



**Life Stories**  
Individual Lives. Collective Impact.

KRIS TOMPKINS INTERVIEW  
*THE THREAD SEASON TWO*

**Kris Tompkins, Co-Founder & President, Tompkins Conservation**  
**January 24, 2024**  
**Interviewed by: Teddy Kunhardt**  
**Total Running Time: 39 min and 2 seconds**

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories Presents

KRIS TOMPKINS:

What I hope, you know, Doug and I always talked about, "Oh when we're both dead, we'll go on and we'll do the same thing out, you know, in the billions of years-- light years away." Those kinds of things. And that would be fantastic. But I also know that durability counts. So whatever happens to me. I have this life. And it's been so extraordinary. I don't--- I'm not in a situation of needing the next story. This one that I've got is almost more than I can handle on many days.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The Thread

Kris Tompkins

Co-Founder & President, Tompkins Conservation

00:01:06:00

KRIS TOMPKINS:



My name is Kris Tompkins and I was the CEO and one of the founders of Patagonia, a company and have lived in Chile and Argentina for the last almost 30 years on specific conservation of territory and bringing back extinct species.

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INTERVIEWER:

You had an unconventional childhood. Can you talk about that moving down to South America with your parents?

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

So, we grew up on our great grandfather's ranch here in Santa Paula, and our grandmother, who had brought this ranch through the Depression and understood the nature of ranching and how tough it was, said no child of mine will be a rancher. We're going to stop this after generations of ranchers. It ends here. And she insisted that our father get out, go to university. And so he went to Stanford, graduated and chemical engineering and with another man, started a company that was involved in the oil business. And then as the oil fields of Venezuela began to unfold and people really understood that this was going to be the next several decades of oil production, he decided to expand that company down into Venezuela.

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

And so he took all of us with him. And we lived in the Orinoco Basin, which is a very wild area in sort of glorified camps of French people,



British people, Americans, all people who had their families there who were in the oil business. And he died there, I think, in the third year we were there from Bulbar polio, dead in five days. And so my mother gathered up my siblings who were in British schools in Barbados, and we all came back here to the ranch.

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INTERVIEWER:

How old were you during this period?

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

Eight, nine and ten.

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INTERVIEWER:

Can you describe your father? What was he like?

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

Our dad was a go-getter. He wasn't a tough guy, but he expected enormous things of his kids and really pushed us in a way that I responded to that. That was like, this is my team. I can do this. I just seem to have one of these personalities that if I'm going to do something, if I'm interested in something and I commit myself to something, I am all in. And that's definitely what my father was like.

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INTERVIEWER:

If you have this competitive, speed driven characteristic from your father, what did you get from your mother?

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

I didn't understand this for a very long time. What I learned from her was grit. Like when things get tough, lean in and learn about grief, learn about loss, learn what it means to keep a family together. The harshness, the beauty in the harshness of what does it mean to really commit yourself to a family? Or really almost whatever it is to be all in? To have both feet inside the circle and not, which is my personality, to have one out just in case I change my mind. I have that fierceness from my mother.

00:05:12:00

KRIS TOMPKINS:

I am sort of the matriarch of our family because I understand glue. And I am a factory of glue. I'm a glue maker. I keep people together. I make sure we gather. I make sure that if someone whom I love doesn't--- whether through blood or salt, I am there and I will take care of them. This is my mother.

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INTERVIEWER:

We're going to jump now to when you're 17 and you're joining Patagonia. Can you tell me how that came about? And what was your initial job there?



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KRIS TOMPKINS:

In our family, the expectation was that at high school you would go away to school. And I told our mother that there is no way that I would go away to boarding school for a high school, and that if she made me, I'd run away. And it was a real fight. And finally, she just caved in. So I went to Santa Paula High School. And I didn't really fit in. And I wasn't scholastically challenged. So I started leaving school and going out to the beach. Our family had a little string of beach cabins in those days, and Yvonne Chouinard was running one of the beach cabins next to ours. And I just started hanging out with them. And then all of a sudden I realized, this is where I'm supposed to be.

