



Total Life Complete Podcast. Date: July 7<sup>th</sup> 2017. The Grove co-working space Dallas, Texas

iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/total-life-complete/id1225853687?mt=2>

SoundCloud: <https://soundcloud.com/totallifecomplete/sets/podcast>

Stitcher: <http://www.stitcher.com/podcast/total-life-complete>

TuneIn: <http://tun.in/piseD>

Web: <http://www.totallifecomplete.com/#podcast>

Email: [podcast@totallifecomplete.com](mailto:podcast@totallifecomplete.com)

EP6 - Justin Nygren Co-founder, Art Event Producer, Relational Architect

<https://soundcloud.com/totallifecomplete/ep6-justin-nygren>

**BRETT COWELL** (host)

**JUSTIN NYGREN** (guest)

Brett Cowell: Hi it's Brett Cowell and this is the Total Life complete podcast coming to you from the Transformation room at the Grove.

Today I'm here with Justin Nygren, co-founder of The Grove Dallas, art event producer and relational architect. Welcome Justin.

Justin Nygren: Thanks.

Brett Cowell: Hopefully today we'll talk about community building, social enterprise and perhaps a little bit about sauerkraut, we'll see how we go. We'll start off with the introduction. How do you introduce yourself at a party when people ask who you are?

Justin Nygren: I usually tell them I'm the owner of the Grove which is a co-working space in the West End downtown Dallas. It's a little bit more, little bit unique in that it focuses on social impact so we're not just a standard co-working space focused on just standard start ups or freelancers. There's a larger social mission. I'm also a dad, I've got two kids, I've got 50/50 custody with them so, do my best to spend as much time with them as possible. I guess my life's mission, if you will is to leave the world a better place than I found it. I do everything that I can to keep myself involved in that space.

Brett Cowell: Let's talk about the co-working movement. What is co-working and why is it a movement?



Justin Nygren:

Sure, co-working as a movement of itself, is anywhere between 10 and 15 years old depending on what stories you hear and who you talk to. Really started around the time of the economic downturn where you had a lot of people being laid off. They were subject matter experts and they were trying to figure out how to keep their heads above water. Really the beginning of the rise of the gig economy, the freelance economy and folks just began to realize, why would I go and sign a five year lease on an office when there's five or 10 other people just like me and we could split that load and share that weight. Instead of buying five copiers for five businesses, you buy one and spread that cost across the community, across the group. It became known as collaborative consumption basically.

As more and more folks figured out, this is a legitimate way of lowering their costs and extending their network, folks began to move to the forefront of actually taking on that risk themselves and then allowing others to join in as members in their spaces. To where it's not everybody taking on the risk, it's more one person or a company taking on the risk and then sharing the load with a group of companies.

That's really how co-working came about. It's evolved, even since I've been involved in the co-working movement. I got involved in 2012, my first experience was with an arts community that was building a co-working space and maybe we can talk about that a little bit later. And then fell in love with it. Just love the idea of community, I'm a natural connector and networker. That's the basics of the beginning of the co-working movement.

Brett Cowell:

What qualifies it as a movement? Everything seems to be a movement now, I want to join a movement. I'm not sure how many movements you can be part of at the same time. Is there a limit?

Justin Nygren:

That's a great existential question. That's a really good point and I think now that companies like wework, depending on who you talk to there's debate on whether or not what We Work does is actually considered co-working they're more still tied to the standard executive suite model, like the Regus'es have been up until co-working. I don't know if it's actually still a movement, I think it's still gaining momentum in some arenas but in most developed cities, most larger cities it's become a staple in the freelance and even in the traditional business community, finding advantages of tapping into the co-working community. I think we're in a space where different arenas are in different phases of movement.

Dallas was probably one of the later cities to really engage. I think co-working in Dallas has really only been, really moving forward the last three to four years. Those of us that were kind of laying that foundation, there were no



opportunities for co-working. But then you go to someplace like New York City and it's 10, 15 years old and it's everywhere. Everybody and their dog owns a co-working space on the East Coast. But then, you go to Old East Dallas and there's no co-working. You go to Richardson, there's one popping up that just about to probably launch by the end of this year. I think different places are in different phases of the movement.

**Brett Cowell:** You mentioned a couple of other organizations that provide co-working or space rental services and I guess just anecdotally, that certainly from my perspective it's growing and it seems to become these co-working spaces are popping up all over the place and their fundamentals, fast forwarding more than a decade from when it started, seemed to still be there. The gig economy, maybe even just explain what that is.

**Justin Nygren:** Sure, the gig economy is the idea that there's actually a great show today on Terry Gross [Fresh Air Podcast - <https://www.npr.org/player/embed/535664628/535664634>], is actually covering this question of loyalty to companies. It used to be you got a job with one company, you stayed with them 50 years and you retired, you got your pension and you got your gold pen. That just doesn't exist any more. Is it a generational thing? Is it an economics thing? I think it's a combination of all of those. But in terms of the economics, what people are beginning to realize is that they can take their talents, they can take the skillsets that they've honed over a period of time and source those out to multiple companies. Even multiple companies at one time. They don't need to be tied to somebody's desk from eight to five, they can literally work from anywhere in the world now. We've got cloud computing and email, it's just the world has changed.

The gig economy is basically taking those talents and skills and farming yourself out to larger companies that can afford to pay you the rates that you want to make.

**Brett Cowell:** There is kind of a philosophical approach to life and work embedded in this movement, continuing this topic which is saying, okay, as you well summarized, instead of a job for life, I'm looking at myself and my strengths and what I can the value I can bring in, this type of environment, a co-working space seems like a great place to locate to say, not only do I need a place that's not my home to work from but also I'm self-identifying as somebody that is taking a different approach to creating work and value.

**Justin Nygren:** Right, absolutely. One of the things that we talk about in the co-working movement is, you got standard serendipity which is you happen to meet the right person at the right time, at a happy hour. But if you can build a community inside of a co-working space, you can accelerate that process. There's the value



of not only just having a space to work that's not your home but also being involved in a community that's there to fight for you and help you grow in the way that you're wanting to grow.

