



Nat Damon: Welcome to another episode of Reach, Teach, Talk. I am very excited about today's episode because we're going to be taking a little personal turn on this podcast today with a very heartfelt and very open conversation about individuality, and about what makes all of us special, what makes all of us unique, what makes all of us add to the overall texture and the fabric of human society.

Nat Damon: And oftentimes ... I live in Europe right now, and I live in London, and some of my greatest memories of living in Europe are sitting out on a plaza in rural Spain, a village of 500 people, and it's 10:00 at night, and it's summertime, and a lot of you will get the idea already. You're sitting out there, you're the adult, you're eating at a table, you're drinking some wine, you're just enjoying the conversations flowing among other adults, and of all different kind of ages. And in the middle of the plaza you've got the five to 12 year olds playing football, playing soccer with abandon. Boys, and girls, and kids of all different abilities and all different athletic abilities and all different types playing football, and it's 10:00 at night, and the adults are not even casting an eye to those kids, they are just on their own, and they are absolutely having the time of their lives. Knowing that should anything happen, should a kid trip, or should a kid find himself of herself in a situation that's just not ... that gets the attention of any of the adults, that they would jump up and they would take care of the kid.

Nat Damon: But those kids are independent, they're learning independence, and their surrounded by adults. And then ... I don't know, let's just say all the sudden the kids notice out of the corner of their eye that there is a very dignified looking older couple coming down the stairs. Let's say this dignified couple is about 90 years old, both of them, husband and wife perhaps, let's just say they're husband and wife, husband's wearing a flat cap, his shirt's tucked in, he's wearing a belt, he might even be wearing a tie. And the wife is looking beautiful, her hair is done, she's got the cardigan sweater and she's walking down, maybe with a cane. And they're walking down with dignity, and their heads are held high, and their dignity is reinforced by these kids who suddenly stop playing football and they look up, and they say, "Buenas noches, Senora. Senor and Senora, buenas noches." Welcome, it's nice to see you. And they return and they say, "Buenas noches Matteo. Buenas noches Jose. Buenas noches Susannah." And they understand that there is a connection, they know the kids, and the kids know the adults, and you've got multi generational living. And you've got this community, a true, authentic community.

Nat Damon: And that's what we're going to be talking about today, actually, and the subtext of this podcast is about the importance of community, and community that

embraces everybody. Because we're living in a society, certainly in America, where if you're of a certain age you're in this area of the community, if you're a certain ability you're in this area, if you're a certain ethnic type, in certain cities you've got different areas for them. And in certain ways it's great, you've got Tai Town, Japan Town, you've got all sorts of different areas. But there's also something amazingly important about connecting, connecting with each other, connecting with people who are different, Republicans, Democrats, people of different mindsets, people of different ideas, because we need to embrace the individuality in ourselves. We need to understand and discover the special in our own needs.

Nat Damon: And today we're going to be talking specifically about special needs. And I'm the brother of a sister, an older sister, who has special needs. She just turned 50 and she is thriving, and she's living independently in her own community. And I've got nieces who also have special needs, and what they bring with them is really undefinable. And this conversation today is going to be to talk ... it's going to focus on talking about autism, talking about special needs. But if I'm doing this right, and particularly with my amazing guest today, if I'm doing this right, we're not going to be talking about what we already know, right? We're not going to talk about one in 100 kids born today are autistic, we're not going to talk about what's the cause, what's the root cause and all that stuff, because you know what? Who cares about the root cause when you've got a person in your life who has autism, and who is giving you so much more in return than one would even bargain for. And I'm speaking with passion, and I'm speaking from my heart when I'm talking about what my sister has given to me growing up, and in my young and also adult years with her special need.

Nat Damon: And if nothing else, it's this idea that we've all got special needs. And we've all got special traits, and talents, and discovered and undiscovered. And today is going to be a little bit of a deep exploration into what makes us all special through the lens of Susanna Peace Lovell, who is a mother of a 13 year old beautiful daughter, Arizona. And she has taken her experience raising Arizona. Oh, I just thought about that.

Susanna: Yeah, right.

Nat Damon: She just took her experience raising Arizona ... great movie. And applied them to her new consultancy group, a parent coach, she's a parent coach for parents of special needs kids. So again, we're going to dive into the personal, we're going to dive into the heart of being a parent of somebody with special needs, being somebody is responsible for somebody with special needs. And we're going to look at, yes, Arizona, we're going to talk about Arizona, and we're going to talk about also what Arizona has added, Susanna, to your life. And what I'd love to do first of all is just welcome you.

