



## Episode 594: Susan Cain on Bittersweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole

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Katie: Hello, and welcome to "The Wellness Mama Podcast." I'm Katie, from [wellnessmama.com](https://wellnessmama.com), and I am so excited today to talk with an author whose work I have really, really, really enjoyed. And that is Susan Cain, who you may have heard of. She's the best-selling author of a book called "Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking," and more recently, "Bittersweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole." And we talk about that today.

She has been on the best seller list for over eight years in multiple countries. Her TED Talks have been viewed over 40 million times, and she's been named one of the top influencers in the world. She also partners with Malcolm Gladwell, Adam Grant, and Dan Pink to curate the Next Big Idea book club, which I will link to in the show notes as well. But in this episode, we specifically talk about the concept of bittersweet, and how it can make us whole, and why our world these days tends to shy away from the bittersweet and melancholy of life.

We talk about what led her to write her first book, "Quiet," and why "Bittersweet" was an important follow-up. We talk about how joy and sorrow exist together to create fullness in life, why the impermanence of life paradoxically leads to joy. We talk about the connection to melancholy and love, and why certain sad music can touch us so deeply. She talks about studies that show the relationship between a melancholic state of mind and creativity, and about the wounded healer archetype, and why a very high percentage of people we consider the greats in art and music suffered a huge loss, often of a parent, at an early age.

She gives practical strategies for learning to embrace the bittersweet, to actually create more happiness in life. And then we talk about ways we can help our kids learn, from an early age, how to accept bittersweet feelings as part of the actual, what she calls the main road of life, not a deviation from what we think the path of life should be. We also touch a little bit on how we can inherit grief and trauma from past generations, and how we can transform this into beauty and creativity. So, like I said, I have followed Susan's work for a very, very long time, and I was so, so happy to get to actually have a conversation with her today. It was a really fun conversation for me, and I think you will enjoy it as well. So, let's join Susan. Susan, welcome. And thank you so much for being here.

Susan: Thank you so much for having me, Katie.

Katie: I'm very excited we get to record this conversation today, and so honored to actually get to chat with you. Your book "Quiet" really made a big impact on me personally, and I'm so excited now that you have another book, called "Bittersweet." We're gonna talk a lot about that today. But to start off, I'd love to just kind of, if you don't mind, maybe recap what was the impetus for writing "Quiet," and then maybe what led to "Bittersweet" as a follow-up.

Susan: Yeah. So, "Quiet" was the result of, I guess, myself being an introvert in a very extroverted culture, and just being kinda aware of the ways in which there's such a bias in favor of needing to act and present extroverted at all times. And that that leads to a gigantic waste of talent, and energy, and happiness on the part of the 50% of the population that identifies as introverted, and that that's not really serving anyone's interest. You know, it's not good for the introverts, but it's not good for anybody. And that all of us are either introverted ourselves, or we're married or partnered with introverts, or working alongside them, or raising them, or whatever it is. So, these dynamics affect us all.

Katie: Absolutely. And you, I think, explained it so well in that book. It was really eye-opening for me, even as an introvert. I feel like it helped me understand parts of myself that, to your point, I had kind of tried to either shut down or mold into what seemed to be the more appropriate way of existing in business or in relationships, and it was really helpful to kind of have that context.

And I know it seems like "Quiet" has really actually helped shift the culture around that, and that this is much more of a conversation now, and people are so much more aware of it. And I'm sure you've gotten so many follow-ups from that book, and gotten to talk to people who have felt that shift as well, but it's been really cool from the outside to see the societal shifts that seem to have rippled from that.

Susan: That has been an absolutely amazing thing. And, like, I, you know, I go in now and I work with so many different schools and companies, and the fact that these schools and companies even have this topic on their agenda in the first place, to me, feels like such a huge win.

So, like, you know, there's still a lot of work to be done, but the fact that there's this much awareness around it is incredible. And, yeah, you know, I often say I'm, like, the world's greatest confessor of introverts. By which I mean, like, I walk around the world and all these people who would seem to you like super extroverts, like,

they'll come up to me and say, "Oh, that's actually not really who I am at all, you know. That's just, like, a mask that I'm wearing." So, that's...it's intensely gratifying to see how much our culture has moved along. And then, I think we still have work to do, but that's okay.

