

A New Angle
MTPR Episode 11
Brendan Leonard

Justin Angle This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business. Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. Today, I speak with Brendan Leonard—the man behind Semi-Rad.

Brendan Leonard There are tons of different ways you can actually visualize data, but very few of them are understood by adults who are not taking college classes in that subject.

Justin Angle I started following Brendan Semi-Rad feed on Instagram several years ago. It's got a playful sensibility and an uncanny knack for making you consider the ordinary or obvious from a different perspective. It's really one of my favorite things. I connected with Brendan through some of our mutual friends after learning about his recent move back to Missoula. We're happy to have him in our community and I'm happy for you to learn more about Brendan and his work right now. Brendan, thanks for coming on the podcast.

Brendan Leonard Yeah, thanks for having me.

Justin Angle Otherwise known as Semi-Rad. That was my entry point to your work a couple of years ago. And it's been super fun learning that you are now a member of the Missoula community or a yet again member of the Missoula community. This is not your first time around here. Yeah, let's start there. What was your first entry point to Montana? I know it's played a significant role in your life.

Brendan Leonard Boy, I had grown up in Iowa and gone to college there and barely graduated in 2001. And then had a series of, I was, basically my introduction to Montana, the summer before I came here I went to rehab for substance abuse for five weeks. Spent a week in jail and then moved to Missoula to go to grad school to get a masters degree in journalism.

Justin Angle And so were your problems with alcohol sort of like through through college thing or like how did that kind of become get to the point where you had to kind of get some help?

Brendan Leonard Well, I think when I think in addiction circles, they often describe it as first you have fun and then you have fun with problems and then you just have problems. And I went through the whole cycle pretty quickly. So I started drinking when I was 15 in my small town in rural Iowa and just had a lot of fun really quickly. And by the time I was 20, like 21, things started going sort of wrong for me. And I was, you know, I was the only one having problems when we went out at night. And now, yeah, just it was, I feel, like, lucky to survive that part and lucky to have not really caused a ton of incredible damage to other people. Not that there wasn't some of that, but yeah. Kind of just finally got arrested enough times that the state said you go to rehab or you go to jail for six months.

Justin Angle And so the choice had been kind of taken out of your hands in some ways.

Brendan Leonard Yeah. Which felt unfair at the time. And I felt like, gosh, I'm too young for this, blah, blah, blah. All these things that I reasons I can think of that I shouldn't have to do it. And in retrospect, its one of the best things that ever happened to me. So yeah. Yeah, it was, it was tough. It's been it was really tough in the early years, but it was definitely better than six months in jail.

Justin Angle But yeah, getting sober, getting cleaned up and then kind of getting some direction moving out here to Montana was the next step.

Brendan Leonard Yeah. And then so I had I got a marketing degree in undergrad, but the final year of it was kind of not sure I wanted to do any of the jobs that I was seeing that I might be able to get when I graduated and saw an ad in the student newspaper and started writing a column for the student newspaper. Humor. I'm really glad that stuff's not on the Internet because it was it's really dumb, awful stuff. But once a weekly column, I write whatever I wanted and by halfway through the year, people would sort of, every once in a while, stop me on campus or at the bar and say, hey, I read your thing. It was super funny or they liked it. In some ways, it was the beginning of getting feedback for a newspaper column. And I thought, oh, columnist, that's like a job, you know? And I didn't know that that wasn't a full time job that, you know, one newspaper was paying someone to write one column a week and giving you 60 grand a year for that. But it kind of got me interested in journalism. And Montana was one of the grad programs I found that took people who didn't have an undergrad in journalism. So and I don't remember at the time, you know, this is like 2001/2002. I don't remember thinking much about that. It was in Montana or any of the other reasons people would move to Montana like mountains and beautiful scenery and the culture and everything. I just remember thinking, oh, this this'll work. And I got into it. I think I applied to four places and got into two of them and chose Montana was like, OK, let's try it.

Justin Angle Yeah. And then he got here and seems like the mountains grabbed it pretty quickly.

