the first person ever hired online in the history of the world, which is an amazing, uh, you know, thing in 1983. Now, take me forward a little bit to the time in your life where The Holy Bible entered your world. I am, I am holding an all black copy of, you told me to buy this New International version here with kind of a, a black, sort of a, kind of a fake leather cover. And, uh, the NIV, as it's often called or NIV, um, was created as a modern translation by Bible scholars using the earliest and highest quality source manuscripts available into a broad, broadly understood modern English. So it's a team of 15 biblical scholars representing a variety of evangelical denominations. Uh, the book came out in, I believe 1960. It was created in 1967. I think came out in 1972, it took five years to put it together. You can file this one, Dewey decimal hands under 2, 2, 0 0.52 for religions slash Bible. Kevin, tell us about your relationship with The Holy Bible in this case, the new international version.

### **Kevin**

So my best friend in high school became a zealot, uh, a missionary guy, and he was quoting the Bible to me and it's like, I'd never read the Bible. I mean, I was, I had gone to the Catholic church, but I had never read the Bible and it seemed implausible to me or, um, confusing. I, I, uh, I didn't know what to make of it. So, I decided that I ... given the kind of role the Bible had in our culture that I should read it cover to cover. And when I was traveling, I had a little tiny pocket version of it, which I did whenever I spent an awful lot of time waiting for the buses to leave. And I used that time to start at page one and read through it and I read through it twice. And, and, and I guess the, the, the, the thing about it was, was that the Bible was like nothing like I had imagined it, nothing like people were talking about, it was far more kind of disturbing in many, many ways and kind of maybe more powerful in other ways. And, um, uh, the more I read it, the more I realized that most people talking about it, including a lot of Christians have never read this thing.

### **Neil**

<laugh> yeah. I mean, really, I mean, it's the only thing with the smaller FCIs and The Next Whole Earth Catalog. Yeah, exactly,

### **Kevin**

Exactly. And it's like, you know, it's hard to, I don't know, it changes what you say about it when you think about it, if you actually, um, go through the whole thing. And of course now here's the thing. Any real honest Bible scholar would tell you is that it was not written or created to be organized in that way to be read, cover, to cover. All those books were written separately at way, different times, way different people. So, so it's not as if this was the way it should have been presented or written, but this is certainly what it is now. And, um, um, so, so I, I think it's the kind of, this is Bob Dylan's, um, take on it. "It's the most underrated book and the most overrated book at the same time." Okay. And, but, but it's so core to, um, our culture that its kind of, you know, it really is, uh, an essential thing. And, and it changed me in, in the sense that, um, I did as a result of it become a Christian and identify as Christian from reading it. And, um, I concluded that there was, um, that there was a lot of truth in this very disturbing book. And, um, that truth became really essential to me in my own life, in, in, in, in the sense



of how I thought about the universe and how I thought about why I'm here and, you know, the big questions that most people have.

**Neil**

Um, what was disturbing about the Bible? And I, you know, I I've heard you identified, um, as a born again, Christian, how, how do you define born again, Christian? And what role do you see religion, uh, playing as we, right. I don't want to use the word futurist. I know you don't like it in the, in the long now we're living in, uh, because ... it looks like religion is the fastest growing religion in the world right now is none. And millennials are the least religious generation of all time. Yeah. Those are things we, we know.

**Kevin**

No, it's entirely out of fashion and we'll probably disappear over time. Um, first of all, I don't identify myself as a born again, Christian that's Wikipedia

**Kevin**

The Bible is disturbing which was your first question? Because, um, the <laugh>, you know, the, the God that it portrays is a very vengeful old Testament. I mean, old, the old Testament has a lot of stuff in there that is like, that's really hard to fall in behind. I mean, it's like, that's, that's, um, that's archaic. That's, that's, uh, it's not progressive. And to kind of, to kind of understand it as a source of any kind of universal truth is, is, is difficult because it doesn't always match what, first of all, the new Testament is suggesting and I'm headed into, you know, theological controversy because the really true believers would say that it's, there is no, um, discontinuity it's one large message. Um, I didn't read it that way. That's not how it appears at the very least. Maybe you, you can work yourself into that, but man, it's, um, uh, it's, it's a it's historical.

**Kevin**

And so a lot of this is historical, um, depictions of, you know, um, put this way, um, it was not uncommon in ancient societies for people to sacrifice children. I mean, it wasn't just in the, it was not just in the, um, uh, Judaism. It was prevalent throughout that culture. Which to us is just absolutely barbaric. Yeah. Right. But that is, that is, first of all, that's the, that's the, that's the cultural milieu that it is operating in. And so when you have Abraham trying to, um, sacrifice, um, his son it's it's, it's not that, that, that was that unusual to begin with. It wasn't that out of the ordinary. So, so that's the kind of disturbance that you kind of have to sit in to, to go through the book. And it's just, just one of many kinds of things that, that you kind of have to deal with. So, um, so that's, so it's disturbing because it's, um, it's other, it's other in a very serious way. Um, and the, those kind of parts could kind of disappear from modern Christian thought. Um, they kind of gloss over those, or it's not really glossed over, but I mean, it's, it's, it's not emphasized. I mean, that way.

