

Discover Your Capacity to Create, Connect & Love – Susan Cain – #952

Dave:

You're listening to The Human Upgrade with Dave Asprey. Today, we're going to talk about something you probably didn't think we're going to talk about. We're going to talk about what creativity, connection, and love have to do with sorrow and longing, and how longing is something called momentum in disguise with an expert who's actually spent a lot of time looking at these weird psychological aspects.

What I believe is that many of the things that we do are based in our operating system, our subconscious, the stuff our body and even parts of our mind do that is entirely invisible to us by design. Then eventually, we get this feeling and then we make up a story to support the feeling. It's really interesting to go in on that in this episode so you can figure out what you're doing actually versus what you think you're doing and the benefits or costs that it has to you that are all entirely invisible unless you know how to look for them.

The idea is that you can learn how to live and work and be authentic in an environment of what I'm going to call enforced positivity, where you get to say the glass is half full even if there's no water in it at all, I think. We're going to learn about that, and we're also going to learn about grief and what it is. If you haven't felt any grief over the last two years, you're quite unusual because that means you still have your job, you still have your business, and you don't know anyone who's passed away. Although people normally pass away at these rates anyway, but just from other causes. So we won't go into that, but there's just been a lot of societal upheaval and some unexpected things, and that does usually require grief as a part of it. So we're going to talk about the actual tools that you have onboard that you probably don't know you have onboard.

Our guest today jump started a global conversation about being an introvert about 10 years ago, and she challenged assumptions, things everyone believed about introverts versus extroverts. Her first book was called *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*, seven years on the New York Times bestseller list and translated into 40 languages. Her name is Susan Cain. So incredibly successful author.

By the way, guys, seven years on the New York Times list, I think, is God-mode for authors. I've been on the New York Times list enough weeks that I don't know, but it's through a series of books, and I just throw this one, but seven years, me in Oprah kind of thing. So she's a big deal for writers and her new book is called *Bittersweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole*. Susan, welcome to the show.

Susan Cain:

Thank you. It's so great to be on the show with you.

Dave:

Are you an introvert?

Susan:

Yes. I mean, who else would write a book all about the power of introverts? Yes, I'm totally an introvert, but I mean, people ask me that question all the time. Well, actually, the formulation they ask is, "Now that you wrote this book and you go out and speak all the time, do all these interviews and stuff, surely, you're not an introvert anymore." The whole premise of that question is all wrong because introverts do extroverted things constantly. Nobody is all one thing also.

Dave:

It just costs you more to do extroverted things, right? It's more tapping of your energy. Is that a good way of putting it?

Susan:

Yeah. It's a really good way of putting it. Yeah. I think people confuse energy with skills. So as an introvert, you can have the skills of public speaking or the skills of doing interviews or whatever it is, the skills of going to a cocktail party, but yeah, as you say, it takes more energy. You need more recharge time when you're done.

Dave:

LinkedIn named you the sixth top influencer in the world. Did you have a panic attack when that happened?

Susan:

No, not at all because I don't know. To me, those things are just media nonsense. Do you know what I mean?

Dave:

Oh, I know exactly what you mean.

Susan:

I'm really happy to be. I'm like, "Yeah." So I'm on LinkedIn a lot. I'm lucky to have a lot of people who I'm connected with there, and I post on there almost every day. So I love those posts. So if they want to put me on some list, that's awesome, but I don't really think about that so much.

Dave:

Are you one of those people who tries to fill in your weaknesses by being really good at them?

Susan:

Oh, that's an interesting question. Actually, honestly, I really don't think so. I'm much more interested in living a life that I super enjoy. It's just when it comes to things like public speaking, I had to fill in my weaknesses in order to do the thing that I love most, which is I wanted to be a writer since I was four years old. It's what I want to keep doing for the rest of my life. In this world that we live in, you can't do that without also doing all the public-facing stuff. So I had to figure that out, but I don't think I would've figured out all that public-facing stuff if I hadn't needed to in the service of something else.

Dave:

Your online presence and your achievements, 16 years as an attorney, top Wall Street firm, all that kind of stuff, it's very interesting. You're like, "I'm an introvert, but look at all the stuff I do that doesn't look introverted." So I'm trying to get to why you're doing it and you're saying because it lets you write and that's your answer.

Susan:

Yeah. Okay. So first of all, I would just say lots of introverts are achievement-oriented and ambitious and there's no, I think, that's actually one of the great misconceptions of what an introvert would be, the assumption that you would be less achievement-oriented. I think those two things are just not correlated at all.

Dave:

Agreed.

