



Nat Damon:

Welcome to another episode of Reach. Teach. Talk. I am thrilled, thrilled, thrilled today to introduce our guest Katja Pantzar who is a resident of Helsinki, a very proud resident of Helsinki, Finland.

Nat Damon:

I've known Katja for the past, gosh, I think about five years now through friends, writing friends of ours who also live in Finland, and it is such a way to have her on the show because she's kind of a local legend over in Helsinki. Oftentimes, people will see Katja riding her bike through town, regardless of what time of year it is, what the weather conditions are, and they will definitely see Katja most every day in the ice pool outdoors in Helsinki, cooling, chilling out so she can wake right up, and if you ever go to her Instagram feed, which I highly recommend, you'll see Katja doing a lot of these activities, these outdoor activities. The reason why I introduce her with that kind of focus is because she writes and researches and promotes the idea of healthy living through what the Finns call Sisu, and I'm going to have Katja talk about and define what Sisu is, and particularly through the lens of education.

Nat Damon:

What I will say about Sisu before we begin is something that I've learned out of reading her book, *The Finnish Way*, available here in the States and all around the world actually, I think in more than 12 countries now it's been republished, and also just I'll add that she has another book coming out very shortly called *Everyday Sisu*, which she'll talk about as well, *The Finnish Way*, this concept of Sisu is to me a concept based on determination and belief, and a hope-filled sense that our capabilities as human beings are far greater than what our minds kind of consider that they are. And through the lens of education or parenting, we look at our kids, we look at our students, and that is our goal, right? Every interaction we have with our kids and our students is to help them kind of view themselves in a way that is greater than how they view themselves. And I thought what a great idea to have Katja come on Reach. Teach. Talk. because this is a podcast about relationships and the importance of the centrality of relationships in the classroom and the classroom of life.

Nat Damon:

Katja is a writer. She's an editor. She's a journalist who's lived all over the world in both Northern and Southern Hemispheres at points in her life in London, and also in New Zealand. She's Canadian growing up. She was born in Finland. So, this idea of speaking to her from her hometown of Helsinki just all comes full circle, and Katja, I'm just thrilled to have you on, and I'm thrilled to talk with you for these next 20 or so minutes about Sisu as seen through the lens of education and parenting. So, welcome.

Katja Pantzar:

Thank you. That was an absolutely wonderful introduction.

Nat Damon:

You're an absolutely wonderful person. We are blessed to have you.

Katja Pantzar:

Thank you. So, you would like me to talk about Sisu first, would you?

Nat Damon:

Yes, please.

Katja Pantzar:

So, essentially, Sisu is a unique form of fortitude or courage in the face of challenges, big and small, and the term Sisu, it's spelled S-I-S-U, but if you want the key to pronouncing it, it's like Sisu because a lot of people look at the word and they think, "Oh, how do I pronounce that?" if they are anglophones. So, essentially, it dates back 500, 600 years when it was first recorded in literature and in texts, and it has a very long history in terms of being referred to in different situations, great defeats in war, Olympic victories.

Katja Pantzar:

I think a more everyday term for our modern times is really, it's the idea of tapping into your own courage, your own grit, your own resilience in the face of challenges, and that can be everything from trying to get your homework done or trying to get your kids to get their homework done to big issues that deal with career, or education, or moving, work, career, mental, and physical health, and essentially, when you're faced with something that seems like a challenge or a problem, figuring out a way to resolve it. So, I think it's very much a solutions mindset.

Nat Damon:

We often talk about the term hope, the idea of hope, and hope to me is a spiritual term in a sense. It's I hope, my hope comes from my heart and from my mind. Right? That feeling of hope comes from within the heart, and yet when it comes to teaching kids or parenting kids, the idea of hope being actually something very constructive. Like, if you hope to make this varsity soccer team, let's break it down, let's break down how you're going to get there. Right? Let's look at your skills. Let's look at your right foot, left foot, your offensive strategies, your defensive, and get there. It's the idea of breaking down the pathway to achieving a great goal. Right? Like, I hope to do well in my physics class, but I'm having a really hard time with this massive intimidating concept. Break it down into parts. Set those goals. Does that sound a little bit like what you're talking about with Sisu?