I think it really is a values based approach to work. What do I want from my life? Do I want? That's not to say that a traditional job path at a nine to five for a larger company, that it's not a valid career path. It's not an either or type of situation. I think it's just that we're at a period of history where that's not the only option any more and if you can figure out how to make it work outside of that, the co-working community can be the support system that you need.

**Brett Cowell:** I want to come back to what makes a great community in a second, you already started down that track. Just in terms of co-working, is it a catalyst, is it responding to a demand that was already created? Or is it something that is kind of created this whole industry itself, which is people can see, people can visit here and see that there's alternative ways to live and work?

**Justin Nygren:** That's a really good question. I think it's a little bit of creating itself and people being visionary enough to see the opportunity that was there. But also borne out of the changing economic landscape that we went through in 2007 to 2010. When people find themselves in situations that are outside of their control like being laid off, as tons of people including myself were in 2009, you have to find a solution. If no door that you knock on opens well then you build a door. In a way that's kind of, with Dallas, that's kind of what happened with us in 2012 to 13, was a lot of people saw the opportunity to start building doors.

So you have folks like Nick Clark over at Common Desk, one of the first ones to launch in Deep Ellum in 2012 and then us in 2013, and the DEC in 2013 as well and Fort Work. Just responding to what we saw was the opportunity to create environments that we were passionate about, that brought people that were like minded and kind of moving in the same direction, brought us all together and the whole proverb of, "if you want to go fast, go alone, if you want to go far, go together". I think it's a mix of us kind of creating the opportunities but also responding to the need that we saw in the community.

**Brett Cowell:** Do you see that the co-working community is it still a community as this type of working becomes more prevalent, there's more demand for that and there's economic profit available to folks potentially that are willing to set that up, and more spaces are being set up, will the community still be a community or is it just now it has been incubated now and now it's a free for all?

**Justin Nygren:** That's a hard question. It's a good question but it's also a hard question. When we started kicking off our spaces in 2013, Oren from Fort Work and I realized that we as the smaller co-working spaces, quote unquote, as we were getting



our traction, we realized that we weren't going to be the only players in the game for very long and what we wanted to do was twofold. One protect the community that we were building at the time but also protect ourselves from the conglomerate, from the weworks that would come in with large marketing dollars and announce that co-working was finally in Dallas even though we'd been doing the work for years.

So we started the Dallas co-working collective that was back in 2013 just realizing that we needed to provide a space for the owners of the spaces to stay open and communicate, hey what's happening in your spaces, what are some tips and tricks, can we use collective buying power, all of those types of things. But as time has gone on and we've all had to get honest with ourselves about this, it's not easy to maintain that. None of us have the time and energy to devote to really making the collective what it can be, what it could be. It's kind of waned. I think that the sense of community is still there in that we all understand that we're part of a community of workers in the city. That understand each other in ways that other people in maybe more traditional working environments don't.

But I think there's definitely room for us to grow on cultivating the true community between the spaces. We've got folks that have considered starting a North Texas co-working alliance, but again it's just, it just takes a lot of time and energy. Quite frankly the funding just isn't there at this point.

Brett Cowell: Just building on that, what makes a good community?

Justin Nygren: Just as a bit of a side note, I was talking with BJ Vann this morning who has Impact House over in east Dallas, Fairpark area, and one of the conversations that we had was around people not wanting, some people not wanting to become a member at one place because then they would feel like they were rejecting everybody else and drawing a line in the sand between you and those other spaces. It's definitely not the environment that we want to cultivate, we want to cultivate one that's open. But it's a challenge.

I would say what makes good community inside a co-working space is the common vision, in being tied to a narrative that's larger than yourself. With the DEC that plays out with the start up community, there was not a lot support for the start up community prior to The DEC, The DEC launching, but they've done a great job in expanding the narrative of we are here specifically to support start ups. That we'll go through accelerator programs and get angel and VC money and go for an exit.

For us, our narrative has been in the social impact space. If you're in Dallas and you're interested in changing the world and doing something positive, that's our



DNA, that's our mission and the majority of our programming supports the people that are in that arena. What makes a community within a co-working space is that shared mission and vision. But really more than that, it's the relationships that take place inside that space. Just really creating that space for those relationships to be cultivated and grow. In terms of the larger community itself, again I think that's what we've struggled with over the last three, four years, what's the united voice? Of the Dallas co-working community?

That being said, we had a meeting at the end of last year over at Genius Den and guy that came in, he's global co-working guy, Mike Delarosa [Mike LaRosa], very involved in the co-working movement. Just from the conversations that he had had with us about the work that we've done together between our spaces and those types of things, he said that we were probably the most developed community of communities that he had seen in the world. When you're in it, all you can see is the weaknesses, you forget about the fruit in the work that you've done. It's nice to have somebody who's been involved around the world to come in and say, "You guys are light years ahead of most of the cities in the world."

I would attribute that to the owners of the spaces. We decided early on that we would take a coopitition approach. Even though we're in the same industries and potentially, quote unquote, fighting for the same customers, we're again, we're stronger together than we are apart. I'm happy to say that two, three of the co-working spaces that have launched since we've been open, the founders came out of The Grove. I feel like we, in the early days, did a fairly decent job of helping people understand what makes a successful co-working space. They've been able to take that DNA and go out and hopefully inject that into their spaces.

Brett Cowell: Let's talk a little bit more about social entrepreneurship in the context of The Grove and what broadly, what is social entrepreneurship and why does it matter?

Justin Nygren: What is social entrepreneurship? That's Pandora's Box, right? Briefly, social entrepreneurship is taking this entrepreneurial mindset, this entrepreneurial approach of solving old problems with new methods or taking old methods and making them more efficient. Taking that approach and focusing on anything that has to do with social impact. That's environmentalism, that's racism, that's poverty, that's environmentalism and in social entrepreneurship there's a spectrum from the non-profit world to the for-profit world. What we've typically taken an approach to solving these problems is through the non-profit community which 501(C)3s. Over the years we've become, we've come to realize that that's just not a sustainable model for truly addressing the root issues that we're typically addressing the fruit issues of.