Susan:

Yeah. So I probably am achievey. I was raised that way, but I don't know. For so many years, public speaking was such a gigantic phobia for me and something I hated so deeply and desperately, and then it was like suddenly I had this moment where my life dream of publishing a book was coming true, and I was invited to give this Ted talk, and I was totally terrified. I had to go after it to the maximum degree in order just to fight the fear at all. You know what I mean?

I wouldn't even have given that Ted talk in the first place if my husband hadn't been coaxing it along the whole way through. I wasn't even sending in my application to Ted. He had to keep telling me to put it in the mailbox over and over again because at the same time that I was trying to do it, of course, I also had the resistance that always comes with fear.

Dave:

I don't believe that introverts have a hard time being successful or that they're less successful. I'm just looking at the type of work you've done that requires you to go out and be less introverted. It's interesting the career path and all the things that you've done, but if it's in service to what you want to do, I get it. I'm actually not that much of a public person. You guys wouldn't believe that now, but before I started this, you couldn't tell anything about me because I'm a computer hacker. I'm like, "I should be digitally invisible," and I'd pulled it off.

Let's talk about sorrow because you went from a introversion and then you waited quite a while and then said, "All right. I'm going to write a book," and you went through some personal loss and you said, "All right." You wrote Bittersweet. Talk to me about what sorrow even is. I'm not sure that I really know. It's a feeling, but how would you define sorrow?

Susan:

Well, I mean, I really wrote the book because, well, I started off trying to solve this lifelong question that I've had, which is the reaction that I and many other people have to sad music. In my case, Leonard Cohen is my patron saint. I just love him, love him, love him, love him, but all minor key sad music for years has evoked in me this incredibly transcendent feeling of love, really. That's the only way to describe it. I had this experience back when I was in law school and sitting in my dorm and some friends came to my dorm room to pick me up for class and they arrived and I was blasting my sad music and they thought that was hilarious and they were like, "Why are you listening to these funeral tunes?"

At the time, I thought it was funny and I laughed and we went to class and that was that, but I really couldn't stop thinking about it, about, well, first of all, what was it in our culture that made it so funny to be listening in the first place, but also what was it about that music that evoked in me the furthest thing from sadness. It really feels to me like the doorway to transcendence, which you could define as being a moment where you're transcending just your own self and you feel connected to something much bigger.

After I listen to that music for a few minutes, I can contemplate the fact that I'm going to die one day and everybody else will die one day and that's fine. It feels like it's totally fine somehow because of that music, and that was really the question that got me. That was a question I wanted to answer of, "What was it?"

So it started off as a question just about music, but it quickly led me to realizing that there is this tradition, a literary tradition, an artistic tradition, religions or wisdom traditions have all been talking about this bittersweet mode of being, and this spans centuries that they've been talking about it. It's in every culture. All of these traditions are pointing towards this bittersweet state of being. It's being connected to creativity and a really deep communion.

You wouldn't know any of that if you look in our culture. There's nothing in our culture that is sending us that message. It's telling us to be afraid of these kinds of emotions, and I think it's a huge spiritual impoverishment. So hence the book.

Dave:

Okay. So you're saying that when people feel both sides of the emotions that it creates a better sense of peace and all, and that's something Buddhists and others would say as well. You have to feel everything not just some things.

Susan:

Yeah, and you have to feel them quite ... Well, it's helpful to feel them quite intensely. For me, I get into that state reliably and predictably when I listen to that kind of music, but everyone has their own ways of getting into that state. It can look different for different people. Although we do know from the research that music is an incredibly common gateway. There's a reason that musicologists have looked at this that the music that gives people the chills and goosebumps, it's always the sad, slow music. It's not the happy dance music.

Dave:

What's the single saddest song on earth that you know of?

Susan:

Oh, wow. I don't know, but I love Leonard Cohen's famous Blue Raincoat, which is just maybe the gloomiest of all his gloomy songs. So that's a really good one, but I also think his song Hallelujah, which has been covered so many gazillions of times, and so many people listened to it performed on American Idol with tears streaming down their faces. I'm like, "What is it about that song that spoke to people so deeply?" I think it's because the essence of that song is what he calls the broken hallelujah. It's the longing for transcendence or divinity or whatever word one uses for it together with the acknowledgement that the world that we're living in is fundamentally a broken world. Those two states together, I think, are the essence of what it is to be human, and people know it the minute they feel it. They know it's something deep.

Dave:

Wow. I love it that you named Hallelujah. It's one of my all-time favorite songs. So when you look at that feeling, I think listeners know they like that. I wouldn't identify that feeling with sorrow. It's maybe more longing. In Bittersweet, you talk about how sorrow and longing make us whole. Is that more of a longing

song or is that more of a sorrow song in the way you're defining it? So I don't even know the right words for which feelings are where in my body when we go into this stuff. So I'm trying to get a sense for it.

