



Nat: Welcome back to Reach, Teach, Talk. I'm Nat Damon and we are talking today about the power of belief in teaching and learning. And it's funny because whenever I talk with student groups about "who's your most memorable teacher and why" and it's always they come up with the funny one and the happy one, or the one who's really nice and probably maybe on the easier side when it comes to grading and whatnot. But then there's always that student who's like, "You know, actually, the most memorable teacher for me is actually Ms. Smith who's my AP Bio teacher and she is just so hard and so strict but there's something about her that just makes me want to work for her." And then a couple kids will start nodding and they'll be like, "Oh, yeah, Ms. Smith, that's right. She is really hard but I want to work for her too." And then it comes this idea of what is it that Ms. Smith presents that makes her memorable, meaningful, even though she really pulls a lot out from her students.

Nat: And we settle on the fact that it's because "Ms. Smith believes in me. She found a way to challenge me in a way that makes me not want to run away from the challenge, but instead I want to lean in and I want to work harder." And it all has to do with belief. "She makes me feel," these are students talking here, "she makes me feel like I can do this work, and even to the degree that I wouldn't be assigned this work or expected to do this work, if Ms. Smith did not believe that I could do it." So that's the topic of our conversation today and I'm really thrilled to have **Brian Wogensen** here. He is a 20-year teacher at the Archer School for Girls here in Los Angeles, and actually Brian, welcome, first of all, to the show.

Brian: Thank you. It's great to be here.

Nat: It's wonderful to have you here. And Brian has a very interesting kind of origin story about what brought him to Archer, which actually takes us 6,000 miles away into the green hills of Italy. Is it Umbria or was it Tuscany?

Brian: Tuscany. Just outside of Siena.

Nat: It was in Tuscany. Okay, even more ridiculously gorgeous, and outside of Siena. Like, you can't get more bucolic than that. But I want us to kind of start there, because you lived outside of Siena for a couple years before you became a teacher for the past 20 years, and you were doing something very different but very relevant to what we're talking about today when it comes to belief. So what

were you doing in Italy, and what brought you there and yeah, what was your focus for those two years?

Brian: Well, I had been in graduate school in Boston and I'd done a year and I went to a writing conference in Europe. Friend of mine said, "Hey, come to Italy. You can spend the rest of the summer here." And it was incredible. And I got offered this opportunity to do an apprenticeship with this old guy that I had met there. His name was Silvano. He was a stonemason. And it didn't take me long to call up my professors at my graduate program and say, "Hey, I'm going to take a leave of absence." And so, it ended up being a two-year leave of absence and I did this apprenticeship with this guy. And it was remarkable and frustrating at first. We had a language barrier. Obviously, I didn't know Italian. I thought I was learning some Italian from him, but after a couple weeks I realized he was trying to speak English to me. But once we got over that I started to learn.

Brian: And I actually think the language barrier was interesting in terms of how I was learning, because I had to kind of dampen my focus on what he was saying and really focus on what he was doing, which is one of the things that he wanted me to really do at the beginning was just to do a lot of observation. I think that would have really kind of got on my nerves and kind of been difficult for me, if it wasn't for the fact that he also made sure that every job we were doing, I had some piece of it that was mine, that was doable, that I had learned some of these skills and I could apply them at this little piece of the job.

Brian: And I was a part of it, right? I knew that we were building this wall and this little section of it was mine. I remember, a year later, walking through with my parents, came to visit me, and I said, "I built that little piece right there. And I did that stair there." I kind of walked through my apprenticeship with them. But that was a big part of that relationship that we had was him kind of bringing me along by allowing me to take part in what he was doing, but in the kind of controlled way I wasn't going to screw up what he was doing.

Nat: Silvano is his name.

Brian: Yes.

Nat: And can you give a little characterization of him?

Brian: Oh, yeah. So, he was kind of an incredible guy. I actually just saw him. I've been back a number of times and I just saw him last summer. He's still the same. He's just very gregarious, 6'4" guy who's... His father was a stonemason. I think his grandfather was a stonemason. And his son went to law school. And so he was kind of looking for someone, to work with him, to pass on the stuff, and I kind of fit the bill for a while. He loved food. He loved wine. His wife would make him drink Mezzo Mezzo wine at lunch, so she would pack a bottle, a liter, of wine that was mixed half and half with water. And I of course was bringing my own wine.