Katie: And to your point, it's been helpful for me as a parent, in raising kids as well. With six of them, I feel like half of them are introverts, which lines up with the statistics that we know, and I think you have such a gift for mixing research and storytelling in such an easy-to-read but really impactful way, and so I'm real excited now for you to enter this concept of bittersweet. And I think everyone, of course, has heard that word, but can you maybe give us a broad context of what that means when you're writing about it, and maybe just an overview before we jump into specifics?

Susan: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, so, maybe I'll just start by asking a few questions that... I put together this quiz that, as you know, is in the book, that measures how bittersweet a state of mind you are in at the moment that you take the quiz. And it asks questions like "Do you draw comfort or inspiration from a rainy day? Do you react intensely to music, art, or nature? Have others called you an old soul?"

And what bittersweetness really is, which I think these questions get at, is it's a kind of intense awareness of the ways in which joy and sorrow in this world are forever paired. And that everything we love, everyone we love best, everything we love best, that it's all impermanent. Which is sorrowful, but that what comes with that is a kind of intense joy at how beautiful everything is.

And what we found is that the more people enter this state of bittersweetness and this awareness, that it become...it's a kind of hidden source of creativity, and human connection, and spirituality, and transcendence. So, we're living in a culture that's telling us, you know, "Put that smile on your face. Be positive all the time." But that mentality is actually robbing us from some of the deepest joys in life, which come from this awareness of this pairing of joy and sorrow. So, it's not to say, like, you know, "be depressed. Never have joy." It's not that at all. It's just to say, "take it all in. Be open to all of it, because that's where the real beauty comes."

Katie: I love that, and especially when you talk about the mixture of joy and sorrow, and the nature of impermanence. And I think back to a show I watched a while back, called "The Good Place." And without hopefully giving any spoilers, it just, people who are "in the good place," which is their sort of portrayal of heaven, eventually kind of get bored, or they lose their excitement, even though they're supposed to be in paradise, because there is no impermanence, and everything is wonderful all the time, and it kind of creates this friction that they have to figure out.

And I also think back to, I've read a lot of the stoics, and they have the phrase, you know, "memento mori," remember your death, and how they believe that was actually part of happiness was remembering the impermanence of life. And that, paradoxically, the more that we remember how impermanent life is, the happier we are in the present moment, which makes sense.

What really sparked this idea for you initially? Was there, like, a personal reason that you felt drawn to this concept, or was it something you noticed, like with "Quiet," that was kind of a glaring thing in society that we weren't having the conversation around, or what led to this book?

Susan: Well, I mean, there was a bunch of different things, but there was an experience that I kept having again and again and again, that would happen when I would listen to supposedly sad music. You know, and there's a story I tell in the book about how, back when I was in law school, I was in my early 20s, I was hanging out in my dorm, and some friends were coming by my dorm room to pick me up for class. And they arrived

there and found me, you know, listening to, like, extremely bittersweet music, sort of like pumped out on my stereo speakers, and they thought it was hilarious. And they were like, "Why are you listening to this funeral music?" And at the time it just seemed like a funny joke and a funny moment, and we went to class and that was the end of the story.

But I could not stop thinking about this, literally, for, like, the next 25 years. I was thinking about that moment, and, like, well, first of all, what is it in our culture that makes it seem so funny to listen to yearning music, but also what is it about the music itself that is supposedly sad, but that actually elicits these feelings of, like, joy, and uplift, and a sense of a really deep connection with the musician, and with all the other people who are listening to the music? It's really just love. Like, you just feel this tidal wave of love. And why would the tidal wave of love be unleashed by something, by a supposedly sad cue? That's what I really wanted to understand. It seemed so counter to everything that we're taught, and yet those moments with that kind of music have been reliably, like, some of the most profound moments of my life.

And even literally just last week, I had a medical scare, and it turned out to be nothing, but while I was in the moments where I didn't know if it would be nothing or not, I was playing some Chopin music, you know, which is very bittersweet. And I listened to the music and I felt like, you know what? No matter what happens, whether the medical scare is real or not, it's all okay. There's, like, something about that kind of music that tells you that, on some fundamental level, everything is okay. And that's pretty profound and deep, and yet we don't get to talk about it. So, I wanted to open up an avenue for talking about these things.