Susan:

That's a really astute question because in the book I really do talk about both states of mind, and I think you're right that, well, I mean, Hallelujah is definitely about sorrow, but I would say it's more squarely about longing. It's about, I think, just this feeling of there is a sense with which all of us enter the world where you come into this world crying, right? Psychologists would say or psychoanalysts would say that we're crying because we're longing for the womb that we've just left for its comforts. The religious interpretation would be that we're longing for the divine world that we feel we belong to from which we've been exiled.

I'm not sure it matters which interpretation one uses. The fact is that this is our emotional core. It's our emotional DNA, this sense of longing for an ultimate communion and ultimate love. I believe that that state, that state of existential or spiritual longing is at the heart of some of the best things that we do because we're longing for a better state. So in the service of that longing, we're trying to create things, we're trying to-

Dave:

Oh, wow.

Susan:

... to turn pain into beauty. We're trying to just get closer to the state that we long to be in. That's also what inspires us. You see a moment of Simone Biles, turning some improbable summersaults or some amazing scientific achievement, and it's like for a moment you're glimpsing that perfect world that all humans want to be part of, and then you're inspired to get ever closer to it. We're not in that world right now, but we want to be. We deeply want to be.

Dave:

I'm getting it now. So I think one of the most powerful forces of transformation for humanity is laziness. We just don't want to waste time and energy doing stuff. In fact, I can prove it down to mitochondria and cells that were energy-conserving beings. So I'll use baking powder instead of spending four hours to make the bread rise because I wanted to save time, right? So that's why a lot of entrepreneurial stuff does that, but I had discounted until you've just said it in the right way for me that longing is also a major force of creativity and problem solving in humans because you're saying, "Oh, it could be better. I long for a better world." Therefore, that power of longing is there.

I have different language because I'm a computer hacker, but I experienced something a couple years ago at Burning Man, as these stories go, that I would call techgasm, and it was watching several thousand drones go up in the air and put on a drone show at scale I'd never seen before. I was like, "This is such an achievement of engineering, of human ingenuity for one of those drones to do it," but for them to be like ... It was beautiful at multiple levels where you're just like, "How many hundreds of thousands of lives of technology innovation culminated in that one thing?" You see this state of beauty of what humans can achieve because of its complexity and its beauty.

Yeah. There's a sense of longing like, "Why can't we do that with, I don't know, our legal system or any of the other parts of the world that are irretrievably broken?" I say that to an attorney, of course, which is funny, but-

Susan:

I'm not an attorney anymore, though. You can say anything.

Dave:

All right. There we go, to a former attorney, but it's like, yeah, there is something there. So the desire for things to be better than they are is different than laziness. I think that they're both powerful. So thank you for adding that to my stack of motivation.

Susan:

Yeah, absolutely. I would also riff on that for your stack of motivation that, I mean, you must know this feeling as a computer hacker that part of the creative process is having a shining vision of the perfect thing that you want to create and you know very well when you're working on it that you're never going to get to that full, perfect thing you're imagining, but the sheer act of trying to is itself an uplifting experience.

To me, it's actually the opposite of laziness, honestly, because I always feel like when I have that vision in my head, I'll do anything. That's why I spent so many years on my books. I'll just work and work and work at it in the service of trying to get closer, even though I know it's an asymptote and I'll never actually reach it. I know it's not just me. I've heard many creative people have described their experience that way.

Dave:

It makes sense. For me, I am seeing there's a perfect efficiency ratio right now. How do I raise the, this will sound super nerdy, but the ability of my cells to turn air and food into electricity with zero waste? I know I've shifted that in a very powerful direction, but I know there's always going to be one more electron I could save, right? It's not about perfectionism at all. It's about the game of how close could you get. Is it worth it? At a certain point, the ROI on something like that isn't there for a normal person, but if you're an artist and that's your art, you're like, "Okay. I just wanted to see what was possible because I was curious."

Where does curiosity play into longing versus sorrow? Is that completely a different spectrum? Because these are all words that they're so mushy. I could define them with electrodes on your head, but where does curiosity fit in your stack of how people work? Where does curiosity fit in your stack of how people work?

Susan:

I know. I have to say the biggest challenge of writing this book was that it's such an ineffable topic. I feel like it's a deeply important one that we need to talk about, and yet it's so hard to put it into words. So I'm not surprised that you're asking these kinds of questions.

I don't know. I do think of curiosity as being a different question. You're probably a super curious person so you apply this human way of being of trying to transform sorrow into beauty or to go down the path of longing. You probably do that in the path of curiosity, but I think a less curious person would have their own ways of doing the same thing. Let me just say it more categorically. I don't enjoy sorrow or sadness experiencing it any more than any other human does.

