S3E1: Brave Shift

Julie Bogart with Susan Wise Bauer

Julie: Welcome to season three of the podcast: A Brave Writer's Life in Brief [theme music plays]. I'm Julie Bogart your host.

Susan: As each of my children age and become some fantastic individual that I never dreamed possible, I realize how out of control that is for me. I think that when a kid is struggling academically, we desperately try to fix the kid, we don't try to fix the system.

Julie: Welcome to season three of the Brave Writer podcast. Today, episode one, features a friend, a colleague, and an ally in the home-education mission to help our kids and our families thrive around learning and being a family. I am excited for you to get to talk to this guest with me. We're going to look at the culture of homeschooling. How it's changed since the 1970s. What are some of its opportunities and limits in the future.

I also am excited to share this interview with you because I learned so much from this guest back when I was home-educating. And it seems to me that we have a mutual regard for one another and an ability to help bring this homeschooling movement into the 21st century, to help parents feel liberated from the tyranny of idealism and the fear that we are somehow failing. Today, I invite you to relax, to consider your homeschool in a new light, and to be willing to make the brave shifts you need to, to find joy and learning as a natural outcome of your home education commitment. Please welcome today's guest with me [theme music plays].

Julie: Susan Wise Bauer calls herself an accidental homeschooling guru. She was educated at home by pioneering parents in the 1970s, back when home education was still unheard of. She learned Latin at age 10, worked as a professional musician while still in high school and wrote three unpublished novels before she turned 16. Kind of an overachiever, don't you think?

Susan and her husband have four children that they, in turn, have homeschooled. But Susan is best known for her juggernaut homeschooling classic: *The Well-Trained Mind*, now in its fourth printing. I own that book and remember when I read it through the first time, thinking "now here's someone who gets it about writing. She understands."

I joined the message boards for *The Well-Trained Mind*, perusing the site, and was startled to discover Brave Writer in Susan's list of recommended resources for teaching writing. We had the privilege of meeting, finally, at a homeschool convention several years ago and traded war stories while we watched NCAA basketball.

I've invited Susan here today for a specific purpose: not only is Susan admired and trusted as a homeschool authority, but she is also someone who understands the history of the home education movement. As student, teacher, and as a homeschool business. In this series about brave shifts, then, I wanted to invite Susan to talk with me about how she'd like to see the culture of homeschooling and education shift to be even more powerful and effective in families around the world. Welcome, Susan!

Susan: Thank you! So fun to talk to you.

Julie: Yeah I love talking with you. You always stimulate my imagination. I thought it might be fun to start with your own experience as a homeschooled student. What was the homeschool culture like when you were first being home-educated by your mom?

Susan: Well that's a really interesting question because when I was first being home-educated, so my mother started with us in 1972, I believe, 71 or 72, there was no homeschool culture.

Julie: Right.

Susan: So I mean, we didn't know anyone who was homeschooling. I think that when I was in my teens, my mother finally came across a copy of—do you remember the Colfaxes?

Julie: Yes! Yes. Very much.

Susan: Yeah right at the beginning of the homeschool movement and they were the only people I'd ever heard of who were homeschooling and they were doing it because they were like in the mountains of Appalachia or somewhere way out in the middle of nowhere. And we also lived in a rural area but we were homeschooling more because none of us—I have an older brother and a younger sister—and for various reasons, none of us fit into any of the classroom cultures that my mother tried to integrate us into.

So for us it was very much a pragmatic decision and we didn't know other people who were homeschooling because it actually wasn't really legal at that point so people tended to keep their heads down. So I think for me, homeschool culture really became more of an issue when I was homeschooling my kids because by that point, 20 years after—later, at that point there was a homeschooling culture. So that was the first time I had encountered this thing called "A homeschool culture" was when my kids were elementary aged.

Julie: So talk about that a little bit. What was this cultural experience that you encountered and was it startling? Pleasant? Intriguing? How did you feel about it?

Susan: Ah this is a complex question so forgive me while I give you like three separate answers.

Julie: Perfect [laughs].

Susan: Answer number one was that religious culture that I grew up in was a very fundamentalist in the bad sense culture. It was very patriarchal, by which I mean actually misogynistic. It was very anti-intellectual. And my parents, as we grew up, moved out of that culture. We're all still committed Christians but moved away from that expression of Christianity. When I then came back to homeschooling with my children, I felt that almost every socialization or co-op or small group or conference option that I had available to me, was still in that same very rigid anti-female and in many ways, anti-intellectual culture that I had moved away from. And I don't know—so I'm—I'm nearly 49. I would guess that this would be a common experience for people of my age, perhaps not for younger mothers now. But homeschooling was still very much a matter of protecting your children from anything that might possibly sway them in the wrong direction. So it was a very protectionist sort of culture.