Brendan Leonard Yeah, I so I was like, March or was a little over five months into sobriety, so smoking a pack of cigarettes every day is like one of these things that you think, well, that is helping you hang on by that thread. So but I had met a couple of people who took me to sort of day hikes, you know, down in the Bitterroot or Mount Sentinel and one backpacking trip up to Glacier. I never backpacked before. Spent one night, four of us in a three person tent and woke up. I accept the top of, I think, swift current look out and the view up there, I saw a photo of myself. This was 20 October 2002, I think. And it just just blew my mind, you know? And I

think it was just something clicked where it was like I had spent the last five months not knowing who I was or what I should do next. Because you build this whole identity around sort of partying and or whatever that is. And I realized like, this is something, you know, going out into the mountains is something people do every weekend. Maybe I can do more of this. And it just sort of started to snowball from there.

Justin Angle And I would think, too, like that first glacier trip or, you know, these first few trips into the mountains, particularly when you're smoking a pack of cigarettes a day or whatever, can't like. Feel all that good physically, although at that point you probably don't know what feeling good physically is. And then there's probably the self reinforcing thing where you're starting to make better life choices. You feel better on these outings as you could do more stuff. You can go for longer. Yeah, I could see how that could be very positively reinforcing over time. Pretty quickly.

Brendan Leonard Yeah, I think of it as like, you know, when you start out, you're like literally I think that trip I definitely wore jeans and like probably a I think I could cotton long sleeved t shirt on. So you wear an all cotton in the mountains and I don't know if I even had hiking boots. But you don't if you don't know there's better gear, you're not that uncomfortable. You just like. But then later you think, you know, you start to get things that are comfortable and maybe make things easier. And you realize how hard it was when you had when you were wearing jeans and had a horrible backpack and a big heavy sleeping bag. So I think the same way physically can be a slippery slope here right now I'm eating vegetables and all that crazy stuff.

Justin Angle So making good life choices, all those things and starting to and starting to get some formal training in journalism and starting to do your own writing. And so, yeah, how does that kind of career in creative essentially start to kind of come to life?

Brendan Leonard Yeah, I mean when at the time I was there and I would assume it still is. And, you know, the journalism school is like I think the ideal that you go in there with is like if you

worked for if you graduated and worked for The Washington Post, that's like that's a good outcome. Like that's the ideal outcome. And I think when I was there, I was learning all these things and learning how to do because I do such a great job of teaching, putting you in a position where you could do that. So you get this I get this incredible foundation of basics of editing. I think in my mind when I started here, I thought I'd love to work for or write for like Rolling Stone. I took a magazine writing class my second year, second semester, my second year. So right before I graduated. And the requirement for grad students is that you had to get published in order to pass the class. OK, so I was like, oh, my God, how am I going to get published in Rolling Stone magazine? I'm like this lowly, you know, my publishing credits are like the Montana Kaimin and, you know, almost nothing else. And a classmate said, you should try to write for Idaho magazine. And they pay like forty dollars per article and they take pretty much anything. And I said, oh, OK, great, that sounds like a win. Yeah. So I had done a little road trip the previous summer where a friend and I visited Hemingway's grave in Ketchum, went to Craters of the Moon National Monument and climbed Borah Peak, the highest mountain in Idaho, which was way beyond my fitness and skill level. But we did it and I pitched them the story and they said, sure, well, that sounds great. We'll take it. You know, I got published and I got my forty dollars and that just a light bulb went on. And it was like, wow, I could make a sort of a living writing about adventures or these things that I do outdoors on the weekends. And I didn't my brain didn't do the math and go OK. Forty dollars per article that. How many articles is that to make a living. It's quite a lot. So I think my first year freelance income was forty dollars. The next year was like one hundred and fifty and the next year was like eighteen hundred bucks or something like that. So I left Montanans 2004 and I work at a couple different, really small like suburban newspapers that didn't, I don't know if anyone was actually reading them over the next five years. And on the side I would go to work every day and think this is fine, I'm using my degree, but this is not what I want to do. I want to write for like Outside Magazine and Backpacker and Climbing. So I would pitch right pitch letters and try to come up with article ideas. And from 2004 to like 2010-ish, I really did not get into any of these major magazines, but I finally got something in like Climbing magazine, I think 2011. So took me that many years to to figure out a way in.

Justin Angle Yeah. A lot of grinding. What made you stick with it?