If you ask me, "Would there be a way to design the world without any sorrow or sadness in it?" I might say despite this book that I've just written, "Yeah, go for it," but what I'm responding to is the

world that we have and the humanity that we have, which is destined to experience sorrow and sadness over various circumstances.

What I'm saying is in that world, this world that we have, there are things that sorrow does for us that we're not paying enough attention to, and one of the things it does is it creates, these are someone else's words not mine, but a union between souls because we all experience, because we're in it together and we are all these beings who are destined to love and lose and experience bereavement and all the rest of it, we're in it together, and there's a kind of love that comes from that.

The word compassion literally means, its etymology, it means to suffer with someone. We are designed to respond to the cries of our infants. That's how we survive as a species, and then because of that, we're designed to respond. It radiates outward from there. We're also designed to respond to the distress of other beings and it bonds us together when we share about it and talk about it.

So what we lose when we live in a culture that says, "Well, hide all that and walk around with a smile plastered on your face regardless of what you might be experiencing," first of all, we're losing the truth. I think that humans are truth-seeking beings. We're also losing this ability to connect with each other as much as we otherwise could.

Part of the reason that we love artists the way we do like musicians or novelists or whatever is that they're telling the truth of human experience. They usually are expressing some kind of pain that they and every other human has been through. We feel like, "Oh, my gosh! They're doing that for us." When you read their novel or you listen to their song, you're like, "Oh, my God!" You're saying, "That artist has been through this. Everybody who's listening to it has been through this and, therefore, we're all connected." So it's a glue that we have that bonds us at a deep level.

Dave:

If I fully tapped into the sense of longing, I know how perfect or at least close to perfect we can make the world. I look at the stupid shit that people do all of the time that sabotages it for no good reason, sometimes greed, usually ego, all that stuff. If I actually went full into that, I feel like I just want to jump off a bridge, right? That is a kind of longing that doesn't feel beneficial because how would you mourn for the overall stupidity of the organism of humanity? So how do you avoid from longing so much that you just lose, either become bitter or just become unmotivated?

Susan:

Yeah. That's a question people ask a lot. I think related to that question is, well, what's the difference between this and clinical depression, and they're actually completely, they're very different states, but of course, I see the thing people are worried about or that's in your question.

I'll give you etymology again. The word longing literally means to grow longer and it means to reach for. So the answer to your question is to feel the thing that you're lamenting but then to try to turn it into the direction of beauty or solving the problem or whatever it is. This has always been understood traditionally. You look at Homer's *Odyssey*, and that's basically a story of epic adventure, but it's understood that the adventure begins with Ulysses, the main character, weeping on a beach out of home sickness for his native country of Ithaca that he hasn't seen in a really long time. So it's longing and sorrow and homesickness are what propels him on the journey in the first place.

You see the same thing with so many of the children's stories that become canonical. It's like Harry Potter enters the story at the exact moment that he becomes an orphan and he's now going to spend the rest of his life yearning for the parents who he's never going to be able to remember. That's what starts us on the journey. So the idea is not to be in tune with what's wrong and then follow it down

a black hole. It's rather to be in tune with what's wrong and then follow it to the adventure, follow it to the transformation.

Dave:

So you're basically talking about the magic power of transmogrifying one emotion into another, to quote Calvin and Hobbs who I think made up that word, but you can turn anger into motivation, although it'll burn you if you do that for a long time, and you're saying you can turn longing, which could turn I'll say into toxic longing like, "Good God, how can people do so many bad things?" You can turn it into motivational longing, and that's the hack, that's the trick is to say, "Wow, I feel sorrow that things aren't as good as they could be. Therefore, I'm motivated to make them better," versus "Therefore, I'm motivated to just go, 'Good God, why am I here?'" which maybe more of the clinical depressed path.

Susan:

Yeah. I think it's something like that. I mean, Leonard Cohen, just to use him as one example, there's a bunch that I talk about in the book, but his artistic career you could really say began when he was nine years old and his father died and he reacts to that by taking one of his father's bow ties and writing his very first poem and burying both of them in the family garden in a sacred act. His whole career echoes that act. So yeah, it's a transformation of a grief into an offering. What I say to people, I say it in the book, "Whatever pain you can't get rid of, make that your creative offering."

Dave:

So you recommend people get rid of their pain to the extent they can, and then what they can't get rid of, then they get rid of as a creative offering. Are there other pain-draining technologies?

Susan:

Oh, gosh, pain-draining technologies.

Dave:

I am a [inaudible 00:27:53]. All right. Just different language.

Susan:

Yeah. I love it. Yeah. I'd say call a friend who makes you laugh. Any form of connection I actually think is really the answer to pain because other than physical pain that's caused by an illness or an injury or something like that. Most pain has to do with some kind of failure of connection or loss of connection.