Julie: Yes, yeah in fact I remember the metaphor of hot houses being really popular in the 90s. Like we're keeping them in a hot house to grow them, to protect them from you know the outside pollution so that they'll be strong and healthy and then eventually, we can release them into the world. Do you remember that? That metaphor?

Susan: I do remember that! Yes talking about how good a hot house was. And I will say that this changed. So I—my brother and sister and I are all very close in age but my kids—my oldest and youngest are 11 years apart. So the experience that I had with my oldest, who was born in 19—I can never remember when my children are born, can you believe how terrible?

Julie: [Laughs]

Susan: He's going to be 26 this summer, if that helps. And then my youngest who was born in 2000—there was a clear—there was a clear difference between the options available to me but I will say that still, I mean I have still been blacklisted from my local state convention because I am not Christian enough. I mean, explicitly told that in a letter from the conference. So although perhaps that is not as much the case as it was, certainly when I was trying to be involved in co-ops and homeschooling groups, I literally had the experience of walking into a homeschool social group and have everybody stop talking instantly.

Julie: Oh. Sister, I hear ya! I had children who weren't allowed to play with my kids. I totally know this story [laughs]. Oh my gosh.

Susan: And I'm sure it was a little exaggerated for me because by that point, we'd written this book—so people knew for example, that I recommended reading Greek myths and the local homeschool group was very opposed to reading any quote-unquote "Pagan literature" because it would corrupt your kids and so when I walked in, people stopped talking. And that for me, was just—I thought "why am I doing this? My kids don't need to be socialized this badly [laughs]." Why am I putting myself through this? So that's very definitely the experience that I had when I was starting out.

Julie: So what would the other two and three be? So first is this encounter with the fundamentalist culture, what might the other two be?

Susan: Well, the second answer and how things have changed is that I really think for the better, homeschooling, because it is now so widely known, or at least known of, now when I tell people that I homeschooled my kids. I've got one left at home, one 16 year old left at home, so I homeschool my kids, their reaction is much more likely to be "oh that's awesome, I wish I'd been homeschooled." As opposed to, "They are never going to get into college," which is what everybody used to say, right? Or "How are they going to be socialized?" I actually hear that a lot less now. That seems to be a really positive development to me. And it's been interesting. If you don't mind me going on a very slight side note. At *The Well-Trained Mind,* which is my family of companies, we launched an online school—online classes about three

years ago and we have been doing a lot of research with college admissions officers into what do they want to see if you have a transcript from an online school. And what we've heard is that if you take classes with an online school, the admissions officers think that's fine, they don't discriminate against you, but they put your application in the pile with what they call—they call it the homeschool pile.

Julie: [Laughs]

Susan: Basically, they have a pile of non-traditional applications. Applications where kids—they just haven't gone through the same processes as everybody else. And I think the fact that there's now an existence of a homeschool pile where if it looks a little odd it goes in there, is a really healthy sign, right? It just means that colleges are increasingly recognizing that there are many different ways to get an education and this is one of them. So I think that's been immensely positive.

Julie: Oh it absolutely is. I've told this story before but I'll share it again for people who maybe haven't heard it. When Noah was applying to go to the University of Cincinnati and had not taken both lab sciences, had not completed two years of foreign language. I called the admissions department, you know, to prove to Noah that he was not going to get admitted [laughs] and when they found out that they wanted to be a linguistics major who had studied Klingon for three years and constructed languages with all these sophisticated tomes of linguistics, they said oh put that all on the transcript. The linguistics department doesn't care if he's done lab sciences. And sure enough, he got accepted. And so right on the transcript, it says Klingon, I gave him an A that was his foreign language credit.

Susan: That's awesome! Julie that's fantastic. I hadn't heard you tell that story.

Julie: [Laughs] but I agree with you. That has been such a bonus is to watch these college websites in the admissions section, they literally will have a homeschooling tab, even, where you can click on it and see what are the requirements for homeschool. And they do vary! Notre Dame requires you to do the SAT 2 test for example for subject areas, so does Boston College. Ohio State wants no descriptions, they just want what did you take and what are your scores. So you're right that is a huge step in the right direction, that's awesome.

Susan: No I mean I was thinking of sort of three specific ways and how has homeschool culture changed. I guess I would say that increasingly, homeschool culture does also partake in some of the—not as encouraging aspects of modern secular political culture in that I am finding that over the last year, that more and more homeschoolers who contact us are wanting some

sort of—they want some sort of reassurance that we share their political position before they'll use our grammar books, sort of thing. You know, we're fans of our current administration before they'll use our writing curriculum because they feel attacked in there is opposition to their political stance and it's been—that's been disheartening because I see the political culture becoming what that religious culture for me 30 years ago where you had to sort of pass a test of soundness before anyone would listen to you or use your materials, no matter how good the materials were. And that I find discouraging. I'm hoping that this is not something that continues.