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INTERVIEWER:

But this culture is sort of counterculture.

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

Yes. And our family was not counterculture. I always said if I had to have gone on to boarding school, I'd be, you know, some alcoholic wife with tons of pearls around my neck. I still wear the pearls, but I'm-- I'm happy. So anyway, I decided to--- In our family, there was no question, you you had to finish your studies, go to college. The first year I came home for summer, Mom sat me down and said, you know, "Contrary to your belief, I am not your personal banker and you have to get a job." And I was horrified, like a job. Anyway, I was complaining to Yvonne one afternoon that I had been cornered by Mom and that I immediately had to come up

with something. And so he said, okay, come on, work for me. And that's how it started.

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

That was fun. You could wear bathing suits to work. This was long before Patagonia. We were just making the best technical rock and ice climbing equipment in the world. When I started working for Yvonne full time, I was a shipper, but there were only six of us. So I really began to understand the nature of what it means to be on the front end of something. We were in the middle of a cultural shift that was tectonic. You didn't know it in the moment, but that's what was taking place. Yvonne began to think about these things that would A, repel moisture and what would maintain its loft and efficacy if it's soaking wet. And that's when he decided he was going to change the way that we dress. And he didn't really care where it was going to go. That's the thing about Yvonne. He wanted the products he wanted. And he would do everything to get them.

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INTERVIEWER:

What was Yvonne's philosophy of his MBA?

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

Yvonne's sense of MBA was to hold... To hold faithful to management by absence. So he was gone for at least five months a year. And I was the boring one who sort of grinded out. And, you know, that's probably why I became the general manager at such a young age. And then eventually he



decided to call it a CEO. And I did that until I left for Chile. He, and often would most often with Doug, they would take off on these trips and surf around the world or the famous Patagonia trip in 1968. Doug found a picture of Fitz Roy, which is today a very famous peak in southern Argentina, and he called Yvonne up on the phone and said, "We have to go and we have to go now."

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

So they bought an old van in San Francisco, packed it up, and they left for six months. They drove from San Francisco to the tip of South America surfing, skiing volcanoes. And that was the emblematic trip, one that really changed their lives utterly. They saw something in the Patagonia region that was, for them, unmistakably clear like this is as wild as it gets. And in those days, it was pretty wild. The worst thing, for me running the business, was that Yvonne would go off with Doug Tompkins, who I saw as just this pirate, this-- this, you know, wild man. And they would go off and spend months in a tent together, and they would talk about business ideas and so on.

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

And Yvonne would come back and say, "Oh no, you know what? I was talking to Doug and I think we should start doing this." You know, whatever it was. But they were so--- some of them were so cockamamie that you think, Christ, this isn't-- this is nuts. But some of them were brilliant. And that's what it took. If you're going to do something extraordinary, it has to be extra ordinary. The evolution of an idea and the



confidence in those ideas comes from that... I'm going to call it original thinking, original thought. And that may be a little more glorious than it should be. But this is this is what-- this was the environment.

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INTERVIEWER:

I would agree with that, but I would argue those thoughts and ideas are only as good as the execution and the machinery behind them, which is where you come into play. You took these ideas. He was gone. You didn't have a business degree. At this point you were calling banks and asking for help.

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

Yeah. So when Yvonne decided that he want to start making clothing and eventually said, "You should be the general manager for this." I thought, Christ, I have no idea what I'm doing. So I thought, okay, I'll go to the best banker in L.A. Who focuses on the fashion business. And I explained. Listen, I've been given the responsibility to create this company around clothing, and I have no idea what I'm doing, and I want to be the best at it. So he just... Anyway, he agreed to see me. So he was extraordinary. I said, I need to understand. I didn't even know what a letter of credit was. I didn't know how to work with Hong Kong. I knew nothing. And that's how I got started. I just thought, go find the best people. Ask them for help.