Nat: It's a communion wine.

Brian: Yeah. But he would always, as the hierarchy went, he would kind of take my wine and make me drink the Mezzo Mezzo.

Nat: So he doubled down, right? He was like "Give you the watered-down one."

Brian: "Give me that here." He was also just an incredible... His ability to take the Lord's name in vain was kind of incredible too.

Nat: He has a hundred different ways to curse?

Brian: He had these strings of like (dramatic Italian gibberish with flair). It would just go on and on, like that was a...

Nat: But it sounds so beautiful, but it's the most crude-

Brian: But it's horrible. Yeah, yeah.

Nat: But you got to love Italians for that.

Brian: Yeah. So he was pretty incredible.

Nat: Okay, so you were in a grad program in Boston for what? What was the...?

Brian: Oh, I was doing a master of fine arts in creative writing.

Nat: Okay, beautiful.

Brian: At Emerson, yeah.

Nat: Beautiful. And a great program. But you left it. And you left it not knowing you were going to be learning and being an apprentice for stonemasonry for two years but you knew that you wanted to live in Italy and in a totally different environment than Boston.

Brian: Exactly, yeah.

Nat: Okay. Beautiful. And then you met Silvano. And then way you describe him, he is a gregarious figure, and he's large and kind of a larger than life person. But he also took you through the steps of learning how to shape stone into functional walls, as you were describing in that example. But what's interesting to me is a couple of things about the way that you describe how he approached you and approached the learning model, because you had a language barrier. As you say, he was kind of trying to speak as much English as he could and you were trying to learn Italian as best as you could from him from his broken English.

Nat: But despite the language barrier, you found a connection to him and you were building a relationship with him. And there's so much that is behind that I think when we think about teachers in the classroom and the teacher/student relationship, because a teacher can heap tons of verbal praise on a student, but

that student might or might not receive it, because that student might not believe it. That student might think those words are empty. Same thing with the opposite, criticism. So how did Silvano communicate to you in a way that made you feel like you were making steps and progress and also learning the art of stonemasonry without knowing the language so well for you? Is there something you can speak about with that?

Brian: Yeah, I mean, one of the things certainly was if I had done something that wasn't up to par, that wasn't working, that my skills just hadn't been there yet and I had been trying something, he was pretty abrupt about saying, "No, that's not it." And he would tear it down, right?

Nat: Like a sandcastle.

Brian: It was very clear when you're building something and then he comes along and says, "No, we're going to unbuild that." But I always knew the stakes. I knew that this was a job, that he needed to complete this to a level of proficiency and excellence, in his mind. And so I knew that when I did do something that remained, that was up to par, that really gave me an incredible sense of satisfaction. Because I knew the difference between when I had failed something and when I'd succeeded. So I think one thing I learned from him is that failure in the process of learning was actually really helpful. And that's a tough lesson for students, especially in our culture and our society. Where I teach, with girls who are prone to a kind of a sense of perfectionism, the idea of failure is really difficult. So that experience was really good for me in that, and I try to certainly kind of carry that with me.

Nat: And you would still get the Mezzo Mezzo wine, regardless of whether he kicked over your sandbox or not, right?

Brian: That's true.

Nat: So there was like consistency regardless. So if you failed, or if you didn't do the work to his excellent standards, it wasn't like he was going to withhold, which gets me thinking about teaching. Because it's a great analogy you made there, Brian, because positive reinforcement versus negative withdrawal, right?

Brian: Sure.

Nat: And this idea of how we as teachers can communicate when a student did not hit the mark at all, in a very clear way, in a transparent way, but also not have it be this imposing scarcity on the student or withdrawing something. Does that make sense?

Brian: Yeah, yeah. And I also think like for me it's framing how I'm talking about a failure or giving feedback that is honest and clear, framing that from the very beginning of our experience together, with the class and with students individually. And framing it in articulating my goals for them and my hopes and aspirations and being as genuine and authentic as I can with that. And then in the same breath saying, "And I'm going to be telling you some things that are going to be critical,

that I'm going to critique and give you a sense of where your skills are lacking, or where you need to build." So I think that framing is really important.