One of the insights that I took from all these different traditions is that, usually, when you're talking about a true lost love, you usually don't get back the lost love in exactly the form that it once existed, but love itself returns in different forms. So I would say to turn in the direction of connection, whether that's calling a friend or some other act that makes you feel bounded to people.

Generally, when you feel pain from something, it's because whatever just happened is something that you actually really value a lot. So let's say you're feeling the pain of a breakup. That's telling you that you value connections of love. So go in that direction.

Dave:

It makes lot of sense what you're saying, though. I'm just trying to get a sense because it's very hard to write a book like this, and congratulations, by the way, on writing Bittersweet because these are all

ineffable concepts. Ineffable is one of my favorite words because it means there isn't a word for it. So how do you do this? That's most of the meditation stuff that I've studied, especially if you go to Tibet or any ancient lineage. It almost reads like nonsense because they're trying to describe a felt state, and if you haven't felt the state, how would you know the word for it, right? So there's all this here's what the edges look like, but they never tell you what the middle looks like because until you feel it, you can't really know.

Now, you said something in Bittersweet that was pretty surprising. You say, "Bittersweetness is the hidden source of our moonshots, masterpieces, and love stories." The two biggest moonshot guys ever, Peter Diamandis and Naveen Jain, are friends and have been guest on the show multiple times. Naveen wrote a book about moonshots and Peter Diamandis runs Abundance 360 and started the X Prize and all this stuff. I don't know if those guys, from knowing both of them, neither one of them is particularly bittersweet. I mean, these guys are positive like, "The world is abundant. There's so many things we can do," and it's just this full charge optimism, and they're the highest achieving moonshot guys I know. They teach other people to do moonshots. How do you contrast your perspective on it with what people are doing for moonshots? I'm not saying you're wrong. I want to get your thinking.

Susan:

Yeah, no, I hear you, and I haven't spoken to those two in particular. What I would say is it's like what we were talking about before that there's always at the heart of a creative drive or the desire for a moonshot, there is always an awareness of the gap between the amazing thing that could be versus that which currently is.

Dave:

Okay. That motivates them 100%. That's exactly what they do. It's what I do, too, right? We have to do that because it's painful not to. Okay. So the longing, yeah, I would say longing for a better whatever is a big part of that. Okay. I like it.

Susan:

Yeah. I'll give you another example of it. Maybe this is slightly different, but you know in the book I spent a lot of time talking to people who are working on radical life extension and the quest for longevity. I went to one of these conferences with people. I was really struck by how much on the one hand the language of life extension enthusiasts is one of you could say it's like a radical optimism and it was definitely a very optimistic vibe in the room and when you chat with them, but so many of the presentations by these scientists and other people in this field, they would start with a story of somebody talking about the loss of a beloved parent or child or something like that or there would be a picture of somebody weeping over a grave.

I thought, "Oh, my gosh! That's it." This was a collection of people who are actually more sensitive than the average person is to the grief of mortality, and they feel like this grief is so unacceptable that they have to spend their lives devoted to closing that gap between the world they're dreaming of and this one. So I think that's often an element.

Dave:

You're 100% right. It's the unspoken thing. I've noted that for 25 years of running a nonprofit in the space. There are people who are running away from death, and sometimes they have billions of dollars and they're willing to fund things. Not all of the movement is that, though, because there are those of us who are into what's possible, right?

I just want to thank you for saying it. Very few people in that movement where I'm, I will say, a well-known figure will talk about that, "Oh, my God, I'm afraid to die." I'm not afraid to die. I just decided to believe in reincarnation. So it removes fear of death. If I'm wrong, I won't know, and if I'm right, then I win. It's very easy to do it that way.

So then when you don't have fear of death, you're like, "Well, how long can I live?" It's a game instead of a race to not die, which allows me to play with longing instead of play with fear because playing with fear isn't really that interesting except in a few contexts.

Susan:

Yeah, and it's also more inhibiting. Fear is not as motivating. Fear causes you to withdraw. Whereas longing causes you to move forward.

Dave:

You talk in your book, too, about unconditional love and why we long for it. Why do you think we long for perfect, unconditional love?

Susan:

I mean, I don't know if I have the answer any more than anybody else does, but for sure, that's who we are. We're destined to do that. Whether that's because our first experience of life is nine months inside a womb where everything feels like love and all our needs are met and then suddenly out into the world and things are different or is it because there's some divinity to whom we feel we belong and want to return there? The Sufis call it the longing for the beloved of the soul, and the idea is that there's no distinction between the divine being we long for and ourselves. What we're really longing for is an ultimate union.