Great example is the Red Cross after there's an earthquake or a hurricane they come in and they bring in clothing, they bring in food. They're addressing an immediate need that a for-profit business just simply cannot address so they operate on this charitable model that sustains them year after year. Then the questions that started being asked in the '80s and '90s on a more academic level was how do we create sustainable models that not only address these fruit issues but address the root systemic issues that are causing the problems that we're trying to address? Instead of simply doing charity drives for people in poverty, what's causing the poverty and can we use the model of capitalism to address those issues to create sustainable models to get people out of poverty? Those are your two ends of the spectrum, one is the non-profit charitable model and then other is the strictly for-profit, for-good model.

Why does it matter? It matters because we live in a broken world. It's good to try and make the world a better place. That's a super simplistic answer. Like I said at the beginning, that's my personal drive is I know there's solutions out there, I know there are ways to get people out of poverty, I know there are ways to get healthy food into communities that don't have access to food and it matters because they're human. These people that are experiencing these issues, they're not a statistic, they're humans just like we are and I feel like those of us, especially those of us who have a better opportunity or have had better opportunities in life simply because of luck and chance, nothing that we chose, that we have a moral obligation to help those in our world that have not been given those same opportunities.

I know there's a lot of people that disagree with me, the whole, well if you work for it then it's yours and if people don't want to work for it then they don't deserve anything. I think that's way too simplistic of a conclusion to come to in life given the complexity of the world that we live in.

**Brett Cowell:** We're sitting here in Dallas Texas and both business and non-profit are both big business here in this city. So how does social entrepreneurship fit in here? Is it actually, does it find a more fertile ground here? Or are people confused, and go where does this fit in with what we've got already?

**Justin Nygren:** On the non-profit side, you're right, it's big business, the United Way of north Texas is one of the largest, I think it's one of the oldest in the country if I'm not mistaken and they do amazing work. They will continue to do amazing work because they continue to improve their model with things like the Ground Floor which is their social entrepreneurship accelerator program that we're fortunate to get to partner with them on.

Intellectually that's been the model that people are able to wrap their mind around. Okay, I go and I become the CEO, of a company, I do great and now I can



want to give and so I contribute to and become a mentor or do those types of those things and get involved in non-profits. But again, as people are beginning to question, what kind of an impact are we really having? The models are beginning to evolve and those conversations are beginning to evolve as well. That's been one of my personal missions over the last four years is to move the social entrepreneurship conversation further down the road and again we're fortunate enough to partner with United Way, to partner with Social Venture Partners [SVP], these folks that are really pushing the boundary on how we address these issues.

This year is the first year that the Big Bang Conference that Social Venture Partners puts on, the whole focus this year is on impact investing. How do we take the models that we're investing in start ups in tech start ups, putting in some seed money, putting in a little bit larger amounts and hopefully looking for some kind of long term financial return while also having some kind of social impact. That's the whole theme of the conference this year. I think it's moving, we're moving the conversation forward and the more opportunities that we create for people to become informed about these models, the faster we'll move that conversation down the road. It's happening, it's taking a little while but it's happening.

Brett Cowell: I know you quite often talk about narratives and dialogue and all of these sort of things. There seems to be a role for social enterprise if nothing else, to be an interpreter between a for-profit business and non-profit to say, to be expert at plugging into both sides and not only in terms of getting money from one side to the other, because that seems to work quite well at the moment, but actually getting practices and people to work across and to tackle projects collaboratively as opposed to saying, "Oh okay, we're going to donate this money and we'll get some results and stats and photo opportunities out of it and then that's it."

Justin Nygren: There's a lot of ways that the traditional for-profit community's beginning to engage in social impact. It's been traditionally done through their CSR departments, corporate social responsibility. This can be everything from having a recycling task force for every department to employee volunteering opportunities. One thing that's been growing over the last few years is skills based volunteering. Instead of just, I shouldn't say just, but instead of a group going and volunteering for Habitat for Humanity, it's the accounting department specifically aligning themselves with non-profits that the company believes in and going and helping those non-profits develop their accounting systems and implementing better practices and those types of things.

And actually EFNT, Entrepreneurs for North Texas, is a great organization that's helping companies really plug in based on their company vision and those types of things. But then it also goes the other way where the start up community and





the business communities helping the non-profits really engage on a more professional level. As opposed to seeing their non-profit as passion project, operate it like a business. We've been able to work with the Ground Floor program and helping those non-profits engage with start up principles like rapid prototyping, customer discovery and lean canvas and those types of things. It's been really cool watching either end of the spectrum begin to embrace the values and strengths of the other end.

**Brett Cowell:** Just picking up on the term “operated just like a business” and I think you've clarified it as well to say, what is operating something like a business? It's taking some inputs and then looking at the outputs you're getting from that and the process you used to develop them and kind of measuring the impact out of this. Is that what it is in managing this like a business? Is it just really focusing on the impact and the outcomes and trying to increase that per unit put in?

**Justin Nygren:** Yeah, absolutely. The donors, on the non-profit side, donors are becoming more and more smart about where they put their money and they want to see not just that a program's running or that some kids got fed but really what's the data? What true impact are you having? Really helping the non-profit community establish measurement guidelines. If you've got an after school program for literacy, how do you measure the effectiveness of that? If you've got food programs for South Dallas, how do you measure the effectiveness? Somebody like Bonton Farms who in the middle of food desert, they're launching a café on the farm. How do you measure the effectiveness? So really helping non-profits begin to wrap their mind around what's the data that they're focusing on and how do you translate that for your donors to help them understand the impact that you're having.

**Brett Cowell:** Another term you mentioned is “food desert” which is something that I've heard more and more recently. Do you want to explain what that is and why we've got one here in Dallas?