Brian: The other thing is that the way that I try to develop feedback in terms of students finding areas where they need to work, let's say it's with their writing. I try to find ways to have that be a collaborative process, so the student's a part of that, so that I ask a lot of questions of them, and get them to kind of analyze and reflect on their own skills and where their skills are lacking. And oftentimes they're recognizing things, once they're drawn to it, that I would have been telling them as well, but they're finding it themselves too. So I think that kind of relationship that happens in feedback and that collaboration between a mentor and apprentice that develops like that is really crucial.

Nat: I love this idea of the questions you ask and the fact that you make a collaborative process. There's you, there's the student, there's the mentor, there's the apprentice. It's one-on-one, one with one, and what you're doing. And what 15, 16, 17 year old doesn't want to feel like they matter and that they are seen and heard and ultimately trusted? And your questions are ways that communicate to the student that you are interesting to me. Your thoughts can sometimes confuse me and so I have some questions about them. The defense you use for your thesis, passages from book, whatever we're discussing in your essay are not as clear, and I've got some questions about that. But I'm taking my time to ask these questions. And the way that I'm visualizing in my head as you were talking about that, Brian, is just these threads of connection between question and a student's answer, question, student's answer, question, student's answer, that over time build a trust bridge between a teacher and a student.

Nat: So it's funny, because one thinks, when they think about critique or feedback from a teacher, especially like on an essay, which is interesting because a teacher matters, like who the teacher is when they're grading an essay, because it's hard to be totally objective when you're grading an essay versus when you're correcting a math test or something, right? The conversation that can happen is absolutely something that is about sharing impressions, sharing thoughts, sharing questions, that can lead to a closer bond between the teacher and the student. So, I just love how you're making that connection between... I'm not sure if Silvano, with his language barrier, was able to ask you specific questions about how you sculpted that stone, yet it sounds like the attention he gave to your work mattered. And that makes me think about the attention you give to your students' work, the time that you would take, "Come meet with me and let's talk about this essay together," is a way of communicating that their work matters. Does that all make sense?

Brian: Yeah, no, that makes total sense. I mean, I think the other piece of it is that when you're asking questions, what you're opening up is an opportunity to listen. And I think a student, who recognizes that someone is listening to them, is hearing them. That develops the trust more than almost anything, right? They know that they have the floor. They're able to express their thoughts, their ideas, respond to these questions. And so over my years as a teacher, it's become more and more evident to me that listening is really probably my most important skill. I think back on my first like five years teaching, I used to think of my curriculum and my role

as a teacher, I understood that I wanted there to be a student-centered classroom, but I was still a focal point in a way that I'm not now.

Brian: And I saw my curriculum as almost like an adventure for the students. And I would have these little kind of things that would pop up. And they would surprise them and they would recognize them. Whether it's like something really small like we were working on this vocab list and then a month later, they're reading an essay by someone and one of the vocab is in that essay, and they're like, "Oh, this is the word that we're..." Right? So these little like Easter eggs and things, right? And that's great, and I still love that aspect. But I've really learned that the more I can step back my sense of being the kind of conductor like that, or the orchestrator, and give them more opportunity to kind of be co-orchestrators, and to listen more, has been important.

Brian: And you know what else? I used to tell a lot more stories in the classroom, which I think is, I mean you can challenge me on this, but I think telling stories, if you're teaching a humanities course, which is really about storytelling and about how we learn and gain empathy and perspective from stories. I think it's important. It's crucial. But it used to be my voice a lot more and I would tell these stories, and I think the girls really were interested in that. And they got to know me and understand me through my stories. But I realized that that's one way. That's one-sided. I would say the biggest change that I've made in terms of my students gaining a self of comfort, understanding, empathy and belief in the classroom has been taking council. So I did Council Training at the Ojai Foundation 15 years ago. And I was a class dean for seven years, with the senior class primarily. And I would use council with the class. And-

Nat: Sorry, when you say "use council" just for anybody who's listening or watching-

Brian: For sure.

Nat: I think about a talking stick. I think about, and I don't mean to simplify by that, but can you maybe tell us what council is? It's a formal program.