I don't think I know the answer any more than anyone else does. I just know that we see different manifestations of that same wish, and that so much of the reason that people have trouble with their real life love relationships is because they don't match the perfect unconditional blissful union for which we long, especially in romantic relationships. You spend the first six months, first few months with someone and it feels a little bit like you're in that Garden of Eden state. If it's a great beginning to a relationship, it feels that way. Then suddenly you start to realize you're not perfect, they're not perfect. You see all the ways in which you're individually not perfect and your union together isn't perfect.

Then you feel like, "Oh, gosh." You're thrust back into that state of wishing for the Garden of Eden state. So if you're not careful, you might move on to the next relationship even if that original one could have been really great just because this DNA of ours thrusts us to keep looking for it. So I think it's really helpful to understand that about ourselves so that we can distinguish between a "wrong relationship" and a quite wonderful relationship, which will still always necessarily be imperfect.

Dave:

So that's where that little gap for longing is. Then there's a ton of songs, and most everyone has experienced lost love. In Bittersweet, you talk about the acceptance commitment therapy topic. Can you walk listeners through what is ACT?

Susan:

The idea of it is that when something goes wrong, when you have a loss or a pain or a sorrow or a bereavement, the acceptance piece is to first really accept all the emotions that are happening,

everything that's just happened. You're just leaning into it. You're going to experience feelings of overwhelm and that's okay, too. You're giving yourself full permission to accept everything that's happening, but then the second piece of it is the commitment piece, and that idea is to say to yourself, as we were talking before, "If something has caused me this much pain, it's because it's an area of my life that I really care about, and what could I do to commit myself to this thing that I care so much about?"

So if it's the loss of a love relationship and it's causing you that much pain, it's telling you that love really matters to you and you want to organize your life around love, but there's other kinds of pains, too. It's like why is it that after 9/11 suddenly in the US so many people sign up to be firefighters, and in the wake of the pandemic, so many people sign up for medical school? There's a way in which these kinds of painful experiences remind us of what we've lost and make us realize what we really care about. So you can turn in the direction of that caring.

It doesn't bring, in the examples I just gave you, that doesn't bring back the towers and it doesn't bring back the people who are lost to the pandemic, but it's a way of saying, "I care about having our health be intact so I'm going to lean into that." You don't get your people back, but you still get to move in that direction.

Dave:

Okay. I get it. So this is a way of working through loss and love and longing, and it's cool that you worked it into your book so that people can see that it means you valued something. There's so many people walking around right now with a ton of pain and trauma and loss and sadness who don't really know what to do with it, which is it's an act of service to teach them what to do.

There's something else going on, though, that's probably driven mostly by social media, but everyone's a winner and a loser and everything is polarized. If you realize that the real world is more shades of gray, there's some wins and some losses and all of that, how do you recommend people live just in authenticity when everything is you won or you lost or this toxic positivity, "Look at my jet," and not mentioning that you just stood next to someone else's for the photo kind of thing?

Susan:

Yeah. Yeah. I think it's really helpful for people to be aware of how much, and this has been going on since the 19th century, but how much US culture, maybe more broadly than that, tends to look at ourselves and at others in a dichotomous way, that you're either a winner or you're a loser. Literally in the 19th century, as we became more of a business culture, people started asking the question more and more of, "If somebody has success or failure, is that because they got lucky or unlucky or is it because of something inside of them that predetermined this outcome?"

Increasingly, the answer that was given, the answer became that it's because of something inside you. The more that that happened, the more it became really important for people to start only permitting themselves the emotions that they would associate with winning and not with loss. It became this false duality.

So it got to the point in the 19th century, the psychologist William James starts noticing that people won't even talk about bad weather. It became distasteful to notice that there was bad weather outside and to comment on it because you weren't supposed to dwell on anything that was negative.

The use of the word loser has just increased. It's gone up and up and up over time. This started a long time ago. In 1929 with the Great Depression, there were newspaper headlines that would say

things like, "Loser commits suicide in streets after becoming bankrupt," so even in a context like that. That's why people are presenting themselves this way in social media or anywhere.

It's like if the choice is be a winner or a loser, then you know which direction you're going to take instead of just viewing life and humanities like a constant interplay between winning and loss and everything in between. That's what life is. So the main thing I'd say is to become aware of that and reject the false dichotomy.

Dave:

So you just reject it and say, "All right. Maybe I don't have to smile all the time." You talk about in Bittersweet, you talk about how Americans smile way more than anyone. It's funny. About three days before I recorded this, I was in the Maldives, and that's one of the countries you cite, where if people smile, it's because they're dishonest or they're foolish or probably both. Tell me more about why smiling means you might be a loser.

Susan:

There's even a quote there from a guy in Russia saying, "Life is hard. Why are Americans smiling all the time? Life is hard." So there's a feeling of if you're constantly smiling in the face of knowing that life contains all these difficulties, then you're either not telling the truth or you're too unaware to even realize what the difficulties are. It's not to say never smile. It's just a different sensibility.