Katja Pantzar:

Yeah, I think that it definitely does because if we're looking at kind of everyday Sisu, the things that you can do to build up your resilience, they vary from person to person, but the idea that you can actually train your resilience is not new in any way, shape, or form, and the example that you give there's a lot of steps you can take, for example, if you're trying to make the varsity team, and on a personal level, every day you can train your resilience, train your Sisu by tackling difficult things.

Katja Pantzar:

And that might be as simple as you feel lazy and you'd rather stay on the couch and eat potato chips, but you know that if you go out for a walk or a run or a ski or a dip in the sea, as we do here in the cold north, we'll feel much better. We'll feel refreshed. We'll have a rush of endorphins and then that'll better prepare us to deal with the stresses of everyday life to find hope again, to feel optimistic about things that maybe we're stressed about or worried about, sad about, have a variety of feelings and maybe we feel low energy as well, and then when we tap into our resilience or our Sisu, then we're better able to deal with everything else, whatever that ever else may be.

Nat Damon:

Wonderful. And yeah, we've alluded to the topic of ocean swimming, all four seasons, and I think that we need to just jump right into this because it's such a central image that I have of Sisu and the way that you've presented Sisu, Katja, it is just... So, briefly about the science behind it, and also of kind of why is it that it is more than what you think, it's more than just like I'm going to go in and wake up by being frozen.

Katja Pantzar:

Yeah, so essentially I think because there are a lot of forms of cold water therapy trending around the world, people sometimes get the wrong impression, and in Finland, essentially cold water or ice swimming or winter swimming as it's known, and I just went for a dip before this podcast so that I would be refreshed and energized because right now it's evening in Helsinki and we've had a long work day. So, essentially what it means is going for a dip in the middle of winter in water that's about two degrees Celsius in a hole that is carved into a lake or the sea. I just went to my local watering hole which is in downtown Helsinki, and we have an association where we've got a dock, we have a pump that keeps the water flowing, and we have changing rooms and saunas right beside the water hole so that we can go and warm up afterwards.

Katja Pantzar:

And essentially, you go in to the water, and most people stay in for about 30 seconds to maybe a minute or two minutes, and what happens is it's so cold that once you come out of the water, and of course the process already starts when you're in the water, you get a rush of happy hormones. The endorphins kick in. Your heart starts beating. Your blood starts pumping. So, essentially you leave all your stress, your aches and pains, your worries in the water. And when you come out of the water, you have something that's called swimmers high because you just feel so good physically and mentally, and this is a really good example of training your Sisu, your sense of Sisu. You do something that seems hard.

Katja Pantzar:

It also does not maybe seem like the first thing to do if you live in a warm climate and you come to visit a cold one, the last thing you want to do when it's below zero and snowing outside, but it comes with all of these great benefits and it's very quick and effective because you're there. The whole thing takes a few minutes, and there's the social element. You're chatting with fellow swimmers. I have yet to meet a cranky winter swimmer. So, there's a good mood that's being passed along. The milieu is very positive, and it's a good example of instead of us during the long, cold winter sitting around bemoaning the fact that we're not on a beach with a cocktail, we've turned the cold weather and the cold water around to work to our benefit, and there's nothing like a hot steam in the sauna, the quintessential Finnish steam bath, afterwards to heat up and to kind of relax and do your own cold and warm therapy.

Nat Damon:

I'm thinking about when the last time I was in Helsinki was when they had opened up this new sauna, just so beautiful, about probably two kilometers away, maybe three away from your swimming hole there in the Harbor, right, and it was just this just beautiful. But also, what I sensed in the sauna and also in the cold plunge, even though when I was there, it was July, the water was still cold, people came together. I had this feeling of relation with everybody who was there, whether in the sauna or in the cold plunge. Is that part of it as well? Do you still sense that connection?