Julie: Well you know, I love that you're bringing that up. I hadn't even made that connection that the religious view had sort of morphed into more of a political alignment. I see the same thing. I know because you're a scholar and an academic and a historian—which side note, you majored in English, right? I majored in History [laughs]. I think it's funny that you write the history books and I'm writing these writing books.

Susan: Oh that is funny!

Julie: But what I was going to say—

Susan: I did end up doing a PhD in history, so.

Julie: Yes, no, I knew that. I did know that. But one of the things that I found interesting in just sort of creating programs around writing, around literature, around history is the need to help parents and students understand what it is to have complexity as a feature of your thinking. So instead of assuming that you are violating sort of you core beliefs by simply dipping your toe in the water of something that is not aligned with how you think that that is actually undermining the academic task. And I often try to separate the skills of apologetics from academic writing. This notion that you should be asking a question you don't actually already know the answer to if you are engaged in academic thinking. Would you speak to that a little bit? I know this is a big value of yours and it comes through in your writing.

Susan: Well, it is. I taught literature and writing at the College of William and Mary for 15 years and I remember I would often be asked at homeschool conferences, and I'm sure you've heard me say this, how are the homeschooled students who to your classes? And I got a fair number of those because a lot of them, they'd grown up on *The Well-Trained Mind* and so they came to William and Mary they saw my name, they would register for my class, and I think people expected me to say "oh they're great, they're wonderful, they're really head and shoulders academically above the other students." And my actual answer was they're kind of

fragile. They don't know what it means for me to play devil's advocate. If they say something and I challenge them, they immediately assume that I am condemning or indoctrinating them as opposed to trying to draw them out further. So they seemed—by and large, the homeschooled students I had in my classes seemed to have not been exposed to the style of teaching where you say the opposite and ask the student to respond. Say the opposite, ask the student to respond. Really, basic Socratic dialogue but in a challenging sense. You know? That you are trying to sharpen the student's thinking by having them considering something completely opposite to what they came into the class assuming. So that is certainly not something that I think homeschooling parents are doing by and large very well. I would say actually that there aren't that many places that are doing it well.

Julie: [Laughs] that's true.

Susan: Yeah. There is this fear, though, and I think it is probably more prevalent among homeschooling parents that if students run across something that makes a very convincing argument for something that you disagree with that it's like they're going to get a magic, whammy spell put on them and instantly it's going to convert them to the opposite.

There's a real fear of persuasive argumentation—which, that I find both as a writer and as an academic anti-intellectual. I always used to say—when my kids were smaller—that I met so many homeschoolers who resembled pre-literate people in that the way they thought about books was as if books had some sort of magic power. So if you open the book it could cast a spell on you. It's a pre-literate way of thinking about the written word but so many homeschoolers had this attitude of "if I let my kid read something that I disagree with or read something that comes from the opposite political position or—and this is a big one, now—read something that talks about different gender or sexuality norms than the ones that I believe are right or are true, they're instantly going to be—they're going to have a magic spell put on them.

Julie: Yes, I totally agree with that. I also think that there is this fear that they will be perceived as having aligned with it simply for having read it or considered it. I'm finding that, too. We picked a book this year for The Arrow that features evolution and as part of the child's journey of dealing with grief and she is very interested in science and the ocean and so she's looking at it through the lens of science and we had someone ask us if we chose the book in spite of evolution or because of it and I said we chose the book because it's a beautiful story about a middle schooler dealing with grief.

So I think sometimes—you know, and I invited her—I said "This is an opportunity to simply hear how people from that perspective understand science and understand the nature of reality. It doesn't mean you're affirming it to read about it." For me, that seems to be the lynchpin. This fear that if I read about something that I disagree with, I am lending my own support of it. And I find that challenging as well. It goes against what I understand of academic instruction.

Susan: Yes—no I agree with you. And I think to sort of circle back around to where we started, I think that now political positions have been given that—have been put in that same category as you know, can't read about evolution, can't read about someone who identifies as gay or non-gendered in some way, can't read about a political position that's different than mine.

Julie: Climate change [laughs].

Susan: Yeah exactly. Yes climate change, yes, that's a big one!

Julie: I know!

Susan: As soon as you start talking about climate change, it's like you're talking about witchcraft again.

Julie: Yes, right, right.

Susan: So when my kids were younger, it was all about witchcraft. You can't read about witches.

Julie: Yeah or *Harry Potter*. My gosh, I got banned from so many homeschool websites just because I shared that my child read *Harry Potter* in 2005.