Dave:

So they don't do it reflexively and falsely the way that Americans do sometimes.

Susan:

Right. Right. It's a feeling of, yeah, it can't possibly be true that you always feel like smiling and yet there you are smiling all the time. So what are you not showing? What truth are you not either not seeing or not telling?

Dave:

In that same part of your book where you talk about smiling, you also talk about a Stanford term called effortless perfection, where it's not enough to be perfect. You have to look like you didn't try to be perfect. I liked seeing that because when I was much younger and pretty much an asshole, I'm reasonably intelligent and I loved to, in high school, I'd finished the test first and I already knew I aced it, and then you slam your pencil down and make a lot of noise with your backpack. You're like, "Haha. I did it. It was easy," right? You're rubbing people's faces. I know people don't run on that operating system anymore, but I used to be like that.

It's something that I think is much bigger and more toxic than anyone's really talked about, where people work their asses off and sometimes they're successful and they're usually lucky and worked hard, but then the media will portray them as effortless perfection or effortless success. When in reality, there's a lot of pain and struggle and work. You just don't see it, and that leads younger people to believe that if they have to work hard in order to get success, that something's wrong with them because it wasn't effortless. You're supposed to just wave your hand and say, "I deserve a promotion," and you're like, "Actually, you didn't learn the skills of the job. You actually deserve to be fired not to get a promotion." Then there's all sorts of pain and all that stuff. How would you go about reversing our epidemic of effortless perfection if you had a magic wand?

Susan:

I mean, if I had a magic wand, I'm a big believer in influential people being able to pave the way. So I would say it's really incumbent on anybody who has any degree of influence, whether in their company or school or whatever it is, to start just talking more honestly about what they've actually experienced and what they actually feel. I'm saying this at the same time that I'm an extremely private introvert by nature. So I'm not saying you are now obligated to divulge everything about your personal life. I don't mean it like that. I just mean make a few adjustments of what you're willing to share.

We are starting to do this a little bit more, but even if you look at the last 10 years or so, there's been much more of a narrative of talking about failure. I'm sure if we Googled it, the word failure is used much more in the business press, but always, it's like people will only talk about failure in the context of the narrative of it leading to an ultimate success. That's the only context in which we're comfortable with failure as opposed to just talking about it as part of life. Sometimes it doesn't lead to success. It just is, and that's okay, too. I mean, it doesn't feel good when it happens, but it is part of this human experience.

So yeah, I'm a big believer in influential people leading the way in doing this, but then also in creating spaces for everyone to do it. We might be needing to start anonymously social media platforms that would encourage people to talk about what they truly feel, and maybe that would only happen with anonymous platforms. I don't know.

Dave:

There was an app called Whisper. That was all the rage about seven, eight years ago. It was really cool because you could go in and you could just say something, and it was, by definition, anonymous, and it would share it with people within 100 miles of wherever you were, but you'd never know who they were, and there wasn't a permanence in the connection, but people could respond to what you said.

It caught on big time in tech circles. So you go to San Francisco or Silicon Valley or New York or somewhere and you'd just be like, "Wow, these people are talking about their real life like big failures or cheating on marriage or not knowing what to do," and you're going, "Wow! There's all this hidden stuff that you never see anywhere." Of course, then they didn't get funded and went out of business or stopped growing or I don't know what happened. Someone told the wrong secret, but it was a really neat experiment in what you're talking about.

I was on there for a little while. I was like, "This is really, really cool." I even shared a couple things and got really interesting feedback on it, stuff that you just wouldn't really bring up in a boardroom or when you're raising funding or whatever. Clearly, these are people who were real people, who knew a lot of stuff, and I was like, "Wow, I'm intrigued." So there's something going on there.

Susan:

That's really interesting. Why did they not get funded, though, if it was catching on?

Dave:

I don't know what happened to Whisper. It was all over the place and then it just crashed. I think maybe they didn't have any way to make money. It was just cool. The very early internet, Circa in 1992, was like that. Anyone could be anonymous at any time and it was easy. So people would share all kinds of neat stuff, and there was this rapid learning. Once we started forcing identity, once they shut down the last bastion of privacy, it was called anon.penet.fi. It was a server in Finland where anyone can send an email

and it would anonymously send it to someone else. So you could say something without them knowing who you were.

When some government, probably the US, tried to get them to give up their server, they're like, "Nope, we just deleted everything. See you all later." After that, anonymity went away, and sometimes for us to express the hard stuff, you need anonymity. So I'm hopeful that we have that.