Brian: Sure, yeah. I mean, there's different forms of and you're going to get different perspectives on how to kind of define it, but for me, from my perspective, in a kind of generalized way, it's a form of communication where you have a talking piece. And you have a specific intention, and that can be a prompt or a question. And it's usually formed in a way to ask someone to tell a story about X, although I've definitely done modifications with that. And more than anything else, it's a listening exercise, because whoever has the talking piece is speaking and everyone else is listening. So you have you 30 people, which is a big number for a council and they are kind of ways to modify how that happens. But as the piece goes around, you have your opportunity to speak. But the goal is to be open to listening rather than thinking about, "Oh, what am I going to say to this?" So it's about being in the moment. It's about listening.

Brian: But I did that, and we do that in our human development course, but I think we kind of silo some of these things and kind of I recognized, "Wow, why don't I bring council into my classroom, and actually into my curriculum, in a way that

there's more storytelling." And so every last period of every rotation, so once every seven days, we spend the whole period doing a council. And sometimes that's about the text we're reading. We're doing Handmaid's Tale right now. Yesterday, I did a council on Handmaid's Tale, where the prompt was something that resonated with the themes that we'd been talking about in this book. But other times they come up with the prompt themselves. But what it is, is they have an opportunity to learn about each other. And I get an opportunity to learn about them. What's a place in your life that is a sanctuary for you, a place where you feel the most you. And tell a story about that place.

Brian: If you can imagine 18 students, each kind of conveying that and being inspired by the story you just heard to talk about your story. And they know that I've heard all those things. And they've heard me give my response to that too. It just develops a kind of trust and empathy. So that idea of listening more in the classroom to your students, in terms of giving them a sense of believing that they're in a place of comfort, where they have agency, and where they can feel like they can engage, and do that in a place that's authentic.

Nat: So often the classroom feels phrenetic, right?

Brian: Right.

Nat: And it's so interesting to hear about this council approach as a way of deliberately kind of pushing the train back, or just holding back this impulse that we have, particularly as teachers in the classroom, to keep the pace going, to keep things exciting, to make sure that students are... It's almost like there's two different ways of looking at the word engaged, which is such an overused word in education, but I like that it's overused, because it's an important word, engagement. But it's like there's two different ways of looking at engagement. One is the song-and-dance, story-driven, teacher as a charismatic, keep everything alive, keep everything sparking, spark, spark, spark, spark. And I can totally relate to how that as a younger teacher, an earlier teacher, that's appealing. And you get a bit of a high off of that in the classroom, the sparking and fizzing and everything.

Nat: But then there's this other level of engagement, which is what you're absolutely talking about, which requires belief. And I was thinking about this as you were talking, describing it. Because this other deeper, I think, engagement is one that is based on we've shaped the way that this classroom is going to behave, for lack of a better word. We are going to listen. When somebody is talking and telling their story, they've thought about and making relevant to this theme of the Handmaid's Tale, for example, that you gave, anybody who talks is going to know that they are going to have the floor. And they will be listened to and what they say will be believed unconditionally. But as a teacher, that level of engagement that you're building, involves a sense of belief that silence is okay, that ultimately there will be a gem that comes out of whatever Julia is saying here. I can imagine, Brian, there must be times where, say, Julia is sharing and you're all listening, because you have to, but as a teacher you're like, "I just wish we could..."

Brian: Oh we have the final followup question here. Can I just...

Nat: Totally, because she's-

Brian: No, you have to just sit with it.

Nat: Restrain it with it. You have to sit with it. And all this relates to there's a mindfulness aspect of this. And it's just such an interesting and very different way of looking at the role of a teacher. Because it's funny, Brian, you mentioned earlier, like I used to be a conductor. I used to think that I was the conductor in the classroom. And that I always looked as like the benchmark that you want to hit as a teacher, the idea of being the conductor. Let the students play their instrument and build harmony and have a beautiful symphony come out of this. But you're getting me to think about looking at the classroom in a very different way, which is not based on the belief that Julia can play the oboe and Sam can play the viola, and Terry can play the drums and have it be harmonic. But it's actually not about noise, it's about silence. And it's about trusting that silence and believing that the silence, the restraint, the intentionality that you build in your classroom today is going to produce some rich learning.

Brian: Yeah. And also the silence breeds voice, right? And I think as teachers, our big demon is time, right?