Susan: Well and this happened to me—it was closer to 2010 and the organizer—one of the organizers of our local homeschool convention said that she would never allow her children to read *The Chronicles of Narnia* because there was a witch in it.

Julie: Oh my goodness.

Susan: Yeah so it's a very—it's still very active but yes climate change is sort of in that same boat. And I'm hearing this comes from now having older children because my kids are now nearly 26, nearly 23, 20—no, nearly 24, 20, and 16. And the more I watched them grow and become adults, the more I realized that it really—of course you protect young children from things they are not equipped to handle. Absolutely you do.

Julie: Right. Right.

Susan: But the more I realized the extent to which the people who they are becoming has always been completely outside of my control—

Julie: [Laughs]

Susan: I think a lot of parents don't want to hear that, particularly if they have younger children. As each of my children age and become some fantastic individual that I never dreamed possible, I realize how out of control that is for me. Really hard to realize when your kids are younger.

Julie: No you're right. And I think where I hear you going with that is within that sphere of development of who they already are, they will come to understandings, thoughts, ideas, opinions, they will read things that you may or may not know they've read. See things—they may see that you may or may not know they've seen.

But if they've been raised with—at least in my opinion, if they've been raised with an awareness that the academic task is interrogating reality and appreciating complexity and being willing to pivot from perspective even temporarily to hold space for something that you don't already know or understand to be true, then they will grow. They're not going to encounter the world as some scary location that's out to get them. They'll feel like they have the role of participant. Somebody who can make a meaningful contribution, or at least, enter the dialogue. Right? I mean, that to me is the goal.

I look back at age 16 and I certainly have shifted positions from the things I believed at age 16 and 18 and 35 and even 45. So when I see my kids stretching their sort of intellectual wings and considering ideas that maybe I've already discarded in my aged, senectitude, I go ahead and just roll with it because it gives us the opportunity to appreciate complexity, go a little deeper, and understand this sort of intellectual journey that I hope schooling is really all about.

Susan: Yes, absolutely. And you know, I think you've said something very interesting there. The extent to which we change our positions as we grow. I guess I would challenge parents to look back over their journey from being 10 or 12 or 15 or 20 and recognize the extent to which they have changed and be willing to give that same freedom to their children. I have to say, I get a lot of pushback on this idea. When I post on my—I post articles that interest me on my Facebook page—my professional Facebook page—Susan Wise Bauer on Facebook, if you want to come follow me.

Julie: Yes, please go follow her [laughs].

Susan: And you know, I'll post something—so recently, I posted a piece about how it's possible that directed and thoughtful screen-time might be better than quote-unquote "down time" for teenagers because down time often turns into undirected screen-time, if that makes sense.

Julie: Yes. Yes!

Susan: And I thought this was a really good observation and I sort of push back a lot against over-scheduling kids but once of the points this article made was is if your kid is spending all of his down-time playing some mindless video-game that you don't really want them to be playing, then maybe it's better to over-schedule them. I thought this is a good counterpoint to what I usually argue so I posted it. And I was really startled by the number of people who came on it and said "Well obviously parents who think this can't be bothered to monitor their kids' screen-time and you just need to have tighter controls over your children and be more thoughtful about it." And I really wanted to say, "How old are your kids?"

Julie: [Laughs]

Susan: Because the older they get, the less practical it is to control their every breath. So I find myself wanting to ask this of people who are so protective over what their kids see and hear and read. You realize this is going to change, right? You realize that you cannot monitor even a 15 year old, let alone an 18 year old.

Julie: Well and—

Susan: 24 hours a day, right?

Julie: No you're 100% correct.

Susan: Julie, who want to spend their 40s and 50s doing that.

Julie: [Laughs] okay that's the best argument I've ever heard [laughs]. I'm going to always parrot that one now because I really like that. That's perfect [theme music plays].

Julie: You're listening to my interview with classical educator Susan Wise Bauer. Today on the podcast, I want to make you aware of a brand new free product designed to get your writing program off to a great start this school year. It is called the 7-Day Writing Blitz. And you can download it from bravewriter.com. Just got the home page and click on the button.

In those seven pages, you'll find activities, fun ways to explore writing with your kids that are super easy, and that are sure to create some energy around the writing life. Inside those seven pages, you'll also find instructions for how to create your own blaster—a writing blaster. You'll see what I'm talking about, it's especially fun for young children. But these activities work for every age and I hope that you will download it and take it as a gift from us to help you jump on the bandwagon of writing this fall.

If you do decide to take pictures of your creative young writers, please use the hashtag #bwblitz, so that I can find you on Twitter and Instagram. My Instagram is @juliebravewriter if you want to tag me. Thanks for following along and joining us in this adventure on season three of the podcast. And now, let's get back to our conversation with Susan.