Brendan Leonard I mean you hear early on about, you know, stories like very famous books that have been rejected over one hundred times, like Zen in the art of motorcycle maintenance, which is sold like millions of copies, was rejected over one hundred times. And it becomes a sort of badge of honor, American dream. Like, Olympic hopeful story that we we are such big fans of, you know, against all odds. So I think there's probably some romanticism in there. But sure. Also you just want to do it. And along the way, I was having like I was eventually getting smaller successes. You know, I started to get articles published in the Mountain Gazette, if you remember that magazine. So it wasn't wasn't backpacker, but it was a cool magazine that I respected and it was very legitimate for me to have that in there. But yeah, I don't know. I've always been a work harder, not smarter person. Eventually something eventually things started to happen, but it was very slow for me. And I think that's maybe good because then when you're making mistakes early on, they're in front of a small audience and no one knows who you are. As opposed to like your first stories being published in The New York Times, which probably doesn't happen to very many people, but.

Justin Angle Well, yeah, I mean, along those lines, could you feel yourself getting better as you were as you were moving through this process? I mean, getting some external validation, getting into better outlets closer to the space you want to be in?

Brendan Leonard Yeah.

Justin Angle But can you feel yourself getting better as a creator, as a writer?

Brendan Leonard I mean, I don't know. I think if you go to work and you think you're congratulating yourself, it's probably a bad, bad way to start. Yeah. No matter what point in your career. But, you know, in 2011, I collected a healthy amount of rejection letters and I was

getting really good at pitching things to magazines that they didn't want to run. So I just started my own blog in February 2011. I was like, I'll just put stories that I think are funny or that I can make something out of on here and I'll do that. I'm going to do one of these every week for, I don't know, a year or until something happens. And it was it was good timing. And within a few weeks, maybe like two or three months, I started seeing the traffic go up a little bit, like not not a huge amount. Like it wasn't like a mega viral post, but it was like there are people reading it. People are commenting. People were sort of sharing things on Facebook or Twitter or whatever it was. Yeah. It was validation that you're kind of figuring out what people were responding to.

Justin Angle Right, yeah. You have some sort of you know, however, maybe it's intuitive, maybe it's analytical, but you have some data starting to come in where you can sort of say, oh, yeah, these sorts of things people like, they engage with.

Brendan Leonard Basically, yeah. And then a few months into the blog ahead, Steve Casimiro, who has started and has run an adventure journal for over a decade now, he reached out through a friend and said, hey, I like some of your stuff that you're putting on your blog. What do you think about me? Also publishing it on my Web site, Adventure Journal, and I'll link back to your blog. So that was a huge validation because he was founding editor of Bike magazine, editor of Powder, National Geographic Adventure. So that made me think, OK, I am kind of doing something right. And in turn, having him publish my stuff led a lot of people to my work. So it sort of was this big hand up from somebody who was very established and that was extremely huge for me.

Justin Angle And so speaking of your blog, Semi-Rad, talk about when you first started doing those visuals, I'd love to kind of understand how those ideas come to life.

Brendan Leonard Yeah. I mean, I think the first thing I did was probably in like 2014, I did a flow chart that sort of went really viral for me. Not a huge not breaking the Internet, but like

really went around and I was like it was just something I drew on it literally a sheet of paper in a coffee shop and then took a photo of and posted it. And it wasn't a lot of work for people to read it. And it was a joke or sort of a way a story about humans and people like them and like to share them. And it was easier than for a lot of people than getting into like a twelve hundred word blog entry or whatever. So I started doing those and then I started drawing stuff on Instagram, you know, on like little sheets of graph paper or whatever. I'm just sort of similar charts that were squares. And in 2016, I decided to buy an iPad to make it sort of more professional.

Justin Angle And you mentioned sort of, yes, it's easier for somebody to get into and quickly kind of consume and get versus 200 word blog posts, but at the same time like to get it right. I mean, there's a ton happening in your posts that you tell us about the process of actually making it happen. I'm sure some of them happen like super quick and then others are maybe a grind.