Nat: Right.

Brian: So I still find, I still have this tension with me where it's I told them we were going to do a council here, but we're behind on this text and can we skip it or postpone it or something like that. But I really have to train myself to recognize how valuable it is, so that I can kind of tamp those feelings down, but it's consistent. But what I meant by it creates voices is that I definitely have found that students, when I am in a more kind of traditional kind of discussion mode or we're doing seminar or they're doing small group work, the value of that listening that they've done in council really pays off, because they're more open to releasing their thoughts, to speaking without knowing exactly where the end of their thought is, which is I think is really important discussion skill, to not kind of try to craft your thoughts and then kind of release it, but to have it be more organic. And that organic thing certainly happens, and I see it every year.

Brian: It kind of develops it. There's a crescendo to it, as they become more comfortable with each other and as they learn about each other, and believe that this is a space that's safe for them to do that. I do think that the other thing that, you were just making me think about the notion of silence, and at Archer we've done a lot of thinking about introverted students and reading the book Quiet. I don't know if you've read that but it's-

Nat: Susan Cain, great book.

Brian: Yeah, it's a great book. And-



Nat: I'm sorry, is it 40% or something? Right? 40% of people consider themselves introverts, right?

Brian: Right, yeah.

Nat: In the Harvard Business School, 95% are extroverts.

Brian: Right. But in the classroom you can expect to have it more that balance shift there. And I think one of the things for those students is to have belief in their teacher and kind of belief in themselves is that they recognize that someone is thinking about that, about that aspect of who they are. So doing silent discussions, doing things like council where... I didn't mention this, one of the things with council is when the talking piece comes to you, you hold it for five seconds and then you just pass it on. There's no requirement that you speak. And the thing I love about kind of silent discussions using kind of digital discussion boards is it becomes a very rich kind of discussion that if you're an introvert, you're so much more apt to like you have time, sometimes it might go over the course of like three days and you can have time to think about something, you can comment on what someone else has said. And so yeah, I just think having the kind of sensitivity to the kind of students that you have in your classroom is important too and the different modes of interaction is really important for their comfort too.

Nat: Absolutely. And just speaking of those message boards and the idea of a thread, do you remember the first time when you were teaching, the first time you used that mode of-

Brian: Yeah, yeah.

Nat: And what was your kind of realization?

Brian: Oh, my god.

Nat: And when was it? Like, it was probably 15 years ago or something.

Brian: It was a long time ago. And you know what it was? Me and another teacher decided we were going to do, trying to remember what text we were reading. We were reading Huck Finn. And we decided to do a kind of inside-outside kind of Socratic seminar, meaning there were like eight students on the inner circle and they were the ones who they had prepared discussion questions. The whole class had just prepared discussion questions, but they were the ones that were going to do the seminar. They were going to actually talk to each other and discuss the text, etc. And then there were six or eight students on the outer circle who were observing and watching.

Nat: They couldn't speak, right?

Brian: They couldn't speak, yeah. But what we did, you talk about the digital discussion board, is we had created a webpage that had links to the discussion boards, and

each of those people in the outer circle had a different role. It's kind of like how Harkness works.

Nat: Yeah, Harkness table, yeah.

Brian: And so there were two girls that were on a joint discussion board and they were just having their own conversation about what they were listening to, but they could stop listening and keep going on their thread. And then another two who were just asking questions of the inner seminar and what was happening there. And then another one was just like a process kind of analyst, who was just like writing down on this discussion board, like, "This is so-and-so said this. And so-and-so had said this. And someone kind of gave a pause before they spoke." You know, all-

Nat: Like the court reporter, whatever it is, yeah.

Brian: Like the stenographer. But then also looking at kind of the dynamics too. I would ask them too, like, "Don't just think about what they're saying. What are the dynamics that are going on?" It got a little meta which I loved. My first foray into kind of metacognition in the classroom really, which I think is a big part of belief too, we could talk about too. But yeah, that was my kind of the door to thinking about how students can have interactions that aren't kind of typical traditional ways.