Katie: And it definitely seems to be a common thread among some of, like, the art, and, to your point, music, and even in nature, that, like, intensity of that melancholy, or, you know, we see that woven through so much of what we would consider the greats in music and in art. But yet, you're right. I think there, especially in today's world, I don't know if maybe social media is driving this, but there is that tendency to, like, focus only on the super positive aspects of life. And I know there's been a lot of conversation around that and how that can be damaging, especially for teenagers, for instance, when they're only seeing the sort of highlight reels of people's lives. But maybe walk us through what you found in the research, and also, I highly urge people to read the book too, because your storytelling is so beautiful. But kind of what are the powers of that bittersweet, of the melancholy to, you know, enrich our life, and why do we seem to shy away from that in today's world?

Susan: Well, I mean, some of the powers of it... Wow, there's so many that it's almost hard to know where to start, but we could start, I guess, with creativity itself. You know, there's been study after study showing the relationship between a melancholic state of mind and creativity, because I think there's something in the human spirit where we take a pain that we can't get rid of, and we make it a kind of creative offering, which is something I encourage people to do in the book.

So, like, there was one study that looked at the top, like, I think it was 573 different creative greats, you know, across a broad variety of fields. And an astonishingly high percentage of these people had lost one or both parents before the age of 18. Like, a huge percentage, it was 40%, but anyway, it was very high.

And you think, well, what is that? What explains that? I do believe there's something in the human soul that when things aren't right, when there's a gap between the world as it is and the world as we wish it could be, we fill that gap. When we're our best selves, we fill that gap with something beautiful, or something creative, or something nurturing, or something productive, or whatever it is.

I mean, you look at, like, after 9/11, for example. Suddenly, there were lots of Americans who were signing up to become firefighters. And in the wake of the pandemic, there's suddenly a lot of people signing up for medical school and nursing school. So, why do we do that?

There's an archetype that we use to talk about this, the wounded healer, which you see in all our religions and mythologies. And it's the idea of, like, a figure who has been grievously wounded in some way, but in the exact place they're wounded, they're granted the capacity to heal other people. And this is something that we do. We just do it naturally, when we're our best selves.

And I emphasize that because when we face our difficult moments in life, there's almost a crossroads that we come to, you know, where you can take that pain and turn it on yourself, in the form of depression, or cutting, or addiction, or whatever it is, or turn it on other people, in the form of aggression or neglect or whatever. We can go that path, or we can go this other path, of not welcoming the pain, for sure. No one wants it. No one wants it. But seeing in it a source of something else, and following that source.

Katie: Yeah. And this, I've heard this from, in therapy sometimes, about that idea that what we resist, resist. And that by trying to resist those, what we would label as negative experiences or feelings, we actually in some ways can intensify them, or cause them to stick around in that form longer, because we're putting energy toward them. Whereas I've read books like "Letting Go," by Hawkins, of just, like, the nature of accepting something, not, like you said, not being, choosing it or looking for it, but accepting it, in its form, actually helps us to exist with it and to move past the really extreme parts of it, and turn it into something that's beneficial, which I think is a really, really beautiful reframe.

Susan: Yeah. And I, you know, I think that what we do...we all have a tendency to do this. We assume that when everything is going well, that that's real life. And then, you know, when the illness comes, or the pandemic comes, or whatever the thing is, that's, like, the detour from real life. And that's just, it's plain inaccurate. Like, it's much more accurate to understand it's all real life. All of it is the main road. None of it is the detour.

And if we can see it that way, then we can at least spare ourselves the trouble of what you accurately described as resisting, because, like, so much of the suffering comes from feeling of, like, "Oh, my gosh. It was not supposed to be this way." And there's, like, a fighting against the fact of it having happened, and that causes so much pain in and of itself. So, whereas if we see it all as, "well, this is one more path along, you know, along my travels down this road of life," you interact with what's happening very differently when you do that.

Katie: And I know there's much more in the book than we can cover an hour-long podcast, but I'm curious if you have anything that you would recommend as sort of strategies for cultivating that mindset, because it seems like a thing that, even if we logically understand that this is a better way to sort of experience those things, it might be a hard shift to actually start doing that internally in our inner dialogue. So, do you offer any strategies for sort of cultivating that mindset around the bittersweet of life?

Susan: Yeah. Absolutely. I mean, so, one of them is the one that you actually mentioned earlier. It's the stoic...well, the stoics call it "memento mori," which is to always remember death is at hand. But that's the stoics' name for it, but most of the wisdom traditions practice this in one form or another.