Brendan Leonard Yeah. And some of them don't don't do very well. And like a very small handful of them do really well and go around the Internet or whatever. I try to create a little bit of space in my life where I'm not looking at the Internet or my phone or whatever. And oftentimes that's on long runs, long trail runs or runs around the city or just walking the dog. And I'll think of something and just have a note about it, like a it would be maybe running is so simple jokes about why it's actually not simple. And then later I'll come back and I guess I approach it mostly as a writer because everything I do has words in it because I can't draw very well. So it's more of like a sort of visual story, I guess. So there's a lot of writing in it. And then I'll sit down and try to draw that thing and make sure it looks as good or as clear as I can do it and make it as simple as possible for people to understand, because there are tons of different ways you can actually visualize data. But very few of them are understood by adults who are not taking college classes in that subject. So you can't really make things too complicated to have learned. And then basically I show it to my wife, who's also a writer editor,

and she will say, yeah, I think that I think that'll work or yeah, that's really funny. And then I'll say, OK, thank you and then put it online. So it's not an extremely scientific process.

Justin Angle We'll be back to our conversation with Brendan Leonard after this short break.

Justin Angle Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with writer Brendan Leonard about the years of work it took him to become an overnight success. I was reading one of your blog posts, it mentioned the privilege of of leisure time. And, you know, privilege is a concept that I think is it's not necessarily taken on new meaning, but it's taken on new salience in the last several months, you know, and ideas around leisure, ideas around conservation, ideas around access. You know, I think people are thinking about these things in a way that they maybe hadn't thought of before. Yeah. How have those thoughts, you know, as one who sort of adventures and writes about those activities, how have you kind of been grappling with this new salience right now?

Brendan Leonard If you have any sort of perspective, you have to realize that you are tremendously privileged. Even things you don't think are privileged, you know, which has been an education for me over the past couple of years, too. You know, I can go running it at night. You know, and maybe that's a situation where my wife and other women are not comfortable doing in a city or in a trail or whatever. Not to mention if you're a person of color in certain places in America or the world, you know how differently that affects you. And I also I guess lately I'm thinking about it in the words of my friend Alex, who's the editor of Adventure Cycles magazine. You know, does the world need to hear more from a 40 year old white guy right now? And I'm trying to make art that is the sort of universal to people who are in the outdoors, as opposed to just talking about my experience, trying to lean that way for sure.

Justin Angle It's a challenge. But things like conservation—I had not really thought about it is like this, this white Eurocentric concept, and it certainly is one. And we go play in these public lands and that's sort of a wacky social construction that white people created.

Brendan Leonard Oh, yeah, for sure. And you're now seeing people like acknowledging the lands for ancestral lands of Native American people and first nation people in Canada. And that's that's helpful, I think. But, yeah, it's you're kind of going, oh, Yosemite National Park, like, oh, wow, this isn't really OK. This is not it's not like it was just created one day by white people. I am hopeful because I think I see things happening that are leading us in that direction as opposed to just ignoring it, continuing to ignore it. You know, I think about I read people's history of the United States when I was 20. I think sitting on the porch of a house in college, smoking cigarettes, reading that and I was being appalled by all these horrible things that had happened. But I think it took me, gosh, another like 19 years to start going, OK, what can I do? What can I actually do to put my money where my mouth is instead of just feeling bad?

So working to do those things and do them the right way is definitely important. Because I guess in the adventure industry, quote unquote, or the outdoor industry where I've worked, it is at some point, if you want to be cynical about it, you can say, geez, all I do is help rich people go on vacation. And it shouldn't shouldn't be like that. You know, it's like, yeah, if you do if all you talk about is a resort skiing and ice climbing, there are high barriers to entry in those sports. A friend of ours pointed out that outside is not not necessarily on top of a fourteen thousand foot peak or or rock climbing can be a city park and it can be people having a picnic. And that's true, too. So I think about it in those terms as well, these municipal parks and how great of a thing they are.

Justin Angle And then you think about this sort of continuum of the way people are engaging with the outdoors and, you know, there's there's inspiration and aspiration. You know, I read your post about the Dawn Wall a few years back. And, you know, in many ways I think, yeah, that's this privileged activity of these elite athletes. But at the same time, if it inspires people to get out and expand their own realm of possibilities, whether it's at the city park or in their home gym or whatever, that's important, too. And that has a lot of value.