Nat: Yes, absolutely. Oh my gosh. I mean, it is similar for me too, just recognizing that. Because for me, I always think about it, it's like seven out of ten are pretty good about speaking in class, or it's not versus bad, but their hands are up. But then there's always like the three to five out of ten that are quieter. Susan Cain's book *Quiet*, good reason for reading that book. It is fascinating what you can get content-wise out of students when they have the time to think, the time to just give space to shaping their thoughts and then sharing them in an online thread or you call silent discussion, is that what you called it earlier?

Brian: Yeah, like a silent discussion is what I'd... Because not just are they posting on a discussion board, but then they are commenting on a post and someone is commenting on their comment, so it becomes much more dynamic that way. Yeah, and that's why I think I tend to scaffold things like a silent discussion or a journal and then a paired interaction. Those things happen in a lesson before we go to the full discussion, so that's another thing that lets them feel like, "Okay, I have some groundwork here that I can use in this discussion."

Nat: Which is a great lesson too, by the way, about preparing before the big class discussion, laying your groundwork.

Brian: By the way, I mean I know you had this experience, but oftentimes I'll have students pair up and talk about a prompt or something or a question on the text. And that is one of my favorite sounds, is you've got 18 or 20 people, or girls, and they're paired up. So you've got 9 or 10 pairs, and they all just starting talking to each other in a classroom. And it's like a cacophony. And as a teacher, you're kind of going around and you're trying to listen or you sit down with one of the

pairs and you can kind of just focus on them. But it's really loud. And there's times where I've taken my phone and just record the sound of it. You can't discern anything, but it's just a beautiful sound. Because it's everyone. They're all talking. Those who are introverted, those who aren't. And it's probably the most alive moment in a class.

Nat: Yeah, one-on-one. And that, yeah, absolutely. That's incredible. It's ironic, because it's like you're splitting them up, but the volume is exponentially louder.

Brian: Yeah. It's amazing.

Nat: I want to get back to a point you made about the metacognitive view of the classroom and how belief ties into that, because you just dropped a line saying there's a connection between belief and metacognition.

Brian: I definitely think so. Well, first of all, I think belief requires some kind of sense of the why of what you're doing. For me to believe in what I'm doing, I need to know why I'm doing it. I need to ask that of myself, or have people help me reach an understanding about the why.

Nat: The purpose behind it?

Brian: Well, the purpose behind it? Sure. And how is it important to me? How is going to help me? How does it help me with understanding who I... Well, from the humanities, it's certainly about understanding who I am or understand who you are.

Nat: So relevance too.

Brian: So, and relevance is part of this too, sure. I think it's a huge part of it. But with the metacognitive, bringing metacognition overtly into a classroom? I think we as teachers have we kind of intuitively do it when we ask a student after they've written an essay, "Will you reflect on that? Write a reflection on what that experience was like. What was the process like?" And that's certainly metacognition. But I think there are ways to do it more thoroughly and have it be part of kind of this system of your classroom, where students are asking themselves, not just kind of what was that process like, but, "What was confusing to me? And how did I react to that?" And I think the more that they're recognizing that questions like that and doing thinking like that, thinking about how they're thinking, the more they do that, I think the more they recognize that the actions that their taking with you in that classroom have value. Because it's helping them understand who they are as learners, who they are as thinkers.

Brian: I think we often ask our students about, "What do understand about this. I'm going to assess you're learning. I'm going to assess what you understand." But how often are we asking, "What don't you understand? Or what's confusing to you about this? What are your confusions? And let's sit with confusions." And I think that's definitely a challenge for me. I teach a senior honors course where I'm having them read literary criticism. We're doing some literary theory and it's really... And there are time that I have to realize, "Okay, we're going to spend a

whole class on just talking about these two pages of what we read and what is completely opaque and confusing about this." And they really respond to that. The switch has gone off, or it's flipped from, "Oh, this teacher needs me to know this stuff," to "Oh, this teacher understand that I don't know this stuff and this is confusing." So now we're in this thing together.

Nat: Brian, that's beautiful, because the whole focus of this podcast is about relationships, and about reaching out, and how, in order to truly teach, whether you're in a classroom or the classroom of life, this idea of the reaching out and building relationships being the foundation. You and Silvano, building a relationship and reaching out to you. We'll get back to him at the end here, because there's another topic about him that this discussion has brought to life.

Brian: Sure.