**Justin Nygren:** The why we have one here, that's a systemic question I think. That's a cultural question around how the city of Dallas views the residents south of I30 quite frankly. But food desert is any area that, there's some folks that have an actual mile point that does not have easily accessible healthy foods. Typically in impoverished neighborhoods, you've got a corner store that has fried chicken and chips but rarely any fresh fruit, any fresh vegetables and so you basically develop an area where access to healthy food is not easily attainable.

So for instance in Bonton [Farms], Darren Babcock tells a story of after he moved down there, he said, “Hey I want to get groceries.” Got a few of the guys from the local community to help him get from his house to the nearest grocery store and it was by bus. If I remember correctly it was over an hour trip on the bus to



get there. And they get there and he's not taking into account that they've got take everything back on the bus so this is a typical food desert situation where if you really truly want access to healthy food, it's way more work to get that then it is to just go down to the corner store and get something that could potentially "kill you" easily. Dallas is one of the worst food deserts in the country but there are some really great folks that are doing work, like Bonton Farms that they're helping to address that.

**Brett Cowell:** Let's talk a little bit about your journey and I know you like to sometimes put a phrase out there for people to react to. Should you play to your strengths or fix your weaknesses?

**Justin Nygren:** I for a long time, thought it was fix my weaknesses and put myself in positions to try and do that but it's been about a year and a half ago now that I've completely flipped that switch and for me it's all about the strengths. And then building teams and community around you to offset that. Should we talk about Strengths Finders?

So Strengths Finders is one of those personality profile tests that was developed by Gallup and they have a list of I think it's 37 strengths that they've come up with you can take this test, and you can either pay for all of them or get your top five. Most people do the top five. When I took the test, this was November, December of 2015 I guess, the light bulb went off and I realized every successful venture that I've been a part of played to my strengths. And every business that I had started or organization that I had started, that had failed were ones that I had tried to or I had put myself in positions where I just was not focusing on my strengths and playing to my strengths. I'm a firm believer now of playing to the strengths and building that community and team around you to offset the weaknesses.

**Brett Cowell:** We sat in this very room a couple of weeks ago just to, I'd asked your assistance in understanding a bit more about social enterprise in Dallas and the lay of the land and I'd enjoyed our conversation and become a member here. That's that. But also I know, we talked a little bit about Strengths Finder and I've got no affiliation with them, you can easily go online and find out what people say about Strength Finder but I noticed for yourself, a light bulb moment had gone on and I think, just a philosophical point for the listeners, which is, quite often you're in a situation and you feel like you're losing, you wake up every day and it's difficult and you're going uphill and all that sort of stuff. It's only later on when you can look back at it as you have done, and say, really I'm playing to my weaknesses everyday which is pretty difficult... I think that you can probably feel that you're working really hard and you're investing a lot when you're playing to your weaknesses and not getting necessarily a lot of results out of it.



Justin Nygren: Your ROI is not, if you were a business what's your ROI with the amount of energy that you're spending? Another great book in that general direction is ROE Powers ROI by Mike Rose. Strengths Finders it, I stopped short of saying it changed my life, I think it just changed my perspective on life. My number one strength is belief and had somebody told me that 10 years ago, where that strength is, I function best when I put myself in companies, organization scenarios where I believe in the moral contribution of the whole. If somebody would have told me that was my number one strength 10 years ago, my path would've been completely different.

Number two is connectedness and being able to see connections and opportunities that others don't and helping facilitate those. I kind of just knew it and I did it intuitively but seeing it as a strength and intentionally creating opportunities to function in that strength has changed everything this last year, year and a half.

Brett Cowell: You talked about serendipity and I guess a characteristic of a good community is this structured serendipity.

Justin Nygren: Accelerated serendipity.

Brett Cowell: Accelerated serendipity. So arriving here at this very moment as we sit here in the Grove, was that serendipity or inevitability or chance?

Justin Nygren: All of the above? Can we do answer D?

Brett Cowell: That's allowed.

Justin Nygren: I think it's, there's circumstances that are out of your control, there's circumstances that you can control, there's circumstances that you try to control that just refuse to be controlled. This phase of my life, the journey started in 2009 and it was a layoff. I was an AutoCAD illustrator, probably the only desk job I ever loved. Got to draw all day and work on patents from Google, it was great. But again, out of my control. Economy had turned down, the firm eventually declared bankruptcy, wasn't anything that I could have done differently there.

Then living in an economy that wasn't hiring anybody with my skillsets. Found myself waiting and hoping for that serendipitous moment that something would click, I'd meet the right person at the right time. Again, the intentional part is putting yourself in situations where that serendipity can take place. That's where you've got a responsibility in fate, you've got a responsibility in serendipity, in these opportunities. The turnaround was a serendipitous moment, I had taken action and emailed a group of about 10 to 15 of our close friends and said, "Look this is where I'm at. I'm tired of working these contract jobs, gotta do something



for my family." One of those friends had heard about the art house project. Which I didn't know had stalled, it had stalled out and I went to go pitch them on hiring me to run it when it was ready. Serendipitously, found out that it had stalled. There was an opportunity there.

Brett Cowell:

What is that project? Just to explain to our listeners a bit.

Justin Nygren:

Sorry. So Art House Dallas is a non-profit here in Dallas that was similar to the arts organization that I and a couple friends had started in 2007. Basically mentoring, nurturing, cultivating artists and building opportunities for them to create community. They had been in Dallas for a year or two and maybe two years and they were working on creating a co-working space for specifically for artists. That was my background, a lot of, most people in Dallas knew me for art organization, Art Love Magic, so it was a perfect fit.

At that meeting found out that it had basically stalled, that just too much on the plates for the folks. I pitched them on hiring me to finish the project. That was a huge risk on my part. I had never done anything like that but knew that I also had the resources and the community around me to at least try and make it happen. So the question of serendipity versus are you responsible for fate, I think it's all of the above. I wouldn't be here doing The Grove without the serendipity those chances that happened to come across your path.