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KRIS TOMPKINS:





And I've done that my entire life. Look for the exactly like who is on the cutting edge of something, who can teach you a lot. So we literally made it up as we went along. Yvonne was dogmatic. "I want to be the best... Producer, designer, producer of these clothes. The quality is the only thing I care about." He has a very really Zen Buddhist sense of quality. And I wanted to build a company. I didn't care that it existed any place else, but that's what I was after. I wanted to be great. I had no interest in being good. I wanted this to be a great company. We hated debt. We never wanted to be in debt.

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

Because if you're in debt, you have to start listening to what other people think you have to do with your business. I mean, we were rabid about these things. We weren't going to be beholden to anybody. And this is Yvonne. Because he had no allegiance to the proper etiquette with bankers and and so on. He didn't like them. He didn't see anything special about them. And certainly not to have to listen to them and critique his business. So this brought a kind of discipline to what we were doing every day. That I have never loosened my grip on. If we could make something work financially, there were no boundaries. We would just decide, okay, let's go for this. And if we don't get it, let's figure out how and go back and do it again. And I'm doing that now. I'm 73 years old. I have the same personality.

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INTERVIEWER:

But you guys did hit a block, a roadblock. Black Wednesday.

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

Oh boy, did we ever. I think in 1989. I'm 39 at this point. I've been working there since I was young. Yvonne wanted to take off and live in France for a year with the family and go surfing. And I was so tired of being the CEO. So I went out and hired a new CEO, CFO, COO and turned it over to them. No real roadmap. No... it was really hard on the people who had been with the company for so long. And these four strangers come in who have really they just wanted Jack light the company, build it up and debt. They didn't care about debt. They didn't care about any of the things that we were holding, like lumps of coal in our hands all these years.

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

And one day, Yvonne and I and Melinda are in up in the Tetons, and our lawyer calls and said, "We're not going to make payroll next month." And I was on a plane back. I think the same day, and I'm sure Yvonne and Melinda were not far behind me. I can't really remember. And a couple days I was back in my chair and let all those people go. And I called Doug, whom I didn't really know very well at this point, and I said, "Listen, I'm getting real pressure from the bank. I have to I have to bring in outside money. They're going to-- they're really going to put the number on us if I if we don't."

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KRIS TOMPKINS:



And he said, "Never, ever do that." I said, "Well, easy for you to say. I'm really on the skids here." And so he hung up and he told Debbie to open a non revolving \$5 million credit line. For us. And that's what really saved it. And I said I will never touch that money. And I never did. But it was there. And that's the only reason Patagonia continued to be... The way it was and continues to be because we never lost control of the company. But it was very close.

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INTERVIEWER:

Once you do right the ship, you know, this is now 1991. You guys are pretty burned out. Yvonne takes you guys all down to Patagonia and then you meet Doug.

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

So then we run into Doug, and that was-- that was it. We both understood that. This was-- this was... This was it. We ran into each other, and I realized, ah, that's who I'm supposed to marry. That's him. And then I went down to see Doug for ten days and stayed five weeks, and then came back and told Melinda and Yvonne that I was going to retire at the end of the year and move to Chile.

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INTERVIEWER:

Can you give me a brief overview of Doug Tompkins?

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

Yeah. Doug Tompkins was born in Millbrook, New York, north of the city, and hated that... That... Culture and left for the West. Never went to college. He was a climbing guide in the Sierras and decided to start making stuff for his clients and that became the North Face and... Famously opened a store in San Francisco with the Grateful Dead playing the opening night. And, you know, that was a... He really moved in a great cultural territory. And then when he, toward the end of the 80s, he realized that... Was a... It was kind of a du-- the duality of seeing that the natural world was coming unglued.

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

And that he was one of the Crown Princes of consumer society that was yielding the axe on nature. And this was such a crisis for him because he'd been out in wild nature since he was a young boy, and even at his most successful business... Point in his career, he just collapsed under the weight of that... That the dichotomy of that. He really fell into the deep nature of modernity and this price of progress that was killing the planet.

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

And so, he was a desperate man, sort of on the run, trying to find a place where he could even the light and find some peace momentarily to... Until he could really come across the direction that he-- of the things he wanted to do, and then happened very quickly. Maybe to his own surprise, I'm not sure. And I was exactly in the same place. The emphasis of my reasons to



bolt were somewhat different from Doug's, but they overlapped quite a bit.