Susan: Well, you know, it's very—it's very intimidating for parents [laughs].

Julie: Yes.

Susan: Yes. Because looking back, there are so many decisions that I made with my kids that if I could do it again I would not make that decision. Somehow they survived. So I think you have to—you have to be willing to make mistakes. You have to be willing to make bad decisions, in order to bring this way of thinking to your kids. In order to instill in them that one of the values that you have is for them to be able to understand something while spending judgment and then think critically about it. And then be willing to change their minds. You have to be willing to make some missteps that may seem pretty major. And I think the younger your children are, the more afraid you are of making those missteps. I mean, I remember being told when my kids were babies that if I were changing their diaper and they were having a tantrum on the changing table, that I needed to smack their bottoms because that was the parenting that was taking place back then.

Julie: [Laughs] yes.

Susan: But here's the reason: the reason was not so that they won't hurt themselves or so that you can get the diaper changed, which okay I wouldn't smack any of my children now but I could at least understand that goal. The stated purpose was if you let them understand that they can rebel when they're six months old, then they're going to rebel when they're 18.

Julie: I know. I remember this. I was given—I was given a spanking spoon as a shower gift. And instead of baby shower games, they gave a lecture on why I needed to spank my kids and this was for my second baby and they knew Noah, my oldest, who was completely unrestrainable [laughs]. And so I think they were trying to correct [laughs].

Susan: They were trying to help [laughs].

Julie: Yeah. But I mean, that is where it goes. And interestingly, of course, you and I now have the benefit of some time passing, I know all those families, I know all their adult children, I know how it's worked out and what I would say to that is: we've all made mistakes. I made mistakes, they made mistakes. Your children will make choices in reaction to things you've chosen but they also make choices because they are autonomous—what I call free-radicals [laughs]. You know? You cannot control their minds. They have thoughts inside that you never see and so part of the growth over the decades of parenting is becoming more comfortable with the fact that you can't invade that space and manage it to protect yourself from pain and sadness.

Susan: Yeah. That is so true. That is so true, Julie. And I think that—again, sort of to bring this back to homeschooling, I think that this—this is particularly important for homeschooling parents to grasp because we are with our kids so much all day long. So if your kid is in school then that just sort of automatically creates a space in which they are more autonomous from you.

Julie: Truly.

Susan: When they are home with you all day—which is a wonderful thing and is the reason why I homeschooled my kids because I really liked them, I enjoyed them being home—

Julie: You wanted to hang out with them, yes, I feel the same way!

Susan: I didn't want them to go away all day. And I missed my youngest daughter—we put her in a local Montessori middle school for two years when her next brother up went to college because—for two years, one is that it was going to be the first time she'd be all alone in the house all day long, without a sibling and I felt like that would be a bad idea at that point. And also just because I'd homeschooled for 20 years and I needed a break. I was just done. I realized I think halfway through the year before that I didn't want to homeschool this kid. Whenever she was home, all I wanted to do was play games and eat cookies. I mean this was my youngest child and my only girl and I wasn't doing a very good job.

Julie: Oh I relate completely. That is so funny.

Susan: Yeah she should go to school. So she did go to school for a couple years and that was a perfect break for me and then our high school options weren't all that great and so she came back home and that's been good, too. So we were kind of flexible about it. But I realized the extent to which her being away during the day gave her space to develop an autonomous life, which was really important because she was 15 years old. And when we're home with our kids, we need to give them that same space and not be afraid of it.

Julie: I completely agree. I have had both experiences. So I've had kids—my oldest did high school at home. Johannah did part-time enrollment in the local high school and then the remaining three did various amounts of full-time public high school. And a lot of times, I don't know if this happens to you, but I'll get emails from parents that they're on the precipice of making this decision or they have a child who's asking to go to school and they're almost embarrassed to tell me about it. And I always respond, "You're about to go on another adventure. This is not the end of your role in your child's education. You are a homeschooler!"

In a weird way, you're more invested even than the parents who are used to this other model because you're used to being involved in conversation, dialogue, being curious about what's going on in your child's mind life. And so school just becomes like—I call it a triangle. You know it's like you're triangle-ing in help. It's like taking an online class with Well-Trained Mind or Brave Writer. You're just bringing in another voice to the conversation that you're trying to have about growing a mind-life. And so if you can see school that way and not just see it as boogeyman standing next to lockers, you can actually find school to be a partner to you.

And sometimes—you know, my case, I went through a divorce and my homeschooling literally fell off the rails. Like it disappeared and I had to admit they will get a better experience without me during this season. I think it's—it takes courage, though, and I always want to be a voice that says "I'm on your team." Whatever educational choice you make, I'm on your team. I know you're working on a book about educational choices right now. Can you share a little bit about the motivation behind that book and what some of your objectives are in whatever it is you're writing?