Nat: Yet the messiness of the human condition, this idea that we aren't perfect. There is an ingredient that we haven't touched on that factors into belief, that is positivity, optimism. And I think about this ingredient because I did a little research before you came into today. And I wanted to talk with some former students about you. And if there's anything that came out... Well, I want you to hear this. This is a student who says this about you, "Some teachers tend to teach as if they're leading you down a path and that you'll discover something at the end that they already know. Mr. Wogensen doesn't do that. He discovers along with you. Sometimes he doesn't even know what you'll find." That's exactly what you're talking about!

Brian: I love that! Ah!

Nat: Right? Isn't it exactly what you're just saying a minute ago is, "We're here together here. This is not me challenging you as to what you don't know and how you need to know it. We've got these two dense pages that we have to use literary critique on and let's go to the weeds together here on this, and see what come out."

Brian: Yeah, yeah.

Nat: Love that. And there's another one, "Mr. Wogensen listens so carefully to his students that we feel heard. But also, he gets us to see the good parts of our writing. Then we see our writing is better than we thought. We recognize the strengths that we didn't see before." And I would say as a result also, the students see themselves differently.

Brian: Hmm.

Nat: Positivity. I think there's something that transcends this whole topic about belief in the classroom. Wouldn't you agree that having a sense of optimism, a sense of there's goodness in this work, in this student-

Brian: In this world.

Nat: ... in this thought, in this world?

Brian: Yeah.

Nat: Just as a final, is there anything that you can say that is kind of the attachment between positivity... And one thing, when it gets back to Silvano, I don't necessarily get the sense that it was because he was always positive and happy. There's a difference between what we're talking about and happiness, which might inform a bit about what you're about to say about the connection between positivity and belief. What do you think about that?

Brian: Yeah, and I think that's a really important distinction, that it's not about being happy or being comfortable, right?

Nat: Oh, that's good, yeah.

Brian: I think positivity is about feeling like there's meaning to what you're doing and that there's a kind of mystery. To me, positivity, when I'm feeling the most positive, and I think when my students are feeling the most positive is when there's an unknown, there's a mystery that they're seeking. So there's something drawing them forward, like what student said earlier.

Nat: Yeah, and that-

Brian: It's leading us somewhere. And maybe a couple days ago, we were just really into the beginning of this text of Atwood's book, and the class ended. And I said, "Okay, we got to stop. You guys got to go." And one of the things that a bunch of them said was, "Oh my god! Like class is over? Like that's amazing! How did that happen!" And it's my favorite thing in the world, because it means that they were lost. They were in the moment so much that they had lost that attachment that we have to all the things that are kind of working on us and that are maybe going around in the back of your mind while you're trying to focus on what we're doing in this class or this moment.

Brian: And so for me, positivity is about being eager for the unknown and the mystery. It really touches me what that first student said, because it makes me feel really good about the idea that I think when a teacher can be able to kind of withhold this need to kind of get to point B and then point C and point D, but rather allow students the agency to start to move from A to B but then, oof, we're at P. Because that's where she went.

Nat: And I was surprised by this as you all are.

Brian: And I've never been to P before, right?

Nat: Right.

Brian: I've never been. In college, or at least I've never gone from A to P, right?

Nat: Right, right, right.

Brian: And so that's a-

Nat: Totally.

Brian: That's a fantastic thing, and think when students start to feel like that's a norm, then their belief in what they're doing is, I think, really solidified. So it's about agency. It's about a positivity of the mystery that they can seek out. Yeah.

Nat: Beautifully said. And speaking of time, just kind of going by in a very nonlinear way, I feel like this conversation, which we have to stop in just about minute-

Brian: Ah.

Nat: ... has just been phenomenal.

Brian: Yeah, that was quick.

Nat: Yes, it was very quick. I agree, a good sign. I want to get back to where started from, which is this relationship that you had, this apprentice relationship with Silvano. And just the idea that you did not go to the hills of Tuscany knowing that you were going to be a stonemason. You were going to learn the art of stonemasonry for two years, and with this gregarious 6'4" Italian-speaking man as your mentor. And as we've had this conversation, is there anything about your relationship with Silvano that actually attaches to what we've been talking about with your relationship to your students?