**Neil**

Yeah. And when I, because I, you know, you said it's gone, it's going away and it might be gone. What are the implications or ramifications of that and what do we lose, uh sure. In terms of cultural connectedness?

**Kevin**

So one of the things I emphasize and, and I'm different maybe from other Christians is, is the evolution of Christianity itself. Okay. I mean, it was hundreds of years later that the Bible started to be assembled.

And that was a process that took hundreds of years and there was even debate about which books should be in the Bible. In fact, the Catholic Bible and the Protestant Bible are different. They have

**Neil**

Major editorial decisions.

**Kevin**

Exactly. And that's just one of the many things that were going on. So this idea that it was sort of fully formed as modern Protestant Christianity, like no, no, no. It's, it's been evolving all along and it will continue to evolve. And geographically, you know, the center of Christianity kind of started in Armenia and in the Mid-East and then moved west into Europe and then hopped over to the Americas. And I think it's going to go back to, um, Asia and eventually end up in Africa. Some of the fastest growing churches or not in, it's not in the Americas, it's in Asia and then in Africa. And so, so, um, and so this, this faith continues to evolve in people's understanding of it and, and what it does. And as you mentioned, the, the nonbelievers, the atheism continues to be the biggest thing happening. And I think that will continue to happen.

**Neil**

Thank you for letting us go deep on The Holy Bible. Obviously that book could, could deserve a conversation and, and you know, many hours of introspection just by itself, but in the interest of the time, let's move on to your third formative of book, which is Gödel, Escher and Bach by Douglas Hofstadter. If I said that, right, H O F S T A D T E R, an eternal golden braid published in 1979 by basic books. This is an orange cover book with a large white all caps, Gödel, Escher and Bach on its own lines. Then there's an MC Escher like image of letters in cubes, in spotlight, shadows below. And at the bottom of the cover, it says a metaphorical F A G U E on minds and machines in the spirit of Lewis Carroll. This is the winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the national book award in 1979. Douglas Hofstadter was born in 1945 in New York. And he's 77 years old today filed this one under 5 1 0 0.1 for mathematics philosophy. Kevin, tell us about your relationship with Gödel, Escher and Bach or GEB as it's called by Douglas Hofstadter

**Kevin**

Yeah. And by the way, The Whole Earth Catalog also won the National Book Award as well. So, um,

**Neil**

Oh, nice. I missed it.

**Kevin**

<laugh> yeah. Um, so this was a book that kind of introduced me to, um, systems thinking and cybernetics and whole systems' ideas. And more importantly, the first glimmer that there was, um, a lot of similarities between technology and life and those technology. Yes. And those similarities were in these, um, these loops, these strange loops Hofstadter talked about in his book. And for the first time, it kind of shifted my idea about technology, because I, from The Whole Earth Catalog had a little skeptical idea about computers. I mean, there were kind of personal computers were fine, but there was, there was a sense of which this was sort of, um, that you wanted to keep technology at bay afar from you and, um, the right kind of appropriate technology hand tool. Sure. Bring them on, but you know, the big corporate stuff, but, but, but understanding the systems as introduced by this book changed my, my, it,

it, it deed my allergy to it. And I became a little bit more interested in thinking about the ways in which living systems and mechanical systems and mathematical systems might share some fundamental roots. And that came out of Gödel, Escher and Bach, which, he was comparing three different systems of logic, the, um, the drawing, the essential drawings by Escher and the Bach, um, mathematical recursive

**Neil**

You on Sebastian Bach,

**Kevin**

Right? So, curse recursiveness is a fundamental aspect of computer programming where you kind of go through loops, you call it strange loops. And he was arguing that these kinds of recursive loops where you're thinking about what you're thinking, where you have things A is connected to B connected to C, which is connected to A, is not kind of a direct arrow. That those were actually the essential elements of everything that we found. Interesting fun life to our own consciousness. And, and so that these strange loops where they have recursiveness they're logically like should be impossible, but they were actually logically necessary to make these complicated things. And so that was sort of like a, a door opening. And at first it was kind of like a lot of people, it was like lots of words, really hard to understand, but I found over time that internalized, that kind of perspective, and it became more of a foundational assumption for later on when I'd been looking at course, living online with, with the internet and looking at AI, they all, actually, this was a fundamental insight. And so that I, I blame it on that book.