Susan:

Totally. Yeah. I'm so struck by you saying that was a feature of the early internet because I remember that so distinctly. I was so excited when the internet came to be for specifically that reason. It felt to me like ... You know the feeling of you might read a novel and part of the gratitude to the author is that they're really, really telling the truth and they're really expressing something that's difficult to express in regular life, but they just did it in this book.

I remember feeling like the early internet was that. It was thousands upon thousands of novels of people telling the actual truth because suddenly there was this anonymous way to do it. Yeah. The fact that we've lost all that in the last decade plus, it's such a huge loss that somebody should figure out how to fix.

Dave:

Now, you went to some places in your book that I didn't think you'd go. You talk about preconception trauma and maybe even generational trauma, and you talk about Rachel Yehuda's work, who's actually been a guest on the show. So do you think that there's generational sorrow or generational longing and that that plays a role into how we behave?

Susan:

Yeah, I do think so. I actually hadn't been planning to go in that direction, but what happened? I mean, I wrote about this. I went to a seminar for, well, it's a whole long story, but basically, I went to a seminar for bereavement counselors just in my effort to understand more about that. That seminar ended up opening up this whole question of inherited trauma and inherited sorrow. I started realizing ways in which, well, for me personally, that there's a kind of sorrow that I have always felt on some level that I can remember from a very early age that would happen. It always happened at moments of finality like I would be leaving summer camp, and I had been feeling ambivalent about summer camp to begin with. It wasn't like it had been pure unadulterated joy. Yet, just the fact that it was the last day of camp and camp would never be again just provoked in me feelings of disproportionate sorrow and anguish.

Anyway, I started talking with this bereavement counselor who was suggesting the role of inherited sorrow and trauma in that for me because I come from a family with a lot of that. Then I started researching that whole area, Rachel Yehuda's work and others. I think it's absolutely fascinating and also just really helpful in understanding oneself of understanding the ways in which you may have inherited a family dynamic, whether it was transmitted to you culturally, familialy or through your DNA, a dynamic that shapes you and your reactions in all kinds of ways that you might not be aware of. Just the sheer fact of awareness of it is transformative in and of itself because you can understand your reactions and move with them.

Dave:

I love the way you write about it in the book. It reminds me of Stephen Porges, who's known as the father of attachment theory, sorry, who's known as the father of polyvagal theory, about how the vagal

nerve works, and you *referenced* the vagal nerve in your book. He has some sounds he can play going back to sad music, and they cause a lot of people to go into their vagal system, which is usually profoundly healing.

So when he plays it in the US, usually, a few people in the room just starts sobbing uncontrollably. He has therapists. He helps them. He goes to London and he plays the same song to a room full of hundreds of people, and after 30 seconds or something, he has to turn off the sound because the entire room is losing it. His explanation for that was that, "Well, look at London. Anyone who's a London native went through extreme bombing in fear during World War II and they have generational trauma from that societal trauma, and anyone who's not from London got kicked out of their country," which is pretty much what an immigrant is. So these are people who now have trauma because they left their country. So it's a really traumatized part of the world, either societally or generationally, and he was seeing it in the effect on vagal tone in people and in how they had to heal from their traumas.

So I think there's abundant evidence that generational trauma is real, and the stuff that your grandmother was worried about probably is in there somewhere even if you don't know it and just recognizing that could be possible. It matters. When I do 40 Years of Zen, which is my neurofeedback brain upgrade program for entrepreneurs and types, it's excessively common for people to step in family trauma or generational trauma, and sometimes even for your people, if you're dealing with an oppressed population somewhere. Sometimes there's just a chip on your shoulder you didn't know you had or a fear, and it's something that you end up healing when you know it's real, but if you don't recognize it in the context of life, then you don't know that you could heal it because you don't know it's there. It's these invisible things that are cool.

I think you did a great job with Bittersweet of pointing out some stuff that's either invisible or very hard to see and saying it leads to behaviors, including to make the world a better place and sometimes not. So it's a fascinating read. I want to thank you for being on The Human Upgrade today and sharing your work with the world and stepping out of your introvert bubble and interacting in the outer external world and having us all look at you. You did a great job.

Susan:

Well, thank you so much. It was really fun to talk to you and really a pleasure to be here.

Dave:

If you liked this episode, you might want to read Bittersweet or maybe do the Audible version, but frankly as an author, I know she wants you to buy the hard cover because that's what gets her on the New York Times for another seven years, but whatever you do, it would be awesome if you read Bittersweet and you like it. Do the same thing you do when you get a really good cup of coffee, you tip your barista, but the way you do that for an author is you just leave a review. So read Bittersweet, and when you're done going, "Oh, my God," then go on Amazon or wherever you like to read books and just leave the number of stars you think are appropriate so that way she won't be feeling sorrow later because she didn't get your review. See, it all works.