And it's basically, yeah, to, like, really be aware that at any moment, you know, at any day, can come the end for you or the people you love. And I know that that sounds, like, really depressing and gloomy, but it literally has exactly the opposite effect, of causing you to fall in deep love with everyone and everything around you,

because, like, you know, it's a cliché, but nothing makes you realize how precious it is better than realizing that it might go away forever at any moment.

I mean, I'll tell you, like, how... I started practicing this in my own life, at a time when my boys, I have two boys, at a time when they were pretty young. So, we were still doing, like, a nightly bedtime ritual, which we all loved. You know, it was, like, one of the best times of the day. But I was going through this really busy time at work, and it was really hard for me during that bedtime ritual not to, like, sneak glances at my phone to see if a new email had come in or something.

But I started practicing *memento mori*. I would literally...like, I would say to myself, you know, "He may not be here tomorrow. You may not be here tomorrow. This moment may never occur again." And boy, like, the minute you do that, you put down your phone instantly. Like, I didn't even feel tempted to look at my phone once I had reframed things that way. It's very dramatic. So, that's a huge practice that I recommend to people.

And another one is to just tune into beauty itself. Like, to really tune into it. You know, we tend to, like, yeah, we might go to an art museum or we might, like, take a hike and, like, go hiking and say, "that vista's really beautiful," but making it a real daily practice, where you're affirmatively cultivating beauty, and looking for it all around you, is another way of, like, falling in love with life and all of its preciousness.

So, in my case, I actually started following all these art accounts on Twitter. And so now, my feed, instead of being full of the usual Twitter toxicity, my feed is full of art, and I start many of my work days by sharing a favorite piece of art and poetry on my social media channels. And that has brought in all these other people who love to start their day that way too, and it's, like, this incredibly kindred community of people, all oriented around beauty and preciousness, and the fragility of it all. And that's a profound kind of reset for how you go through your days.

Katie: I love it. And for me, this is a practice as well. In fact, I have tattooed it, for people watching, on my wrist. I have "Memento Mori" on my left arm, and "Amor Fati," which means "love what is," on my right arm.

Susan: Oh, my gosh.

Katie: And those are my, like, daily reminders as I, you know, wake up or do anything in my day, I remind myself of those two things. And another practice I love doing with my kids, I love that you brought up your kids, we have a daily gratitude practice, where I try to model for them not just being grateful for the good things. So, sometimes I will call out in gratitude for that day something that was hard, or that was what would be maybe labeled as a not great experience, but showing them to have gratitude for that, because, like you said, those are all parts of our lives.

And I love that you brought up your boys, because that was gonna be my next question, was, for those of us with kids, what are some ways we can also help cultivate this mindset from a young age in our kids? Because I see this in parenting a lot, that tendency of we want to, like, parent away the negative emotions, or we don't want them to be sad, or angry, or experience these things, and it seems like maybe a more balanced approach would be to teach them how to exist with those feelings and emotions from a young age. So, any advice to parents specifically of how do we help give our kids this foundation when they're young?

Susan: Yeah. Absolutely. So, first of all, you know, for all you parents out there, it's the most natural thing in the world to not want your kids to experience an ounce of sorrow. And when they do, we tend to feel it vicariously times 100. So, you know, that's all very natural.

And having said that, yes, the drill is to help your kids understand that moments of pain, sorrow, discomfort, impermanence, that they're all part of the main road of life. And I tell a story in the book of a time when my boys were little, and we took this vacation, where we rented a country house next to a field. And the field was inhabited by two adorable donkeys named Lucky and Norman. And the boys fell in love with these donkeys, and they spent the whole week feeding them carrots and apples.

And then the week came to an end, and, like, a day or two before we left, the boys realized, you know, this was it with the donkeys, and they were, like, crying themselves to sleep at the prospect of having to say goodbye. And I noticed that when we said the usual things that parents say at such a time, like, you know, "someone else will come along and take care of the donkeys," or "maybe we'll be back and you'll get to see them again," none of that made any difference. None of that helped.

The thing that helped was when we normalized for them what they were feeling. You know, when we said, "it is natural to feel this way when you say goodbye. You felt it before, and you're gonna feel it again, and everybody feels this way, and it's part of life. It's part of life. You won't feel this sad forever. You're gonna feel better. In a few days, you'll think of the donkeys, and you'll smile, but this moment, this is part of life."