Susanna: Yeah, thank you.

Nat Damon: Thank you for being here.

Susanna: Yes, thank you. Thank you, thank you for having me. I'm so happy to be here and I'm so happy to see you, Nat.

Nat Damon: It's wonderful to see you-

Susanna: Yeah, yes.

Nat Damon: Susanna, this is just ... this is wonderful. And I just want to start off with basically who is Arizona? Who is Arizona?

Susanna: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So Arizona, simply put, is my daughter, right, in the form of things. So here we are on earth, I am a human being, I gave birth to this human being, Arizona. And so she is my daughter. She is also, to me, just this being of light. And she has ... I think we always hear parents talking about their children being their greatest teacher. And that is so true with Arizona times infinity. And not only to me, but if we're talking about community today, it's just sort of a ripple effect through everyone else whose lives I am touching too.

Susanna: So Arizona is my greatest gift. I was reflecting a little bit on my way here, knowing that I was going to be talking about her today. And it always brings me back to the beginning of when I first found out that my daughter was different, and that she would potentially have a different life trajectory than most families that I knew of. And I always love to have that trip down memory lane because it makes me appreciate so much what is right now. Which is, by the way, nothing I thought would be possible back then. So I love that reflection.

Susanna: And so Arizona this soul that decided to meet up with my soul in this lifetime, and I have been given this opportunity to guide her, to take care of her, certainly her basic life needs, but also to learn how to honor her, and appreciate her, and create an environment for her in which she can be wholly and completely herself. And then as a fun side note, learning how to honor myself for exactly the same reason. So that is Arizona, my darling 13 year old teenage daughter, in full puberty. I mean, it's just like autism and puberty is really ... that combination, specifically, and then I'm sure I'm like pre menopausal in some sort of way. So late 40s. So it's ... it's fun times. It's fun times in our house, single mom, right?

Nat Damon: Yeah, right.

Susanna: So it's me and here.

Nat Damon: Right, right, the broad definition of fun.

Susanna: Yeah.

Nat Damon: It's a very broad definition.

Susanna: Yes, yes.

Nat Damon: And I'm curious because you were saying that she's 13, she's on the onset of adolescence and puberty, is there anything that you've noticed like ... I think about communication, right, because I remember times where my sister would be growing up and she would get sick, or she would be also going through adolescence or something, and she didn't have the language, Lynn did not have the language to communicate, like, "This is what's going on in me, I'm feeling this, or I'm just grumpy because oh, man, like ... " At least my sister doesn't express through words as much, and that was part of her autism as definition.

Nat Damon: Is there anything you can explain about just communication? Is that a specific challenge as a mom with a daughter who's autistic?

Susanna: Yes, and I'm glad you made the distinguish about ...

Nat Damon: Right, it's-

Susanna: I'm glad you made the distinction-

Nat Damon: Yeah, distinction.

Susanna: Distinction around communication, because my daughter happens to be verbal. But, and this was not always the case. So when she first started talking, she had words and so she was able to express sort of words and phrases, but she could not communicate, so there was no receptive language abilities, zero percent. So if I asked her a question, even a yes or no question, she could not respond. If I said her name, she could not respond. If I asked her if she wanted to eat something for lunch, she couldn't tell me yes or no or what she wanted to eat. However, when she decided that she wanted to express herself, she could. But it was really if she felt like it, and it was typically like in the other room, staring at a wall somewhere I could hear sort of a little voice like, "Want chips," or something. And so I'm like, oh, okay, so let me go see what ... so she never seeked out conversation, communication, certainly engagement of any sort of relational talk. Right?

Susanna: So that was sort of the big, big red flag in the beginning of so how am I supposed to have a back and forth relationship with my child who, by the way, can talk ... but in a different kind of way.

Nat Damon: Just to get clarification, was there nonverbal ... like if you were to say, "Would you like some chips?" Before she would go into her room, would there be sometimes any sort of like nodding or eye contact? I'm just going with a basic question here.

Susanna: No.

Nat Damon: So, no, okay, so-

Susanna: No.

Nat Damon: No response.

Susanna: No response.

Nat Damon: Right, no reciprocation as you say. Yet it would come out perhaps later, she goes into her room or something and then you hear her say, "Want chips," so it's like the timing would be different than like our conversation right now.

Susanna: Correct.