Katja Pantzar:

Yeah, I think definitely, and I would add to that, that in addition to the kind of social connection, you're talking, people feel really good because they're doing something that's a little bit difficult so they've gotten over for themselves to go for a dip, especially in the winter, and something that is restorative and soothing the sauna. But I think also you're pared down. It's the perfect example of Nordic simplicity. You're authentic. You're there in your swimmers. Nobody knows whether you have a Rolex and a BMW or if you came on a 10-year-old bicycle and it doesn't matter.

Katja Pantzar:

So, that authenticity and kind of honesty and rawness is you're meeting people just as people and talking to a range of people from different backgrounds and all kinds of different ideas, and I think that is really, really powerful, especially in a world where I think there are a lot of hierarchies whether they do deal with socioeconomics or race or gender or whatever the situation can be, for example, in a private club or in a very specific setting and not open to everybody regardless of age, regardless of anything is really, really liberating both for yourself and both in terms of the people that you meet and talk to.

Nat Damon:

Yeah, that's so interesting. I mean, I'm thinking you're literally naked. Right? You're literally without those trappings of class and what you wear and that persona, right, that mask that we wear every day when we think about what we're putting on. Right? I'm thinking about the relationship between us and our environment and what you're sharing here, Katja, because let's be honest. When we think about Finland in the winter, we are, we think darkness. Right? It's cold. The sunlight's maybe three hours a day in December and January, and even that must be a low-level sunlight, certainly not the sun that I'm right now in Los Angeles, right, beating down on us, and it's cold and it's a more insular kind of culture during the winter.

Nat Damon:

And then in the summer, it's all just flourishing. Everybody's out. It's 12 o'clock midnight and the sun is barely down. So, I'm just thinking, I don't know if you have anything, any thoughts to share about how Sisu is endemic to this idea of one's relationship with their environment and how does Sisu form in a sense a thread that unifies the human ourselves with the environment of the far north.

Katja Pantzar:

Yeah, that's a very good question too, and I would just clarify one thing. We do wear our swimsuits when we go for this swim, and then when we go in the sauna

Nat Damon:

Oh yeah, I forgot that.

Katja Pantzar:

Yeah, I just suddenly have this image of people thinking of all these naked people in the city center going for a dip.

Katja Pantzar:

That's not what we do. Yeah, but the reality is we often say that if somebody did forget their swimsuit in the Nordic countries, nobody would really care if somebody went naked because we're just so not interested in... It's just not a big deal. But yes, in the sauna you do generally go naked, and there is that. It is so pared down, but it's so much more about we rather than me. Nobody cares what body image issues you might have, or it has nothing to do with that really. It's just about the fact that it's much more hygienic and clean and pure in the sauna if we don't take in swimsuits that have been in the sea or a swimming pool, for example, and it has to do with the ritual and the kind of cleansing of mind and body.

Katja Pantzar:

And I think that, yes, definitely the connection to the environment and specifically to nature is so key to really good Sisu because I think one of the things that really ails us, and I'm talking globally, people spend far too much time online going from one air conditioned or heated home into a tin car. Well, they're not tin, but I think you get the idea. What I mean is it's a metal box, and then they go to an air conditioned or a heated office or workspace, and a lot of us have lost our connection to the natural world, and that's where we get a lot of our resilience from. A lot of our sense of Sisu, of strength comes from having a connection to nature. Even a 15-minute walk in the woods or a green space has been shown to lower stress and to minimize some of the emotional and physical toil, I guess, that we experience from having a lifestyle that is out of touch with nature.

Katja Pantzar:

And I think something especially like a sauna and a swim is perfect because your feet are touching the ground, you're breathing in the air, you can feel the cold air on your skin, the cold water, and you're having this experience that you are very much in your body, and the water particularly is touching every part of your body. There's nothing artificial about it, but also no part is left untouched, except for your head of course. When it's really cold, we don't put our head in the water, that's not advised. All of your senses are getting some sort of a response or reaction or connection or touch with both the natural environment, but also with the swimmers around you.