Susan: Yeah no this turned out to be a really fun project for me. So we did the fourth edition of *The Well-Trained Mind* a couple years ago.

Julie: Congratulations.

Susan: Yes. Every time we turn around to revise it, it's such a big job and my mother is not as active in the revision process anymore so she's like "Good job, Sue! Go revise." And I go do the leg work. She deserves her retirement.

Julie: [Laughs] yes.

Susan: Yeah so I said to my editor, "you know what this book really needs?" "It needs a companion buy in for people who aren't necessarily going to homeschool their kids. Or maybe they're going to partly homeschool kids. Or maybe they're going to do some other option. But it needs a companion volume that says here are the ways to take principles from homeschooling and apply them to your kid's education, no matter whether your kid is doing a half and half kind of thing or an online school or community college. We need something for all of those other people."

And so the fruit of that—and then of course it took a while for me to actually get this done but it's coming out at the end of this year and it's called *Rethinking School: How to take charge of your child's education*. And essentially, it's a guidebook for parents to think more globally about what's going on with these 12 years. I start with an examination of the way in which our K-12 system—which, by the way, originated in Prussia around the turn of the century as a way to make up for a humiliating defeat by the French.

Julie: Oh [laughs].

Susan: Yeah, that's why we have 12 grades. More on that in the book! But the ways in which our educational system—I think even if you are a homeschooler—is incredibly artificial and arbitrary and the ways in which you can flex it. Because I think that—and homeschoolers fall into this as well—I think that when a kid is struggling academically, we desperately try to fix the kid, we don't try to fix the system.

Julie: Completely! That's so much of what I say to parents a lot of times is "Curriculum shopping does not cure problem learning." The curriculum is not always it. A lot of times it's your tone of voice. It's are you connected? It's the context. Have you created an environment

that makes it possible for this child to even be alert to learning, you know? Is there some other story happening in your family right now that is preoccupying that child's imagination and making it hard for them to concentrate. And those are just on the level of family and just basic lifestyle choices. But what you're talking about I think even examines the way school maybe no longer suits this 21st century model of living and working. The telecommunications and globalization that we're all experiencing—maybe that model is pretty out of date if it comes from Prussia.

Susan: No it is! It's incredibly out of date. And I mean, our age grade system where we assign an age and a grade to match each other is just the prime example of that. It is the most ridiculous system and the people who suffer the most from it are the slow mature-ers. Not the quick ones because the quick ones get props for going through the grades faster. But the slow ones are made to feel that they are failures from a very, very early age. And that is not a problem that is solely located in schools. It's located in homeschool circles, as well. I can't tell you how many homeschool groups I talk to where the overall sort of ethos of the group is that if your kid finishes high school and goes to college at 16, you've done a good job.

Julie: Yes! You are right!

Susan: Your kid is 18 and still struggling? Maybe you shouldn't be a homeschooler. Well! That's just one really toxic manifestation of this idea that we associate certain grades with certain ages. Again, completely artificial. Came from Prussia! It's really eye-opening.

Julie: No I'm excited to read that because I feel like part of what is missing is a historical perspective. We're all so tied into our direct personal experiences and then we're under this notion or this belief that if we're going to homeschool, we have to do a better job than the schools. But then we end of measuring ourselves against the schools rather than seeing ourselves as educational innovators. So one of the things that I do when I speak on Charlotte Mason where I like to update her to the 21st century, I remind everyone—I kind of end with a fist pump and I say "we are all Charlotte Mason. You are Charlotte Mason! You are contributing to the great conversation of how education can be transformed in this era. Simply by being brave enough to teach your children."

But if you stay in the role of I'm only going to teach based on what other people tell me to do, you're like a pinball just being flipped around by Classical, Brave Writer, unschooling, whichever version of school you use as your measuring stick. And I think it ends up being—in so many cases, a drubbing for the parent. The parent ends up feeling like they're not doing a good job and that spills over into how they treat their children. They don't see them as the bright, intelligent people that they are. With Liam having this dysgraphia, you know he went three years without even writing math problems. But we spent so much time doing deep dives into

math. Even without his ability to handwrite. And we took an extra year in junior high. And then he took an additional after high school, before he went to college, and he will tell you that was the best I ever made for his life. To start college at 20 was a completely different experience for him. And I consider that a success! I would never see that as somehow not measuring up to that standard.

Susan: Absolutely. Well you know, I think homeschoolers need to avoid falling into the same traps as private schools did, historically. So talk about a little bit of a historical perspective. If you don't mind, let me back up just for a minute and give you an example of something I am not in any way saying that homeschoolers tend to be racist, okay, that's not where I'm going with this. But the private Christian school movement got its impetus when public schools were desegregated.

Julie: Oh yes.