And that was when they stopped crying, because it's like, that's normalizing for them what they're experiencing, and it's telling them that this sense that we all come into the world with, of, like, this fundamental impermanence, because of course, when we're crying about saying goodbye to a donkey, we're also crying about mortality itself, whether we know it or not. Children sense this from a very young age, and saying to them, "yes, this mortality, it is sad, and it is part of life," then they're like, "Okay. You know, I get it. This is normal. This is okay. I'm not alone. This thing I'm perceiving on the horizon is real." And then you actually feel better, not worse.

Katie: That's such a great piece of advice, and it reminds me of when my now 12-year-old...we've had a lot of pets in our life, and I'm a big fan of having pets for many reasons, from the microbiome aspects, to things like this, because pets' lives are often shorter. And I came home from a podcast day, and he had a pet hedgehog. And he was holding her on his chest, desperately hoping that she was just hibernating, but she wasn't.

And like you said, feeling his emotions in that moment, I feel like it is even more intense as a parent. And we would gladly take that from them, so they didn't have to experience it, but also it was beautiful to get to sit with him in that moment and tell him, like, "You know, I know this really, really hurts right now, and I'm so sorry that you're feeling so much pain right now, but I'm here, and I'm gonna hug you, and it won't, you know, it won't always feel this hard." I remember saying that to him. "It won't always feel this hard."

But it seems like the, often, it's the tendency, like you said, to wanna take away that pain, or especially when, like, a relative dies, to only focus on the positive parts. We're like, "remember all the good things that happened." And it seems, like, important for all of us, and especially for kids, to hold space for those big emotions that are of grief, and loss, and sadness. Because like you said, that's a great point, they will experience it again. As much as we may wish we could step in that fire for them, they will experience it again.

Susan: Yeah. I mean, you're reminding me. So, there's this really beautiful poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, and it's...the poem is in the voice of a man who's speaking to a little girl. And the little girl is crying because the leaves...because it's autumn, and the leaves in her favorite meadow, which is called "Goldengrove," that the leaves are coming down.

And he says to her, "Margaret, are you grieving over Goldengrove unleaving?" Are you grieving because the leaves are falling? And then he says, "It's the blight that man was born for. It is Margaret you mourn for." And

he's telling her that, like, these moments that we have, of, like, these, this poignant, acute sorrow because the leaves are coming down, what we're really sorrowful about is mortality itself. You know, we instinctively know it. But there's something just, like, in the incredible, like, warmth and generosity of that poem, of the older person acknowledging to the younger person what the human condition is. It's like a great big hug.

The hug of, like, telling the truth, and being together in it, as opposed to denial, and pretending none of it is actually happening, and yay, smile, smile, everything is great. Like, it's not all great, but we love each other because of that, not in spite of it.

Katie: And I think that impermanence, remembering the impermanence, is also a huge key. Recently, my oldest just turned 16, and I realized that, like, I felt that much more than I expected to, especially after reading a blog post someone wrote a while back about how we spend 97% of the time we will ever spend with our parents while we're living with them in their homes, and realizing...

Susan: Wow. Is that the real statistic? Ninety-seven?

Katie: Yeah. That's the average. And so, just realizing how few moments I have left with him in his entire life, not just in these couple years, has really helped me wanna just be completely present, and realizing, like, it's gonna go so fast. And even though the youngest is six, soon I'm gonna blink and she's gonna be 16, and it all goes by so quickly. But I think that that's such a beautiful tip to remember. And I love the stories you tell related to this in that book. I hadn't read that poem, but that's beautiful as well. I'll link to that in the show notes also.

Susan: Yeah. Yeah. And there's also something about, I don't know, like, the more you tune into this way of seeing things, I have found, the easier the losses, and the empty nests and all of that becomes, because you start really seeing life as just a series of transitions, of, like, one step to the next, to the next, to the next.

So, like, even as I was listening to you, my first reaction was, my kids are soon gonna be 13 and 15, so, you know, they're, we have them going off to college in just a few years. So, my first reaction listening to you was like, "Oh, my gosh. Like, that's terrible. You know, we're just about to hit that 3% mark of time spent with them in their lives." But the next thing I said to myself as I was listening to you was, like, okay. You know, we're just moving to the next way station, like, to the next transitional time.

And each of these times, like, has its own joys, and its own delights, and, you know, including the time, I think, that we launch our children into the world and they go forth and do what they do, and we move on to our next great act of whatever it's gonna be. So, there's something about, like, accepting these sorrows that actually makes it easier to embrace each of these new life transitions in a very affirming way, I have found.