But it's also what you do with those chances and opportunities. I could have just as easily have said, "Oh, well I'm sorry your project stalled, call me when it's done. Best of luck." But I was intentional about engaging in that. I think that's another, personally, just on a philosophical level, being intentional, when I say it it kind of sounds like a well duh moment, or kind of reaction, but being intentional about the opportunities that you take, being intentional about the decisions that you make and the circumstances that you put yourself in, I think is key. That's key to success and what I found for the way I operated for a long time, just being a victim of the circumstances and not being clear about the direction that I wanted to take with my life. But once I got clear on that, that's when doors start opening. That's when relationships start forming and opportunities come up that you couldn't have baked up in your wildest dreams.

Brett Cowell:

I wonder how much of serendipity comes as a result of necessity being the mother of invention. People don't tend to ask for what they really want out of life until they're a desperate state. You've lost your job and you go, "Oh I've lost my job, that's terrible, now I'll do what I really want to do." Maybe that's an ingredient in serendipity somehow that the blinkers come off and as a result of a life event and the serendipity is actually having something bad happen to you that allows, sets you up for what you really want to do to be honest with yourself and express yourself.



Justin Nygren:

Right. There's a great documentary that I watched after my layoff called Lemonade. I believe it's free now. You can buy the DVD. It's stories of exactly that. The pink slip being the ticket to the future. There's folks that, they cashed out their 401K and started a mobile coffee shop. One guy decided to become a full time artist. But again, the running theme was them just coming to a point of realizing, life is too short. That was a turning point moment for me. You and I talked about this when we first met. Near death experiences too, not just a layoff. In a way a layoff can feel like a near death experience.

But when you come to that point of clarity where you in sense, you're kind of forced to ask the question, what do I want out of my life? What do I really want out of my life? Another way of asking that is, what's the narrative that I want my life to tell? I've got two kids, the narrative that my father passed down to me was not a great one. I've got an opportunity to shape their whole future based on the decisions and the intentionality behind those decisions to create a new narrative for them. So I think the serendipitous side can create those vortices. Is that the word I'm looking for? If it's not, it is now. Those multiple vortexes of opportunity if we're being intentional on engaging those opportunities.

Brett Cowell:

Storytelling is something that comes up a lot in previous interviews you've had here, storytelling is a tool for business and is certainly is a buzzword now. I often reflect on this, storytelling as someone who writes poetry and stories obviously there's a certain resonance to that idea. But I also to just wonder in the age that we're living in, the fake news and fragmented attention, social media universe that we're in, whether stories, we're getting back to basics and just having a story that you can understand gives you enough stability and the power to write your own story. I think it's amazingly empowering the day that you wake up as the result of an event and say, I'm crafting a narrative arc and what arc am I on, if it's not the right one, I've got the power to change that.

Justin Nygren:

It's interesting, as you were saying that, it just kind of had a little personal insight that for generations the narrative was given to us. Whether it was through the church or the institutions, our religious organizations, religious institutions. We were given the narrative. I shouldn't say we. The culture was determined by the narrative that was handed down that from those communities. It's not like that anymore. The narrative is dispersed. The narrative has been open sourced in a way. That can lead to huge cultural confusion. We're talking about the great democratic experiment that we're living in. This kind of narrative has never existed before that we know of.

When you create a culture where the narrative isn't dictated by one institution but you create an empowered community that is given the opportunity to create their own narrative, that's a powerful thing. That's the world that we're living in. With social media we're authoring our own narrative and the way we want



people to understand us and our lives and that can be a good thing or a bad thing. That's a whole nother conversation. What it does, it gives us the ability to create sub-narratives within the cultures that we live in. It kind of goes back to co-working, people wanting more than just being able to, it's great I can work from home, but what is that really doing? Now I'm missing community. Now we're creating this narrative that says, you don't have to, you can still be an independent worker but you don't have to lose the opportunity for community. We're living in a really, really interesting age when it comes to what's the narrative.

Brett Cowell:

And there's probably some level of angst as well with, as you move from a cultural narrative that says, and certainly for the way I've grown up and wrote about in my book, working class background and then moving, getting one of the first in my family to get a degree and then moving to professional work and do that. That's kind of a narrative that you can say, "Look, this is my responsibility, this is the next step and I need to climb the ladder and have expensive stuff and go to restaurants and travel because that's really "fulfilling, that's my self-actualization but it's actually not really. And that's what I have a bit of a problem with.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs on what self-actualization actually means and can be misunderstood as meaning which is not just pursuing a narrative given to you by someone else, or that you've inherited to it's logical conclusion. I kind of did that, and then went, "Okay, I've done that now, I've been successful now, I've had all those experiences however I feel hollowed out inside, I'm not expressing myself in other parts of my values. Teaching, learning, giving back, all of those sort of things I'm creating."

Justin Nygren:

Yeah, the more you and I talk, the more I'm just, I just get dumbfounded of how similar we've had so many similar experiences but my moment for that was that I had been in ministry for almost 15 years and our family had a car accident and just realized, one of the revelations that I came to was I was living somebody else's story that was handed to me from the culture that they had created. That was if you wanted to be spiritual and you wanted to be a leader well then you become a pastor and you go to school for that and you build a church and you build it big and that's what you do.

The accident gave me the freedom to say no. That's not my story. That's not who I am. That's somebody else's suit coat that was tailored for them and they assumed it would fit on me. There's a process that comes after that revelation. I think that's a lot of the folks that you're reaching out to to help walk through that transitional period of, man I've been on this path for X amount of years, I've dedicated to it but it's just not who I am. How do I get out of this, we used to



call it the rat race, but how do I get off the treadmill? How do I write a new chapter?

Again, I just always go back to community, you don't do it in a bubble, don't do it in a vacuum. There are people out there that are ready and happy to help you craft the next chapter. I've had the joy of watching multiple people go through that over the last four years. Come in with no vision, no resources, questioning whether or not they wanted to live, even to that point. Begin to actually make good on their personal dreams, their personal vision. It's definitely worth the work.