Susan: Right so if you track the private Christian school movement back, that is how it began. It began as a way to make sure that our kids didn't associate with those other kids that now are going to be in their classrooms. I think we would all look back at that and say "that was wrong and evil and destructive." At the same time, then, if you're a homeschooler, you have to think to yourself okay, what aspect of my homeschooling experience is being driven by my fear of my kids being next to someone that I feel prejudiced against. We have to be really honest with ourselves. There's a difference between protecting your kids from a toxic or dangerous or—just a toxic or dangerous will cover it. A toxic or dangerous situation by pulling them out of a classroom, and pulling them out of a classroom because you don't want them to be next to those other people.

I think I'm seeing—back to our discussion about homeschool culture changes, I unfortunately seem to be seeing a little bit more of this than I used to. The same thing is true when we look at pushing our children forward to do things at a younger age. Once again, look back at history. The Abeka curriculum, based in Florida, that so many people are familiar with, started to teach cursive in 1st grade. And I remember this clearly because my mother went down for a training session when we elementary school and she was teaching us at home. She went down—she's a certified teacher so she went down to do their elementary school training. And when she came back she said that one of the things they said was because we're a private Christian school, we have to do everything better than the public schools do. So they teach cursive in 3rd grade, we're going to teach it in 1st grade.

Julie: Oh my gosh.

Susan: So this was this attempt to prove that they were good, that they were better that led them to do that. Not a concern for the child's development. I feel like that the same is true with

a lot of classical schools which—so this has been a pattern in classical schools for a long time. They start Saxon 1st grade and kindergarten and 2nd grade and 1st grade—just to try to get the kids on a faster track. And I feel like that's that same impulse to show that we're better, to show that we're more rigorous. If it's about you and it's not about the kid, then that's a problem. And I think that's something that we could learn from as homeschoolers.

Julie: No that's—well, and it happens in school. I mean, you see the same kind of striving happen with my friends who are public school parents. I was in conversation with a girlfriend of mine who has a very young kindergarten child in school. She's much younger than me and her daughter has already been labeled "at risk." And I asked, "What does 'at risk' mean?" And she said "Well, she's just more active in the classroom than she's supposed to be and she's not reading as quickly as the other students so they now have her in this track called the 'at risk' students." And I was like "Well, how many kids are in that track from kindergarten?" Like just the thought that you are being funneled into a category at age 5 because you don't want to sit still in a chair and you're not reading yet really disturbed me.

But what you're saying and what I think has been proven to be true is that sometimes homeschool parents are guilty of treating their own children as "at risk" when they show up with some kind of difference, you know, even within the same families. You might have a child who reads early and it's your first child and you assume, oh, my child started reading at 4—

Susan: It's because I'm doing it right [laughs].

Julie: Yeah! It must be me [laughs]! Exactly! I must be good at this. And then you know—

Susan: And then number two comes along.

Julie: Yes exactly. In fact, one of the things we talked about at the start of this conversation—before we went onto the recording—can you talk a little bit about when public school or traditional education is more what I like to call it because there are lots of versions of schooling—but when would traditional education be something a parent might consider and not feel guilty about?

Susan: Oh well [laughs] any point!

Julie: [Laughs] good.

Susan: You know, we forget how much our lives change from year to year and even sometimes from month to month. I think that when you're homeschooling and you get to the point where you have this sense of "I'm not really into this." I'm not really enjoying this process. You know, not the brief "I'm really tired." But just the week after week, I am gritting my teeth and just barely getting through that. You need to pay attention to that feeling. You know? I find—with my kids, I have found—I am a limited mortal being and I only have so much energy for them and when I have pushed through lengthy periods of feeling like I just don't want to be doing homeschooling, it has taken up so much of my energy that I don't think I've had the energy to be a good parent. To be emotionally available for them. To be patient with them.

So I think there is always a point at which you should be able to say to yourself "I'm beat." I am just beat. And whether I'm beat because I suddenly have my sick in-laws living with me or because we've moved three times in the last three years or my husband is out of a job or whatever—or just, I've been doing this for a really long time. Or—parents don't pay enough attention to this—this particular kid is on my last nerve. I can't get anywhere with them. You have to stop and think, what's better for the child? Maybe it's to put them in a more traditional setting. Maybe not permanently—nothing's ever permanent—for a time, and take a breath. Some of the best adjusted homeschool families I've met are homeschooling one kid another is in a traditional classroom because that's what was working for those particular personalities.

And I just think that's an important thing to keep in mind. I love homeschooling. I think everyone should be able to do if that is what's best for them but I would never want to make it a dogma. Good parents homeschool—ever. Ever. Ever.