Katie: Yeah. And to just enjoy those moments while they exist, rather than having it, our time in those moments be taken up with the sadness of them going away, or the busyness of work or all of those things.

Susan: Exactly. Yeah. I actually had, like, a mini practice moment of this. This past summer, our kids went away to sleepaway camp for the first time, and I found that, like, the first day that they were gone, I was, like, sort of walking around the house like, oh my gosh, you know, feeling very blue.

And then, after a couple days, it was like, "Oh, okay. You know, now we're transitioning to a whole different mode." My husband and I spent all this time together in ways that we hadn't for so many years, and it was really great in a completely different way. So, it's something about, I think that transitional moments feel so difficult, but then once you make the transition, you can embrace that new stage.

Katie: Yeah. That's a great point. And you mentioned the, kind of, the melancholy and bittersweet being very present in a lot of music. I'm curious if you have any particular favorites yourself or playlists that you think are great for kind of just being present with the melancholy?

Susan: Oh, gosh. I do. I mean, I have a whole bittersweet playlist that I put together. So, anyone who's curious can...if you put in my name, Susan Cain, and "bittersweet playlist," it'll come right up on Spotify and Apple Music. So, I have a whole collection of genres and songs and so on, but... Well, you know, I dedicated the whole book to Leonard Cohen, who is, like, my favorite artist in general, and a very bittersweet musician.

And his whole lifelong, you know, decades-long body of work is about accepting that life is simultaneously beautiful and broken, and turning that realization into a kind of transcendence. The way his son put it, he said, "Just the way that cigarettes are, like, a delivery mechanism for nicotine, Leonard Cohen created his songs so that they would be a delivery mechanism for transcendence."

And I love that, because so many of his songs are so, on the surface, they're, like, so sad and gloomy, but they're really not. They're really about, like, you know, reaching for the beautiful place. And that's the thing that's embedded in melancholy, is, like, reaching for beauty.

Katie: I love his work as well. I'm excited to check out that playlist. And you mentioned the word transcendence. I love that word as well, and I'm curious, are there any ways we can sort of, because we talked about how this is kind of a very prevalent mindset, this sort of over-positive mindset in society and workplace, certainly on social media. Are there any other strategies for sort of transcending that, and making space for the bittersweet?

Susan: Well, I mean, if you are somebody who, you know, loves your rainy day, or loves your sad music, or whatever that is, I would say to lean into it. You know, I've heard from so many people since the book has come out who have said to me, thinking of one guy in particular, he's a filmmaker in LA, and he said whenever... He's had the exact same experience listening to this kind of music, and when he would hear it, he would describe it to himself as that holy feeling, like holy, H-O-L-Y. And he's not an overtly religious person, but it was, like, "that holy feeling."

And then the next move would be like, he'd say, "Oh, I shouldn't be listening to that because there's something depressive about it." And so, I think a lot of what we need to do is just, when we see those kinds of, when we experience those kinds of portals, that have the ability to, like, transport us to another realm, to lean into that instead of feeling like there's something about it that we shouldn't be going there. That we shouldn't be going there.

And another practice that people find very helpful, it's called expressive writing. And this is just the practice of, like, when there's something bothering you, to just, like, sit down and write it out, two minutes, three minutes. Don't pay attention to grammar or anything like that. Just write it.

And the psychologist James Pennebaker at UT Austin, he's done tons of studies on this, and found that the sheer act of writing things down lowers people's blood pressure, raises well-being, better outcomes across the board. He took this one group of engineers who were in their 50s, who had been laid off from their jobs, and they were quite depressed about it. And as an experiment, he had half of them just write down, like, what they ate for breakfast that morning, and then the other half would write down how they really felt. And that second group, who wrote down how they really felt, were significantly more likely to have found work a few months later, lower blood pressure, better health markers, better wellbeing markers, and the only thing they had done was just write stuff down.

So, all of this, I think, is pointing towards getting into an interaction with life where you're, like, really open to all of it, and you're taking it all in. You know, you're in open and receptive mode.

Katie: Yeah. The power of journaling. Absolutely.

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And another concept you talk about, and definitely, again, I encourage people to read through, because there's so much more than we can cover, but about sort of the ability or the possibility of inheriting grief and trauma from our parents, grandparents, etc.