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INTERVIEWER:

So now you're married, you're down in Chile, and Doug has his first major fight with the salmon fisheries. Can you talk about that?

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

I'd say the first many, many months that we were actually living down there together, it was... It really was romantic. Doug had bought 1 or 2 properties at this point, but what to do with them and so on wasn't so clear. And so we were in love and we were going around up the fjords, over the border, down into the Argentine Patagonia. It was kind of just a nice six months or so. We were already developing the reputation of being the couple who was cutting Chile in half. We were starting to buy larger and larger properties and just holding them. And at the same time, the salmon industry was really spreading like an algae bloom.

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

But then once we realized they were shooting sea lions who would come close to the cages because there's salmon inside the cages, Doug put out a wanted dead or alive sign like the old Western. Dead or alive. Here's a \$2,500 reward for somebody who rats on some of their fellow workers and has proof of who's doing the shooting of these sea lions. And that was it. That started a war that wouldn't end for, well, it's still not over. But the



seriousness of it probably lasted 15 years. So it was the coupling. And this is right out '94, '95.

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

The government was very nervous about it because we had bought up land that went from the border of Argentina out to the Pacific. And we were fighting what would become Chile's second largest industry, the salmon exportation. And that's when things became so serious. And we... God, it went on for years. But on the front page of the newspapers everywhere on television, the military making low flights with jets over our home. Our phones were tapped for years and years. And it was rough.

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INTERVIEWER:

What were they afraid of?

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

The fear was a foreigner, has money, has this idea to buy up large tracts of land and sit on them. That was how it was perceived in those days. And then fighting certain industry, fighting the forestry industry, for one thing, because we were trying to take forests of prime forestry grade wood out of production. Just buy it and park it. And that's what we were doing as fast as we could. So, from the government's point of view, from industry's point of view, you are moving against them in a way that was palpable, at a scale that was dangerous. This is a fight between people who produce from nature and people who are trying to protect nature.



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KRIS TOMPKINS:

So it was... Was not really fully understood on the front end. But it was a clash of somebody who had money and could come in and buy up hundreds and thousands and eventually nearly a million acres of pristine forest and not cut it. So, the fight, whether it was salmon or forest or grasslands, became a fight over consumption. The conversion of nature to production. That was the actual fight.

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INTERVIEWER:

And then you guys bought San Alonso. What is San Alonso?

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

'97, 1997. San Alonso is in the middle of what is today Ibarra park. 1.8 million acre wetlands in northeastern Argentina. That was the first thing we bought in Argentina.

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INTERVIEWER:

Why is that important?

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

It's important because it became one of our principal projects. It became where most of the big time rewilding started to take place. Jaguars, tapirs,



giant ant eaters, giant otters, ocelots. That's where all of that has taken place.

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INTERVIEWER:

What is rewilding?

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

In the first 15 years of working down there, we were just trying to get nature outside of production and save it. And suddenly we realize we're not in the scenery business. That is not what we should be focused on. We're in the business of creating fully functioning ecosystems. And how do you do that? You have to bring back all the principal species that have long gone missing. And once you commit yourself to that, that's it. There's no going back. And it changes the nature of the work. It changes the kind of biologists you have it. It changes everything.

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INTERVIEWER:

In addition to preserving the land, rewilding, bringing back the animals, focusing on local communities is extremely important to the work you're doing.

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

Central. When we have looked and how I look at conservation still today, I'm not-- I'm not looking at 50 years ahead. You got to look a hundred





years ahead because when you're designing these things now in the 90s or the 2000s, you're not designing them for now. You want them to be fully functioning long after you're gone. Well, how do you do that? And I honestly believe the only way to do that is to make the communities around them the last line of defense of these places. Because they're the ones who are going to be there. They're the ones who, with a national park or without it, they can live in this almost 2 million acres of wetlands. They're the ones who were poaching for 100, 200 years.