Julie: I feel identically to you. One thing that I say to reassure parents a lot of times is that we have billions of people living on the planet and the vast majority—you know, the 90th percentile of them—go to traditional schools and that's what's produced this incredible world that we live in of technological advancement and telecommunications and travel. And so we want to step back from this fear that somehow, because schools have limits that they're somehow failing to deliver education. That's just been proven false if you just look at the scale of how many people today can read, compared to even 200 years ago. So traditional education has been a massive success and it's been a massive success for the people who have the least access.

Homeschooling is absolutely a privilege. It is an option for people who can afford it financially and have the resources to sustain that education. It actually helps if the parents themselves have a decent education. One of the things we do know from research is that whether your kids are home with you or in school, the parents level of education actually has a lot to say about how well those children absorb the school that they're a part of. So I try to remind parents, if you've been this invested parent who has a good foundation of education and you've homeschooled, when you put your child in school, they take all of that with them and they still have you.

Susan: Yes that's absolutely true. With homeschooling becoming more common—

Julie: Yes.

Susan: I think that it is important for us to keep saying that this is a fantastic option, it's one option. And this is again—this is part of what I'm trying to do in the upcoming book is to say "look, the important thing is that you realize that ultimately you have the last say over how your child is educated. Not the school."

Julie: Yes. Perfect.

Susan: That's so important because I find that parents who aren't homeschoolers have no idea that you, for example, the kid doesn't have to take standardized tests when they're in school. Every single state has an opt-out option. It's just that the school isn't going to tell you about it. There are so many ways in which you can really assert your parental authority to do what is best for that child.

Julie: That is such a contribution. I'm so glad that you are writing that book. That sounds phenomenal.

Susan: Oh thank you.

Julie: Yeah no it's great. No this has been just a complete joy to talk with you Susan. I feel so in concert with your perspective about education and about the homeschool culture. And so what I'd like you to part on: when we're talking then about this theme of my podcast series, brave shift, what would be one practical thing you could recommend to the homeschooler who's listening to help them really be a part of this more inclusive, more fearless—to use my word brave—academic journey?

Susan: Let me suggest this: I would say looking back on a long homeschooling journey of my own that whenever I made a decision for my kids based on what I was afraid would happen in the future, it was the wrong decision. So if I made the decision because it was going to develop some character quality in the future—not that I was thinking in the present, I was just really worried about it happening in the future. Or if I made an academic decision based on "Oh no they're not going to get into college." Even when I knew that the kid wasn't ready or was already overloaded or needed a little extra time. Whenever I made those decisions based on fears about the future, it was wrong.

So I guess my number one thing would be, when you're faced with a decision about your kid, be really honest with yourself and say "Am I reacting to something that's happening now that I need to take care of because that is your responsibility as a parent? Or am I forecasting into the future and trying to make a decision based on what I am afraid might happen then?"

Julie: That's perfect.

Susan: And if the latter is the case, think again.

Julie: I call that prophesying doom [laughs]. I always say "I have prophesied doom over my children." You know, "if you don't learn this now, it will be a problem for you then." As opposed to, why would they need to know it now? How can I make it meaningful now? I think that is—and very much, those decisions based on fear almost always come back to bite you, I so agree with that. Wow.

Susan: I call it going global. Where you start with "you didn't finish your math paper" and you end up with "you'll never get a job."

Julie: [Laughs] that's right. Completely. Oh my gosh that's perfect. That's perfect. Well Susan this has been awesome! I hope we can do it again some time. I just always enjoy talking to you. You're just amazing.

Susan: [Laughs] oh thank you! It's lovely talking to you. We'll do it again.

Julie: Okay. Have a great day!

Susan: Thank you.

Julie: Bye! [theme music plays]

Julie: Don't you love Susan? She's a good friend and a good ally. You know what's crazy? She was like you and me. She was homeschooled and then she jumped in and home educated her own kids. There's no special sauce that made it possible for Susan to be better at this than you

could be. And same for. All of us are drawing on the same creative pool of resources and imagination to produce educations worthy of our children. So give yourself some credit. I like to think of all of your as educational pioneers on par with Charlotte Mason. We are shaping the future of education together, one homeschool family at a time. Your contribution to that conversation is just as valuable.

Thanks for listening today. If you would like to grow in that skill and you want to dialogue with other educators who are attempting to think through principles that make the difference, check out The Homeschool Alliance. You can go to bravewriter.com, scroll down, and you will see a banner for The Homeschool Alliance. Or you can visit coachjuliebogart.com. Either place will take you there.

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Otherwise, we're going to see you right back here next week for the next episode of season three of the Brave Writer Podcast. Live honestly, write bravely I'm Julie Bogart, from Brave Writer [theme music plays].

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How do we help our kids experience the same level of passion/excitement for school subjects that they bring naturally to their personal interests?

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