Brendan Leonard Oh, for sure. I mean, that's the essence of inspiration to it's like, sure, we follow really high achieving athletes, but we don't sit down and go, OK, now I'm going to climb the Dawn Wall. If you do, you're on your own Dawn Wall and Tommy Caldwell's words. You know, I was talking to my dad the other day and he said, I am still working on cleaning out the garage. And I said, Dad, I think you've been working on cleaning out the garage for years. I believe the garage is your Dawn Wall at this point, you know?

Justin Angle Yeah, I feel like I have a Dawn Wall everywhere I look around.

Brendan Leonard Exactly. Yeah.

Justin Angle So let's sort of just pivot to you came back to Missoula. And came back over this past summer and you talk about that decision and then, wow. Moving in the midst of a pandemic and trying to reenter or trying to enter a community under those conditions. It's got to be pretty bizarre experience.

Brendan Leonard Yeah. I mean, for me, coming back here in the last five years and short visits was I have to work to separate. Do I like the town or do I just have extreme nostalgia for that time in my life when I was probably one of the hardest but most most important times of my life. So it's a weird thing. You know, I'm 41, and I often have to go, do I miss that or do I just miss being young. You know, we, we wanted someplace where we could have just a little bit more space because my wife and I were working out of a a hundred and fifty square foot half duplex in Denver. Yeah. And you know, there's, there's the awareness of if you move to Montana, you are those people from Colorado who are moving to Missoula. And you know, you know, like you're going to be that person to somebody, you know, most of the people we talked to are not not bad about that. But occasionally, you know, you're talking to somebody at the DMV or, you know.

Justin Angle Well, and then right now, like with covid, you got all there's all this other sort of territorialism that's happening. Right. You know, I can feel it in myself and I don't like it, but I understand it.

Brendan Leonard Right. And so I'm in a position, you know, like I've my life is built on leaving places that, you know, or whatever going in the new place, the next best place. And one of my favorite things I've ever heard. I don't know who said this, but it was it's this place started going to **** 15 minutes after I got here. Exactly. I think about that a lot.

Justin Angle But it's like, what is it that Groucho Marx quote?

Brendan Leonard That I would never be a member of any club that would have me as a member like that.

Justin Angle Exactly. Yeah. Yeah.

Brendan Leonard But, you know, it's like people who live here know what an amazing place is. And I think being conscious to be here not make it a worse place and eventually make it a better place. But in a way and it is not feeling like an outsider trying to change things like why don't you have more yoga studios or whatever? I'm like learning to be a part of the community in a positive way and, you know, helping move it forward. But also not like not sort of bringing what your idea of a city should be to it, to a city that doesn't want it. You know, or like has much better things to offer that you can't see because you have blinders on.

Justin Angle So speaking of that, in our last few minutes, I want to sort of get a sense for what's next for you. You know, you write a lot about the importance of the grind and the importance of sort of just doing the work of figuring out how to get inspired. And, you know, how do you stay inspired and what's inspiring you like what's kind of the next thing and how is that connected to what you've been doing?

Brendan Leonard Yeah, I mean, most of times the inspiration is not wanting to get a real job.

Justin Angle So that's good inspiration. I've been just trying to avoid that for as long as I can remember.

Brendan Leonard Well, congratulations. You know, I mean, it's now it's I think, you know, you start to think about where your best stuff comes from and it's not like, hey, this will sell or this will get clicks. You know, it's more like I always try to try to grasp what's universal about our experience. So one of the biggest posts I've had this year was about a very long illustrated post about anxiety. And I feel like that's just sort of the feeling of our times. And I don't know if it's twenty, twenty or generally in the last five years, but I feel like a lot of people are dealing with that stuff and a lot of people don't see people talking about those things. And it's when you do talk about it, it gives them comfort to feel like they're not alone. If you can make one person feel less alone with your work, I think that's a pretty good way to make a living, a pretty good way to spend your time. If you can make one hundred people feel less alone, that's that's even better.

Justin Angle Brennan, that's an inspiration. Thank you for that work. For the attitude you bring to it. Thanks for being a part of Missoula. I'm excited to meet you in person some day. It's been fun learning more about your work and. Yeah, thanks for coming on the podcast and sharing your story.

Brendan Leonard Yeah. Thanks for having me, Justin.

Justin Angle Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate and we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from University of Montana alums Michelle and Loren Hansen. A New Angle is presented by first security bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business with additional support from Consolidated Electrical

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Thanks a lot. See you next time.