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

They're the ones who actually know how to get around in these territories. They're the ones who can make life, a quality life, in those inside those places left to their own devices, which they're mostly not. I think it was six weeks after Doug died. I'm... I'm buried him down in Patagonia and I'm back up in Uruguay, in northeastern Argentina, sitting in the living room of our house there with the head of Argentina and the CFO for Argentina. And I said, "You have to be independent. You... I have to let you go. There's only one of us left now."

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

So this is how it's going to work. I'll give you five years of money. And I will teach you everything I know. And I will introduce you to every person I know and every connection and every trick. Every... Every stitch. I'll give it all to you. But by five years, we start now, but in five years, you are financially independent in every possible way. So it was really painful. Maybe one of the most painful points in my life because I'd lost Doug, and



now I'm shoving these guys out the-- out the door for their own good, or for the good of making sure we keep going. But it was tough.

00:31:29:00

INTERVIEWER:

I don't want to continue on pain, but Doug died. And you didn't get to say goodbye.

KRIS TOMPKINS:

No.

INTERVIEWER:

Tell me about the moment you found out. And how did you deal with Doug's death?

00:31:47:00

KRIS TOMPKINS:

I was at Patagonian National Park, which wasn't a national park at that point, working and--- Just before they left on the trip, Doug hated, as did Yvonne, SAT phones. I mean, to take a SAT phone on an adventure was-- was unacceptable to them. So just before they left, I slipped a SAT phone to one of the guys on the trip. And so four days later or so, I'm coming back in off the field or doing something. And somebody said, "Kris, there are these phone calls coming in and they're breaking up. Come into the office and see what you think, see if you recognize that voice." And it was Rick. And Doug and just the way they said that it was serious.

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

Because those guys never used that term. I mean, they've been through everything. So I understood that something had really gone wrong. I went outside. We always tied down our planes out on the grass in the front. And I crawled under Doug's smaller plane. I was lying face down in the grass underneath the plane. And they tried to pull me out from underneath that plane. I would not... I mean, I was just clawing at the grass, screaming at people to leave me alone because I knew that once I was pulled out of that plane, then... I knew--- I had a pretty good idea of how it was going to unfold.

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

Anyway, I was thrown in a truck and we started driving as fast as possible. By then, Doug had been moved into a helicopter and it was being flown to the hospital. He died 15 minutes or so before I got there. And so I just crawled up on the bed with him and... And I just thought, well, I'll just drift away with him. I just didn't... I didn't want to be in a world where that was absent of him. Everything that was interesting to me crashed and vanished. I put people through hell. I didn't like the caskets.

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

And so, God, I think we went through four caskets, and finally our guys--- Building caskets out of wood that Doug would have loved out of the forest. It was crazy working all night trying to find... A box that Doug and I would think would be beautiful. You know, it's so shocking that you find somebody that you... That was just the story. There was no discussion.



That's it. So when that vanishes without a word, you have to learn to speak a new language. And that's what I did. In some ways, it's it's one of the great things, certainly the most powerful, but also good things that happen to you.

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

You-- you can't love your life and just select out those parts of your life that you especially like because they're the happy ones, or they weren't a source of fear, or things like that. If you love your life, you have to eventually learn to love the things that brought you more pain than you thought physically possible. And... Actually, the last few years, I've become sort of joyous over that experience. The intensity, you know, how they build samurai swords. That strength of steel comes from the highest possible heat.

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KRIS TOMPKINS:

And that's how I see death. That if you don't have those experiences in your life in some form. That the despair and unspeakable pain become something else that you would never get to experience otherwise. Then you really are all in. And that allows you to open up parts of yourself and how you see the world, how you see beyond this world. How do you... In in ways that you would never have access to otherwise. So, loss is equal to devotion and love. I mean, that's so trite. But I tell you, it's it's it's chemistry. So the chemistry doesn't, you know, entropy. It never disappears. It converts itself into something else. And that's more



**Life Stories**  
Individual Lives. Collective Impact.

powerful, perhaps, than the version of that story when you're both sitting in front of one another.

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