Brett Cowell:

Great point about community there because my next question was going to be, how can you make a change in your life without having to have a car accident? I know we were talking about, I'm drafting an article on what I've learned from near death experiences and those types of things where you consider your mortality because it's taken a number of those and then a living near death experience where you realize that your current path is really heading off in a direction that you don't want to. The logical conclusion of that is a life not lived, which is a form of near death maybe. Moving over to a different path and I often say part of that is, acting and interacting with other people is a way to redefine what your story is. Because doing something, making a small change in your life, slowly redefines who you are. To your point about community, meeting somebody similar to you that is doing, living a different life or has been through that, seem[s] to be a real way to accelerate that.

Justin Nygren:

There's a couple points to that. One is incremental change is change nonetheless. Making small changes in your life to begin to move in the direction that you want to go in despite your current set of circumstances. Something as small as just, once a week, go on a hike. Get alone with your thoughts. This is something that I struggle with. We're constantly on, the internet is constantly accessible, even in the woods. On a hike. Turn off the phone, turn off the computer, just go really contemplate, what do you want? What do you want? And what's one small decision that you can make to begin to move in that direction? Again back to intentionality.

Two, you're right. It's getting into community with people who have gone through what you want to experience. Those communities are out there. I would hope that The Grove is one of those, that people can see it as a place of personal transformation. Find meetups, whatever it is, Eventbrite. There are opportunities out there to engage with people who have gone through the process of redefining their narrative, redefining their story.

Reach out to me. Send me an email, I'll go have coffee. I love walking with people that are in that space of questioning. Again, I see what the potential is.





It's hard work, it's difficult work, but the way I see it, you can wait for your near death experience to pressure you and push you or wait for your layoff to hold your feet to the fire or you can begin to be, to take those intentional steps to move in that direction. Either way, it's hard work. Either way.

**Brett Cowell:** There's a way to use social media more productively. What I found is amazing is since I've left the corporate world and finally joined Twitter, the last person on earth that finally joined. I've actually started out from scratch and what's been most interesting is I probably joined Twitter almost a year after finishing my job and after writing the book and starting a business. The sort of folks I've added on Twitter have been folks like yourself and The Grove and community organizations and what's amazing is that every time I've been on my Twitter now, it's lots of stories about humanity and lots of things that I find inspiring and just reinforce and allow me to develop and grow in my understanding of what's going on. I think it's amazing that I've, I feel fortunate that I've joined at this time. I can imagine if I'd joined years ago, all of my feed would be about, I don't know, about buying a speed boat, a holiday house or something like that, exclusive getaways to de-stress and have some mindfulness time. Thankfully it's not cluttered up with all of that rubbish. I can just learn about real stories about people instead.

**Justin Nygren:** I think there's value in curating your content. People talk about the view bubble. Where it's so curated that you're just continually reinforcing your own beliefs. I don't think that that's necessarily healthy but I think it is healthy to realize if you're going to spend any amount of time ingesting, if you will, this media, think about what you're bringing in. It's okay to want to be aware of good things and not be constantly inundated with the horrors that are happening in our world. I think there's a balance there. Curating to where the social media isn't a negative force in your life. But not to the point where you're so Pollyanna about it that you're not in touch with the reality of the world that we're trying to change.

**Brett Cowell:** I think that's a great point and it seems like a skill that needs to be developed and maybe for generation X'ers like myself, we've got to sit down and intentionally do that. I've been fortunate given that my curation has gone a bit the other way, it's a bit biased now probably to non-profits and social entrepreneurship and very low on traditional news sources and other things. But obviously I still look at those from time to time but certainly not in my feed at all. I've been very conscious about not doing that.

Let's talk a bit about, Art Love Magic.

**Justin Nygren:** Sure.

**Brett Cowell:** How did that start? And it's a great name. Those are three...





Justin Nygren:

I can't take credit. Can't take credit for the name. But so Art Love Magic came about, so like I said, I was in the ministry, decided that wasn't the direction I was wanting to go in and I've always been creative. Was very creative in high school, again when I got involved in ministry, that was okay well that's what you need give that up, got to focus on theology and ecclesiology and all the ologies. The wreck allowed me to just get honest with myself and just say, "You know what? I'm a creative. I always have been a creative, I'm always going to be a creative in some sort." This was 2006, at that point for about four years I had been producing live art events, on the side as a hobby with some friends around Dallas and we'd do everything from the Deep Ellum Live venue to Trees, to coffee shops just anywhere that we could.

My art, if you will, I play guitar, in a band but I began to realize my art was creating space for creatives to be creative. Whether that was a physical location, whether that was an event, whether it's a workshop, it was in the production, dreaming up a vision of an experience and then bringing the resources and the people together to create that.

After we decided to end the church, just within a week or two, I got a call from a friend who had helped start that church and he was no longer involved. He said, "Hey, I'm working with this guy in this organization and this company and he's telling me he wants to start an arts organization to mentor artists. Give them positive support and community." Again serendipity, I was intentional, I was moving in that direction but serendipity, I never in a million years could have predicted that he was going to make that phone call. Basically said, okay, yeah let's sit down, let's talk.

That was the end of 2006 and the original idea was a little bit more focused on the graphic illustrator community. Both the founders are graphic illustrators, very heavily into the comics world. Graphic novel world. That was the majority of the focus. Then the live art production would just be a component. We could not have predicted the response that we got. We launched our first show in February 2007 and before the doors were open there were people lined up at the doors. Halfway through the show, now mind you the show itself, the experiences all focused around live art and my tag line was tearing down the wall between the creator and the spectator. You go to a gallery, you might hear an art talk from the artist, but you never get to really see what their process is like, you never really get to get in their head and in their creative space. These events were designed to do just that. To get you as an attendee as a spectator into the creative's space. Even creating with them. The whole production itself became an artistic experience.