Nat Damon:

This is fascinating to me because I'm thinking about the word harmony, and I'm thinking about how Sisu, it's about grit and determination, and it's about working through the challenges as we've discussed, whether those challenges are goals that we're setting for ourselves or whether they are environmental. It's cold out. It's challenging to me, but I'm going to employ my sense of Sisu in order to... But also to work with it. It just, I keep thinking about going with the grain and everything you're sharing here. That water touches every single part of our body. We surrender to it. We understand it. We connect with it, even if the idea of it, the concept feels challenging, and in all of this, I'm thinking about how it relates, how Sisu can relate and be a really helpful skill, and I don't mean to be reductionist by saying it's a skill. It's a lifestyle. It's a way of being, Sisu. It's more than just a skill.

Nat Damon:

And thinking about in the classroom and with kids, and you've spoken with Pasi Sahlberg, I podcasted with Pasi Sahlberg, internationally known educator, writer, researcher on education. He wrote the book, Finnish Lessons 2.0, international bestseller about the Finnish miracle, the idea of the education system in Finland, what is the special sauce, and what is it behind the education system in Finland, and that's what drew me out to Finland those few times I visited. What he talks about, right, is this idea of helping kids have a sense of purpose and a sense of flourishing. How could Sisu be utilized to instill that in kids in schools? Rules? Do you have any thoughts on that?

Katja Pantzar:

Yeah, I definitely do, and I mean, I think Pasi's work is excellent in kind of translating or taking a lot of Finnish ideas and things that are just seen as kind of common sense in Finland to an international audience. I think one of the big ones is resilience, how do you build resilience in kids, and I think a lot of it is, yes, the way that the education system works in Finland and a lot of things about the society, but also simple things. For example, my son is 11. He's going to be 12 next week, and since he was seven years old, he has walked to school. Granted, we live very close to the school, but this is the kind of thing that would not be possible or even legal in a lot of parts of North America. Part of the reason it's possible is because it's safe. We don't have certain issues that are problematic in other parts of the world like worrying about child napping or other things.

Katja Pantzar:

But I think also, I noticed that when he was seven, all the other kids walked to school, and it was the cultural norm, they walk or bike to school. And so he, of course, they pick up on what the other kids are doing, but also this idea that it teaches you, it gives you independence. If you can bike or walk somewhere and you know how to use the trams, for example, then you're not reliant on your parents or on cars or on other things.

Katja Pantzar:

And this idea in so many ways is let's look for solutions to challenges rather than okay, oh, this can't be done, or okay, you're not doing well in this subject, and we need to push you and tutor you and do this, or how about if we look at other options, or how about we accept the fact that hey, you're really talented in these subjects and this subject is difficult for you. Maybe that's okay too. Not everyone is going to be getting straight As in every subject, or the important question, is it worth it. What is the cost of pushing a child or a student or a person, for that matter, to do something that, despite all of the help and everything, it's just not quite going the way... It's not going, let's say, straight A direction.

Katja Pantzar:

And the funny thing that I have often noticed both with the school here, my son is in elementary school, but also just as a parent is that sometimes if you even try to push too hard, that's the worst thing you can do, and then when you just let go and you say, "Okay, well, here are the areas where you're doing really well and how can we support you there, and this area is a challenge. Let's just let it breathe for a little while. Let's just let it be," and not make it into a big issue, not turn it into something that becomes so difficult and conflicted. And then when you let go, sometimes it comes back around. It's like the thing resolves itself. The situation when there's not so much pressure anymore becomes less of an issue or less of a problem.

Nat Damon:

That is a deeper definition of Sisu than I could ever imagine, and the reason why is because I was about to ask you, kind of push back a little bit on the concept of pushing, Katja, because if Sisu is truly about determination, grit, and drive in a sense, then that feels very, this is the American in me, feels very much like push, push, push. Right?

Katja Pantzar:

Yeah.