And I've had Mark Wolynn on this podcast as well, who wrote "It Didn't Start With You," and he sort of explained some of the science behind what we're learning about this. But I love your take on that. And also, in that, like, kind of note of transcendence and transformation, how we can help shift that into the positive of creativity, or peace or calm. So, maybe, yeah, any way that you wanna tackle that.

Susan: Yeah. Gosh, I started thinking about this, I guess through a few different means, but... I don't know. What, one of them was I found myself at a conference one day, where we were asked to talk about some losses in our lives, and I started talking about a loss that I had experienced. And I found myself, like, even

though I had entered the conference and the exercise, like, feeling totally fine, and, like, not really feeling very emotional at all, I started talking about this loss, and tears came. Like, I was crying above and beyond everything that I was talking about, and I didn't know where they came from.

And the counselor who was running this conference, he's an incredibly intuitive person. His name is Dr. Sim Raphael, and he said, "I don't think these tears are only yours. Like, I think you're crying for the generations."

And I had a whole bunch of talks with him, and, like, really realized the way in which... I mean, I come from a family where we lost literally dozens of relatives in the Holocaust, and there's a kind of grief that you carry around. And you almost don't know where it comes from. Like, you don't know are these emotional cues that you've picked up literally from the people around you who are raising you, or is it something that you're just carrying in your soul?

And the scientific studies that have shown the way in which our DNA literally changes in response to trauma, such that future generations inherit that same changed DNA, are absolutely fascinating. And I think the question then is, like, what to do with that? You know, if you're somebody who has inherited some kind of grief or trauma from previous generations, what do you do?

And there's all different techniques, you know, and certainly going to therapy is helpful. There's all different techniques that I lay out in the book, but I think the real mindset shift that we need to have is to come to a place where you can simultaneously honor the generations who have come before you. Like, send your love back to them, and, yeah, to send your love back to them, while also understanding that you are a different person from them, and that your life trajectory is gonna be different from theirs, and to hold those two things possible at the same time. You know, the love for your ancestors and your own independence can coexist.

And for those of us who are parents, I think it's easier to do that because we know that this is what we wish for our children, right? Like, we wanna give our children everything we have to give them, and then we want them to go forth and live their own lives, and live them fully. And so, we need to wish the same for ourselves as well.

Katie: Yeah. I think children are great teachers in so many things in life, for that reason.....

Susan: So true.

Katie: ...in ways we wouldn't maybe for ourselves for them, and realize that they will pay so much more attention to what we model than what we say, even.

Susan: Oh, gosh. That is so true.

Katie: Yeah. That's been a recurring parenting lesson for me over and over, for sure. On a personal note, I'm so curious to hear a little bit about your writing process, if you don't mind sharing. Also, just being a writer, I love your style so much, and, like I said, how you intertwine research and storytelling, and you're just so easy to read. So, I would love to hear about what goes into writing a book like this for you.

Susan: Oh, sure. So, what I do is I have a topic, you know, whatever it is, and then I kind of walk around the world for a few years, looking at everything through the lens of that topic. So, you know, like, recently, it was "Bittersweet." Before, it was "Quiet." Like, I'll walk around for a few years interviewing people, reading things and taking notes, you know, going out and doing all kinds of research, and then I'm left at the end of those few years with, like, hundreds and hundreds of pages of notes, and then the process begins of, like, trying to weave it all together.

So, I love it that you said it's easy to read. That's great for me to know, because it's not always easy to put together, you know? Because it's so much, it feels like assembling a gigantic jigsaw puzzle. But I just love, love, love to do it. But, yeah, bottom line, it's basically a process of, like, chasing all these different strands of things that I find intriguing or exciting. And whenever I find something intriguing or exciting, I, like, write it down and take notes about it, and then think about how can I share this with a reader?

Katie: I love it. And I've always heard that's kind of the mark of mastery and greatness, is the ability to do something in a way that it looks effortless to people who are just watching. You know, you see this in writers, and artists, and athletes, and, you know, people who make these things seem so easy and effortless because they look that way to this person, and it's a mark of the mastery of the craft. So, that's incredible, and thank you for sharing that part of the story.

Susan: Absolutely. Yeah. Completely.

Katie: And I'm curious if... I know it's hard to summarize an entire book in a short response, but what would be sort of the key takeaways that you hope people will come away with when they read "Bittersweet?"