Halfway through the first event. The gallery owners were asking us when the next one was going to be. I think in our first year we did close to 30 events within



the first year. Might be even more. It really took on a life of its own. I was really heavily involved with Art Love Magic probably for the first three, three and a half years and so '09, when I was laid off that when I had to pull back a little bit. Feel like it's on its third generation of leadership so I'm the grandpa, founding grandpa of the organization but they're still going.

Kid's workshops is one of the more, the ongoing events that they do. They partner with the Latino Cultural Arts Center couple times a year. Kids can come in, it's free to the public. Nobody pays to attend. We set it up studio style for the kids so they can pick and choose what they want to engage in. So you might have a potter that's there and they can sit there and do pottery for four hours if they want. They can make a pot and go over to the origami table, spend a few minutes there. So a lot of fun, it's really designed to create that opportunity for parents and their kids to be creative together.

Brett Cowell: Certainly one of the things that this show is the intersection between art, business and community because I think there is an intersection there probably what you've just described is one of those intersections.

Justin Nygren: People used to ask me, well what's your art? We'd be in the gallery and they'd say, "is that your piece?" No, no I don't have a piece on the wall, you're standing in my creative experience.

You're right, I think in order to nurture both sides of that community, the artistic community and the business community, there should be cross-pollination. In the room right now, local artists, we've got a couple pieces behind you, Leighton Autrey [the artist]. I've tried to be very intentional about supporting the arts community and bringing that, the creative energy into the business community. Like you said, the flip side is also converse, what can the organizational development side of the business community, how can we use those tools and those gifts to organize the creative community?

I would venture to say that back in 2007 when Art Love Magic started, there really wasn't a strong creative community. There were a few arts organizations that were doing some great things but there wasn't really a sense of, as Dallas, we're owning an identity. You would at that point, if you really wanted to become a serious artist, you would move to Austin. It was default. My mentality and my approach was stop. Stop doing that! And quit complaining. You are the ones that have the power to make that community. Nobody else is going to do it for you. If somebody doesn't take the initiative in beginning, again back to narrative, in writing that narrative, it's not going to happen. That was a big call for us in the very beginning. Stop leaving. Stay here and fight for the city with us. I think others would agree, but I think Dallas is a better place for it. Our creative community's pretty strong now.



Brett Cowell: It's a lovely segue onto the section of our talk about Dallas. How do you explain Dallas? What's the heart and soul of Dallas? And did you grow up here? Or you...

Justin Nygren: Yeah, I was born in southern California. Grew up on the beach skateboarding and all that good stuff. Moved to Dallas when I was 14, 15. Just like any Southern California kid coming to Dallas, I hated the idea of it. I didn't want to leave the beach, didn't want to leave my friends. Was convinced in my mind that everybody lived on ranches and rode horses to school and all of that. I was surprised, I was pleasantly surprised when I actually did get here. It wasn't as bad as I thought. But apart from three, four years when I lived in west Texas going to school at Sul Ross, I've been in Dallas since.

Dallas, I have absolutely fallen in love with the city. It is the city that I will fight for with everything that I have because I believe in her. I wouldn't take the risks and the steps that I've taken over the last 10 years if I didn't believe in Dallas. I would've moved to Austin, like why stay here? Why try and start a new organization from the ground that's going to support the arts community when the arts community doesn't even believe in itself. But it's because I believe in the city, I believe in the potential that's here.

Same thing with impact community. There weren't a lot of resources here in Dallas for the impact community. Very spread out, you had to know the right people to get connected to the right thing. Again I believe in the impact community in our city and want to see it thrive. Now that being said, I've told people in the past, if Dallas is my wife, Fort Worth and Denver are my mistresses. They have done some amazing things that I believe show the potential of what Dallas can be and has the opportunity to become. But again, it's work. It's not just something that pops up overnight and it's definitely, definitely not something that's going to come from the mayor's office. It's going to come from people on the street, feet on the ground, who believe in the potential of the city. I won't stop fighting for this city. There's too much good to be done.

Brett Cowell: Seems to be a bit of still frontier mentality amongst some of the folks here that are digging in to, especially working across the art cultural space and other things and as a lot of people will be quick to point out. Oh we've got, in Dallas, we've got arts and culture, we've got this and this.

Justin Nygren: We have the largest arts district in the country. That's saying something.

Brett Cowell: Though if you walk around the streets it doesn't always feel like it.

Justin Nygren: Exactly.



Brett Cowell: I'm not sure that keep Dallas weird is, that's been used that phrase. They have to come up with a new one. There's certainly a number of individuals and some of them already been on the show already. Hopefully get to speak to a lot more that are intentionally trying to create a community, recognize where Dallas is there's lots of opportunities and one of the greatest opportunities or characteristics of Dallas is the ability to start something and the community that is quite small and connected still support that. I don't think anyone goes, "Oh I hope there's no more culture here. I don't want to help that person trying to make the city better." I don't think I've ever heard that.

Justin Nygren: I think about the story of the West End. The west end is the original downtown Dallas. The very first buildings built in Dallas were built here and it took a major entrepreneurial spirit to get the city up and started. There weren't a lot of natural resources, we had the Trinity River and that was pretty much it. I think that that spirit has stuck with the city. The question is, and it's call to action, it's whether or not people are willing to step up to the challenge of creating something new. And contributing something positive to the landscape of our city.

One of the best projects that I've seen that in this vein of starting community and bringing something positive to the landscape is Aurora. That was just a dream. That was just a vision but they've done an amazing job of not only collaborating with the local Dallas community, but internationally and working with folks who have pulled off some amazing things around the world. I believe that's one of the greatest creative assets that our city has.

Is that the only opportunity to do something great and creative for our city? Absolutely not. There's opportunity galore but again it's the work.

Brett Cowell: So Aurora, and I know it is they studied the Vivid Festival in Sydney and that's been a similar type of thing for those folks will be well aware of it, if you're in Sydney it's growing every year where they light up the Opera House and various things and I think there's just something, what seems like such a simple idea, but lighting up buildings and then taking that to the next level and making buildings art, has got apart from the visual spectacle, I think there's a deeper psychological thing which says, here's an overlay, here's a creative organic overlay on the concrete buildings that are around here in our city in the way that we can project whatever we like on the city and make it whatever we like.