Nat Damon:

There's something about the harmony and something about what we've talked earlier about the relationship between us as humans in the environment, and you captured beautifully when you were just sharing how it's still about moving forward, not pushing forward, but moving forward with a sensitivity to the fact that sometimes it helps to just pause. Sometimes it helps to reflect. Sometimes it helps to look within and to really ask yourself to really consider what skills you're using, what skills you might not be employing as well. So, this idea of it being moving forward, which is very hope filled, but not pushing. One last thing I'm thinking is we keep coming back to the idea of the swimming, the sea swimming, and it's not pushing. You don't jump in, in December to the water. You'll have a cardiac arrest. It's going in down the ladder, and just accepting that you're moving forward, you're going in, yet, there's a certain rhythm or pace that is very organic to you. Does that work?

Katja Pantzar:

That totally works, and I think winter swimming is a perfect example of Sisu because there is no rule that you need to be in a certain amount of time or swim a certain amount of laps. Everybody listens to their own body and their own limitations. Some people are dippers. They're 10 seconds in and out. Some people are swimmers. They'll actually be in there for three minutes or four minutes and swim loops. And I think that that is really important in terms of there's good Sisu and bad Sisu, and bad Sisu is pushing yourself too hard. There was a recent study that has been published out of the University of Helsinki and looking at this very thing. Bad Sisu is when you push yourself to burn out, and good Sisu is when you push yourself enough, but you also know when to take that, in fact, I call it the Sisu pause in my forthcoming book, *Everyday Sisu*, and it's that idea of sometimes baby steps are better than trying to push yourself to run a marathon and then collapse.

Nat Damon:

Beautifully said, and that gets back to the point about goal setting earlier, the breaking it up into baby steps. You're not going to collapse with the idea of this is just too overwhelming. And also in my book, *Time to Teach: Time to Reach*, I talk about finding power in the pause, and when you're a teacher, it takes a sense of bravery and confidence in the middle of a unit or in the middle of a presentation to ask the class, "Are you with me so far, or has that train kind of gone off the rail a few minutes ago?" and to then accept their answer when it's you kind of lost us about five minutes ago. Finding power in the pause instead of push, push, push, right, all the way through.

Nat Damon:

As we wrap this up, Katja, I'm thinking about, again, I keep coming back to the cover here of the American cover of *The Finnish Way* here, and I just love so much how it centers around the swimming hole and also every image around is symbolic of Sisu, and they are all environmentally focused. They're

all organic. I mean, whether it's the leaves that form the tea in the teacup, or the mushrooms you find in the forest, or the fish obviously, or the trees, the pine trees, the mountains, the fire in the left, and of course, your bike here in the bottom corner. Is there anything that we haven't touched on about the connection of Sisu to the environment around us?

Katja Pantzar:

Very well said. I think sustainability is really a key thread through Sisu and also something that I've really gone even further into in this next Sisu book, but this idea of everything being interconnected, and something that we have realized, some people realized this a long time ago, but that we have really realized that just because something happens in the water in one part of the world, it doesn't stay there, and I think the same thing happens when we talk about our relationship with each other and with the environment.

Katja Pantzar:

We have to take care of each other and we have to take care of the environment. Many of those actions can be through lifestyle choices, and how we live, what we eat, what we consume, what we think, how we treat other people, how we react if somebody is bullying someone, and all those things really come back to the environment in many ways, this idea of teaching children from a young age to respect the environment and listen to what it's saying, if the water is polluted or the weather has changed dramatically, or certain things are in season, and it brings it back to working together is really the only way forward with each other, with the planet. There really is no other option if we want to move forward.

Nat Damon:

Yeah, I do think a lot about Mother Earth and Gaia and our planet being actually a living being, a living organism. Just yesterday, actually, I was at a school here in Los Angeles and they had this assembly. They were running an all-school assembly, and before they introduced the speaker, they said basically, it wasn't a prayer, but it was an acknowledgement of the native land that their school is...

Katja Pantzar:

Ah.