Brian: Yeah, I mean a number of things. I think probably the first one that comes to my mind is once I developed my abilities with Italian, it became very clear that he just loved telling stories. And he loved listening to them, too. For someone who's lived his whole life in a small town of Rosia in the province of Siena, he was so eager to learn about America, and learn about my life. And so, there was such a great exchange that was happening there. And I think that definitely has translated for me. Yeah, yeah.

Nat: Belief in the form of being seen, being understood, having your teacher, your mentor, communicate to you that you are somebody worthy of my curiosity.

Brian: Yeah. And all of that together allowed me to recognize how much I loved stone, how much I loved working with it. And that fueled me. I went to Berkeley and worked as a stonemason for three years after that. I went back to school. I finished that MFA.

Brian: But then, after I wrote my thesis, I worked for three years as a stonemason. So I don't know if I would have been brought to that recognition, this thing that was genuinely, is still a really important part of my life, without having Silvano treat me the way he did, interact with me the way he did, and mentor me the way that he did as well.

Nat: And I imagine if he were here, he would acknowledge the important role you might have played for him, because you mentioned that his son went to law school. And this is a family generational passing down of this art and skill and trade. And you came in with this interest. And in a sense, I imagine that might have come at a good time for him, just knowing that the generational passing down, he might be think was about to be interrupted, because-

Brian: Yeah.

Nat: Right? Discontinued. And here's this outsider reinforcing to him, "Yeah, this is meaningful beyond me, beyond my family." And there's something there in terms of I think about times where there's a poem or there's a book that's so personal to me and that I'm sharing with my students. And it's such a rewarding feeling when you know that, at least with some of them, that they're seeing what you see in the material, in the literature, in the poem.

Brian: Yeah, and I think about when students come back, which I know you've had that experience too, years later, and come to talk to you. It's such an incredible thing. And I had the chance to go. I've been back to Italy a number of times and brought my wife and my son back a couple years ago. And we ate on this terrace. And I was able to tell the story about five years previous. I had gone back. I'm teaching in Archer already, but I had worked for three years as a mason. I had kind of cut my teeth. And I went back and Silvano and I, kind of as peers, built this beautiful terrace together, the two of us. So now, every time I go back-

Nat: You were on that terrace two years ago?

Brian: We're on that terrace.

Nat: You were on the terrace with your wife and son?

Brian: Yeah, yeah, yeah. With Silvano, having dinner.

Nat: Oh my gosh.

Brian: Yeah, it was great. And so, it's definitely this circle kind of close a little bit on that.

Nat: It's beautiful.

Brian: Yeah, it was great.

Nat: Beautiful. And one last image that you mentioned very much early, was when you would walk down the wall with Silvano and you would proud... Oh no, maybe this was with your dad? You were saying, "I was walking along this wall, and I was proudly showing off I did that part."

Brian: Yeah.

Nat: "I did that part," right?

Brian: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nat: And I was thinking in my head, that's so, like when you have a back-to-school night with parents, and the students are there, "Look at this. Look up at the wall there. That's my essay." Or, right?

Brian: Well, yeah, and this gets, we didn't talk about this, but the idea of students presenting their work and kind of owning it and recognizing there's an authentic purpose for it. That's what that makes me think about.

Nat: And that's, yeah.

Brian: And that seeing that piece of this stone, it's like them being able to kind of take pride in their work and share it, so it's not kind of just this thing that just sits there.

Nat: I'm so glad you brought that up, because this is a perfect way to conclude the conversation, is when that student is presenting his work proudly, he is expressing his belief that maybe he learned some aspect, some belief in himself that he learned through working on this essay or this product, time and again, that he worked really, really hard on it. He's so proud to show it off. And there's also this feeling of the belief from parents or whoever his audience is saying, "Hey, you did this."

Brian: There's value.

Nat: There's value in this. And again, this is an extension. That essay, this section of the wall, this terrace is an extension of who you are.

Brian: Yep.

Nat: And I see you and I hear you and I believe in you. It's awesome. Brian, thank you so, so much. This is just have been a wonderful conversation.

Brian: Of course, it's been great.

Nat: And you've really, really illuminated my thoughts about the role of that belief plays in the classroom from 45 minutes ago to right now, it's absolutely, just we've explored a lot. It's beautiful. Thank you.

Brian: Thank you.