Justin Nygren: One of my favorite ones that they did was about, I think it was not this past one that they did but where lit the Wyle Theater and it was basically a 3D map projecting and no matter where you walked around, it was this amazing cinematic experience.



Transforming space, when you walk through or you drive through the arts district, you're brain begins to pattern and you have your expectation of what your experience is going to be, same thing as anywhere downtown. But creating opportunities for people to think differently about space and what they expect out of space. Is this simply a place for me to come and go inside of a building to experience the artistic creative factor or is the building the canvas?

I love what Josh and those guys are doing man. It's great.

Brett Cowell: Let's take some time to talk about any other projects that you're working on that you want the listeners to hear about.

Justin Nygren: Got a few. One of those is current working title is the Aspen Project. Came out of conversations that we've had over the last few years around access to mentors in both the start up and the impact community. There's a semi-formalized process in the start up community of doing whiteboard hours and office hours and those types of things. Just through conversations, people began expressing, longing for more depth out of those relationships rather than just a one hour talk. Aspen Project is designed to connect people over a longer period of time with potential mentors as well as advisors. These more one off, one hour opportunities. Hopefully that'll end of summer or fall it'll be six month cohorts that anywhere from five to 10 businesses will go through at a time and will basically curate the mentor opportunities for those businesses.

I'm working with consultant and author, guy named Gary De Rodriguez. We're creating a two module business intensive experience that will walk start up owners and social entrepreneurs through both the process of validating their business model which we did last year here with the Unreasonable Institute, here at The Grove. So validating their business model then also diving deep on managerial and leadership skills. Folks that are in early stage are getting access to those tools that they'll need to implement as they scale.

Continuing to work with Social Venture Partners. We've been working on that relationship for a couple of years. We're actually a co-production partner with them on Big Bang. This year's really, really, really excited about that.

Brett Cowell: That's a conference theme impact investing is the theme this year?

Justin Nygren: Yeah, so Big Bang, I believe the website is [bigbangtx.com](http://bigbangtx.com) an annual event. In the past they've done topics like collective impact, just general social impact awareness and this year's theme is on, specifically on, impact investing.

Brett Cowell: I really get around. We normally run out of time and I think we are but, tell us about sauerkraut.



Justin Nygren:

This is great. I've recently discovered just in the last year or two or so, I just really love cooking. I love cooking. When I was married, my wife, she loved to cook. I'd cook every once in a while but I just didn't love it, I liked it. Just last couple years man, just discovered that I love the process. I love the picking out of the ingredients and how does the flavors affect each other and all those types of things.

Years ago I used to brew my own beer. I brewed my own beer for about three years. Around that time, my ex, she started doing the fermenting of vegetables and all those types of things. There's a great book called *Wild Fermentation* by Sandra Katz, that became the second bible in our house. Probably three or four months ago, I after my layoff, developed some really bad intestinal issues with all the stress and all that colitis and all that nasty stuff. And started studying and around probiotics and natural remedies to address those issues. Started taking probiotics, which helped a lot but then the more I read, it was like, the fresher you can get it, obviously the better.

So I just decided, I'm just going to start fermenting again. So bought a fermentor at the suggestion of a friend about a month or so ago and I'm diving in. I finished my first batch and let it ferment for about a week, probably could have gone longer. Been eating that over the fourth of July weekend, I haven't died yet so I'm assuming it's okay. I'm on my second batch, actually second and third batch now. It's just a lot of fun. I love sharing too, so being able to take what you've created and watch somebody, man really enjoy it. It's a lot of fun.

Brett Cowell:

I know certainly, I know people in Dallas certainly eat out a lot and I didn't, when I was in my corporate job, quite a lot of this "have you tried this restaurant"? And this kind of food and you get quite picky about it and I think it's a completely different philosophy of life when you cook more. It's not an inconvenience, it's an opportunity to mediate and express yourself and to relate to other people in a different way. If I can put it that way.

Justin Nygren:

Absolutely. I like the idea of it being a contemplative exercise. It causes you to focus. It causes you to slow down and be in the moment, be aware of what's happening right then, right then and there. Again, like you said, the bigger reward is the sharing. My buddy Jeff, yesterday I shared the kraut with him, he's like, "Man, that was amazing." He's like, "I wouldn't pay for it, but I would eat it all day long." Okay, that's good feedback. Now I know. There's room for improvement. But that shared sense of community of being able to enjoy the experience together is huge.

Brett Cowell:

I think it's nice that we talk about small changes or just small things changing your attitude. Measure of success being what restaurants you've been to and how you rate them on Yelp or whatever. Versus the meals that you've made and



who you've shared those with. I think it's kind of cool and I don't spend any time watching the Food Channel or anything like that but I spend a lot more time cooking than I have in my whole life. I think recently.

Justin Nygren: Likewise. I've grilled more in the last two months than I have in my entire life.

Brett Cowell: Yeah, likewise. We've got that in common. It's just an amazing, amazing thing. I learned since I was in, moved to the US that the difference between grilling and barbecue because in Australia we've got a barbie, I'm talking about barbecuing and people are confused about something about smoking meats and then burning wood and all that sort of stuff. And now I'm a griller, I've got a grill and I'm there.

Justin Nygren: It's a distinction.

Brett Cowell: Okay, so any other final words for the listeners, anything else you want to leave, final words you want to leave?

Justin Nygren: No not really. This has been great. One thing that really hit me while we were talking is just the idea of people getting in the community. Get out and find your people. There are people out there who, if you are willing to begin taking the steps in the direction that you're wanting to go, that they're willing to be your support. They're willing to help you build the bridge as you're walking on it. Don't sell yourself short. Own your identity and engage it as much as possible.

Brett Cowell: Justin Nygren thanks for joining me today.

Justin Nygren: Absolutely, thanks.