Susan: I guess I would say it's to understand that if you are somebody who...if you were the kind of person who likes sad music, you know, enjoys the occasional rainy day, reacts very intensely to music and art and nature, if you go in that direction, to understand that you possess a very particular superpower. And that this way of being, and that this state of mind, is connected to creativity, to a sense of awe and wonder and spirituality, to transcendence, to human connection. And so, to understand it for the superpower that it is.

And if you are curious, the easiest way in is to take the "Bittersweet Quiz" that I developed, and you can find it either in the book or on my website at [susancairn.net](http://susancairn.net). You can just, like, quickly find it there, and take it, and see where you fall on that spectrum.

Katie: Awesome. I'll put links to those as well. I have a good friend who, when I read this book, it reminded me of him, in that he has gotten so good at embracing the melancholy in life. And whether it's melancholy music or even if he's sick, he's, like, his mindset is like, isn't this great? Not in, like, a toxic positivity way, but in a, like, "I'm getting this experience that's part of life, and I'm gonna enjoy the fact that I'm gonna be in bed today because I don't normally get to do that."

Susan: Oh, that's interesting.

Katie: So I'm curious how he would test on the quiz. But I'll link, like I said, to the book, and to, well, all your, both of your books, and to your website as well, so people can find these in the show notes. That will all be at [wellnessmama.fm](http://wellnessmama.fm).

And a couple last questions I love to ask. The first being, other than your own, if there are any books that have really profoundly impacted your life, and if so, what they are and why?

Susan: Oh, gosh. Well, one that comes to mind, I was just talking about it the other day, is the book "Flow," by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. He was a great psychologist. And he talks about the state of flow, which is, like, the state where you're super engaged in an activity, and you're so engaged that you're not thinking about anything else. And you're in that amazing channel between boredom and anxiety.

So, like, the task that you're engaged with, it's difficult enough that you're not bored by it, but it's not so difficult that it's making you anxious or stressed. You're just, like, in it. And once I understood about this state

of flow, and how precious it is, I was like, "Oh my gosh. I have to just organize my whole life so that I'm in that state as much as possible."

And I do find that from writing, for me, is a pretty consistent state of flow. And so is playing tennis, so I try to play tennis every chance I get. Like, you know, like, I try to exercise almost every day, but I find that tennis gets me in that state of flow, whereas when I do my HIIT, or that kind of thing, it's like, it's good for me, but it's not the same. I'm kind of thinking, like, "When will this be over?" So, it's the state of flow when I'm not thinking that at all. That's the real, like, gold.

Katie: I love that. I'll link to that one as well. For me, it's, I think, art. If I'm painting or drawing, it's like eight hours can go by and I didn't even realize that the time went by.

Susan: Yeah. Isn't that the best feeling?

Katie: It's wonderful. And I know we've gotten to touch on so many aspects of this today and talk a little bit about "Quiet" as well, but any parting advice for the listeners today that could be related to one of the many things we talked about, or entirely unrelated?

Susan: Oh, gosh. I don't know. I mean, I guess I would just say that the thing that I think probably links a lot of the work that I do is the idea that there are many different kinds of powers that are granted to us in this world, and we're all granted different kinds of powers. And so, one of the tricks to living really well is to understand what kind of power you've been granted.

And I, you know, I think I write my books to the people who have been granted powers that are not always as obvious, you know? So, the power of being quiet, and the power of being bittersweet, those are superpowers, but they're often not identified as such. But if you look at all the movies, and mythology, and children's books you've read all your life, like, they're all sending us this lesson. You know, light saber, there's the wizard's hat, there's, you know, the Spider-Man ability to climb up a building. There's a lot of different kinds of powers, and the question to ask yourself is, which one do you have, and how can you use it best?

Katie: I love it. I think that's a perfect place to wrap up, and I wanna definitely encourage all of you listening to grab a copy of the book, and "Quiet," if you haven't read that as well. Very, very, very fun reads, and I love your writing style so much. It was an absolute pleasure to get to actually talk with you in person today, and I'm so grateful for your time. Thank you so much for being here.

Susan: Absolutely, Katie. Thank you so much for having me. It was really a delight to talk to you.

Katie: And thank you, as always, to all of you, for listening and sharing your most valuable assets, your time, your energy, and your attention with us today. We're both so grateful that you did, and I hope that you will join me again on the next episode of "The Wellness Mama Podcast."

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