**Neil**

<laugh> I blame it on that book. Well, you can see the steps though, coming through the next, The Whole Earth Catalog then to The Holy Bible, then to, to GEB. And finally, we're going to close this show off with you talking about Finite and Infinite Games, a vision of life as play impossibility by James Carse published in 1986 by Free Press. I'm holding the cover in my hand. It's it's got this like white cover with, um, yellow light, blue, dark blue, pink, and green cubes tumbling down the left side. And at the top of the cover, it says there are at least two kinds of games. One could be called finite. The other infinite. A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play. James Carse was an NYU professor of history and religion who lived from 1932 to 2020. This is an extraordinary book that will dramatically change the way you experience life. Finite games are the familiar contests of everyday life. The games we play in business and politics, the bedroom in the battlefield games with winners and losers, but infinite games are more mysterious and ultimately more rewarding. File this one under 1, 1 0 for metaphysics. Kevin, tell us about your relationship with Finite and Infinite games by James Carse. Yeah.

**Kevin**

So those first three books that you mentioned are all these sort of sprawling, overwhelming treasure troves of infinite amount of information. And so I actually, I didn't realize that until you just mentioned it. They all have that in common of being kind of, um, over the top and, um, outrageously, um,

**Neil**

Some people might call them dense.

**Kevin**

Yeah. Dense. Right. And sprawling is another the word. So, this one is a little different because it's a smaller book and, and, and, and truthfully, it's hard to read in the middle. I tell people, just read the first chapter in the last chapter. And so, um, in fact having read the cover, you probably don't need much more than the cover <laugh> to kind of

### **Kevin**

The general idea, which is that there are two kinds of things in life. There are the kind of zero sum, uh, I mean the, the, the, yeah, the, the, the winners and losers kinds of game. And then there's the nonzero sum where, where, where everybody benefits. And it's a, it's a plus plus plus win, win, win. And those win, win, win are kind of infinite games and meaning that there's no end to them and they keep going. And once you understand that, most of the things that we want in life result from kind of this infinite game where it's, there's no end to it and everybody keeps benefiting and you want as many people to bring in as possible. And so that, that was very similar in line with both my own experience, but it gave kind of a language to, uh, my, my optimism, to this whole system's view that, that, um, GEB um, suggested, and it, it, it gave, it gave a way to talk about it.

### **Kevin**

And that's what it did for me was okay, here, here, I, I can make this, I can see this in the real world. This is a, a practical, actionable thing, which is I'm going to always look for the infinite game. And I'm going to run away from the finite games where there's winners and losers, except, you know, for entertainment, for, you know, for sports and things where there's winners and losers. But, but to actually play, engage it, try to, to, to make it, to take it seriously. The only one you want to really consider are the infinite games. And the question is, as you go into is like, is this, if I look at stocks and trading, is that an infinite game? Or is that a finite game, right? Or it's usually a finite game because there's winners and losers, but entrepreneur making new companies, that's an infinite game that's ...

### **Neil**

Or parenting I was going to, I was going to throw you see if right, exactly. You've said a lot. You've, you've been very formative in my own view of parenting. I, I think I heard you back in 2014 on the Tim Ferris podcast, talking about the world under population crisis, kind of begets people having as many kids as they can. And you've been public on, Freakonomics saying, I wish I had a fourth child. You've got three adult children today. I don't think you're a grandparent. I think of parenting as an infinite game. What is, so you, if you have three adult children today, and there is a conversation happening globally right now, but whether or not we should have kids. Elon Musk is coming out right now and saying a collapsing birth rate is the biggest danger civilization faces.

### **Kevin**

Yeah, yeah, yeah

### **Neil**

How do you come out on this idea of whether or not to have kids or whether or not to have a lot of kids?

### **Kevin**

Well, you should

**Neil**

Actually, I'm asking selfishly,

**Kevin**

Right? There's no overpopulation of humans. So don't even worry about that. You should have as many kids as you possibly can have. And, um, I, I do think this, uh, population implosion, which will happen sometime towards the end of this century is very challenging because throughout history, all large scale prosperity that we've seen has always been accompanied by rising population. So to make rising living standards and having falling population, we don't know how to do that. I believe we can figure it out, but we actually don't have any past experience doing that. Where every year there's fewer audience, a smaller audience, fewer employees, less people to create things. We don't have any experience in making that a world where we continue to grow and mature and expand in our, in our ambitions. And so, so, so that, I think that is a huge challenge. I don't think it's like dystopia, but I think it's a, we need a different kind of capitalism to do that.

**Neil**

Kevin, is there one last piece of advice you'd like to leave three book listeners that would be a bunch of book, lovers, makers, sellers, writers, and librarians to just send us off on our way who have enjoyed listening to you today.

**Kevin**

I think every really important person that I admire reads more than I do.

**Neil**

Thank you, Kevin Kelly for coming on three books.

**Kevin**

You're very welcome.