Nat Damon:

Yeah, it took my breath away. And this acknowledgement, intentional acknowledgement that this is land that has been shared, and honestly, robbed. It's not sharing in this case, but it has been taken away, but this idea of this is a provision of Mother Earth, of Gaia. And again, when I think about Sisu and I think about its recognition, as you were sharing about the idea that the environment will provide, and if we can be determined and work our way through, knowing though that it will always provide, and a sense of purpose, a sense of spirit, a sense of connection. Any last words you'd like to share? And also, I'm curious about your new book coming out because as you were describing it in this conversation, Katja, I'm sensing that there might be some really good information points for parents and for teachers too.

Katja Pantzar:

Yeah, very good question. What I would say is this next book continues on a lot of the same themes, but it moves forward and builds on them and really goes a step further looking at kind of Sisu solutions to the way that we live, whether it's what we eat, what we consume, how we recycle, transit, all those



things. But I think in particular if we're talking about schools and parents and teachers, there is one section that is called Peaceful Sisu, how to deal with difficult and challenging people, and there is a whole section where I have interviewed a teacher in the Helsinki school system who is responsible for the anti-bullying program and really looking at bullying, whether it's in the school system or elsewhere, and what we can do about it and why it's everyone's responsibility, not just the parent and the child, the bully and the bullied, and the teacher.

Katja Pantzar:

Again, this whole idea of we're all interrelated, the environment and other people, but also how do you deal with people who are bullies and bullying, and some very concrete feedback because as you know, there have been several programs out of Finland that have been internationally successful, anti-bullying programs, and they have very straightforward techniques on how to coach children and help them and support them if they're in a situation where they need to deal with bullies, for example, and also looking at education on other levels too, this idea of lifelong education, of always learning and embracing new ideas, and new experiences, and new books, and new art, and new science, and having that kind of open mind and realizing that one of the ways you build up your resilience is being a lifelong learner.

Nat Damon:

Oh, that's beautiful. What a great thought to ponder as we wrap this up, Katja is the connection between building up resilience through being a lifelong learner. Actually, can you explain that a little bit deeper because I've got my idea of what you're sharing here?

Katja Pantzar:

Yeah, essentially, the idea of being a lifelong learner is that you don't get sort of stuck in your ways or your wheels and think that because this is the way that it was 10 years ago, or I feel upset, or I feel pissed off, or I feel disenfranchised because of A, B, and C, it's like no, I'm going to continue learning, listening to other people, taking in new sources of information, new ways of thinking and working and ideas, and keep an open mind, much the way that a child is curious about everything, their environment, what someone is wearing, what they do for a living, that book, that illustration, what does that word mean. And I think when we lose that childlike curiosity, that engagement with the world, wanting to try new things, see new things, listen to new ideas. We shut down and we decrease our resilience. We decrease our sense of Sisu, and that's why it's so important to be a lifelong learner and continue learning and being open to listening to other people, to listening to other points of view, even if they are not at all in line with your own.

Nat Damon:

A broadening life, a Sisu life, that's what we should be aspiring for, and I wish every classroom, every school in America had an ice plunge. It only takes two minutes, and those kids would come out feeling so alive and open and willing to explore. However we can possibly replicate that without installing an ice pool in every school is perhaps what the goal of American education should be because, goodness, we could use every bit of broadening as possible. So, this has been just wonderful, Katja. Thank you so much for sharing with us about how Sisu really focuses on the relationship between us as human beings and our environment and our relationship between us within ourselves, where do we derive our fortitude, where do we derive our own Sisu, and this has just been a wonderful broadening conversation that I think any educator and any parent out there has benefited much from. So, thank you very much for guesting with us on Reach. Teach. Talk. today.

Katja Pantzar:

Thank you so much. It was my absolute pleasure

Nat Damon:

And do check out Katja Pantzar's Instagram page. It is really inspiring, and also keep an eye out for Everyday Sisu coming out in the next month or two, and also if you don't have your copy of The Finnish Way, pick it up today.

Speaker 1:

You've been listening to Reach. Teach. Talk. with Nat Damon. If you'd like to recommend a guest for a future episode, you can send your suggestion or questions to [nat@reachacademics.com](mailto:nat@reachacademics.com).