Nat Damon: Which is reciprocated, right?

Susanna: Correct.

Nat Damon: How did that make you feel?

Susanna: Well, this was before I realized that she was on the autism spectrum. So-

Nat Damon: Sorry, how old? About how old?

Susanna: So she was probably just around two, one and a half, two, two and a half when she would be talking about different things throughout the day and I just remember thinking she's just kind of in her own world, she's a little stubborn, she never wants to come to me when I ask her to come to me, she just was so involved in her own thing. She was running around the house carrying one stuffed animal to one room, then taking another stuffed animal and stuffing it into my bathroom drawer, and then taking ... I mean, it was unique and different, and I didn't know really what was happening other than I was like, oh, this is sort of interesting. But she was my first child, and actually at the time most of my girlfriends actually ... yeah, 99% of my girlfriends didn't even have children. So I was sort of the first leader in the pack to have a child, and so I just didn't have much context around me.

Susanna: And I have four siblings, I have siblings who have multiple children, so I'm around children a lot, but when it's your own I think it's a different sort of ... you're just in it.

Nat Damon: Yeah.

Susanna: You're just like how am I ... okay, I've got to change this diaper, I've got to sleep train, I've got to make sure she doesn't catch a cold. So I wasn't thinking so much about ... I think maybe if she had never spoken, if she didn't have any words at all that would've been sort of a red flag, certainly, at our yearly pediatric visits. But she was talking, it was just in a different way.

Nat Damon: Did you feel connected to Arizona ... like at what point did you ... can you remember the first time you truly felt like you connected with Arizona?

Susanna: That is a great question, Nat. I have always felt connected to Arizona, I think because I just have this sort of motherly instinctual sort of nurturing way about me, just in life in general. And so whether I knew she was connecting back to me ... that was moot. Like I just knew that I was able to connect with her. I will say

though that there was a specific ... I remember this very clearly, she was maybe five years old at the time, five. And she answered a question that I posed to her, a yes or no question, for the first time in her life.

Susanna: So we're driving back from this early intervention sort of preschool program, therapeutic preschool program, and I asked her a question. Talking to her all day, I'm like, "Maybe we should go to the park, do you want to go to the park?" And she said, "Yes." And I was like ... wait.

Nat Damon: Stop the car.

Susanna: I did. I did, Nat. I pulled over, because I was like is this a fluke? Did you just happen to be speaking at the time and saying yes? And I asked her the question again and I said, "Do you want to go to the park?" And she said, "Yes." And I was like ... and then I just started throwing questions at her. I was like, "You got it!" And so I asked her like 20 in a row of yes or no questions and she was like, "No. Yes. No. Yes." And I just ... the water works, I mean, I just was like bawling my eyes out.

Nat Damon: And was she looking at you in the eyes when you were asking those questions? Was she feeling a sense of there's something shifting here?

Susanna: No, no, the eye contact was not quite ... was not yet there, and that is actually something we still work on even as a 13 year old. So that was not there, but I think she could tell that there was something happening, because all of the sudden then we're just like back and forth. And pretty much from that day forward, she never ... so once she learns something, she holds it. There's very little regression with her. So she learned it, she got it, and now unless she's watching YouTube or something and is like tuning me out on purpose-

Nat Damon: Like any 13 year old.

Susanna: Yes. She will mostly respond to me.

Nat Damon: Yes.

Susanna: And that is something that I really was not sure would be possible.

Nat Damon: That's something that ... so I'm inferring here, that that's something you had to accept? Right? When during the first five years, certainly, that this might be the forever reality that you might never have that kind of call and response communication.

Susanna: Yes.

Nat Damon: That's got to be tough. I mean, it's tough for any of us to not-

Susanna: Yes.

Nat Damon: Have a reciprocated ... right? I mean, if it's your own daughter.

Susanna: Right, right, because we are connected, I mean, I can't just stop being your friend, right? Yes, it felt a little bit thankless to me. But there are so many things that I thought she would never do. I thought she would never be potty trained.

Nat Damon: Right.

Susanna: Because that was a very long, arduous process because it wasn't connecting for her.

Nat Damon: Yes.

Susanna: Mind and body. So she's potty trained today. You know what I mean?

Nat Damon: Yeah.

Susanna: But I wasn't sure that she would be, and so I had to think about okay, so what does this look like?

Nat Damon: Yes.

Susanna: I don't know. I'm not sure, but we'll just try to go one step at a time.

Nat Damon: Yes, yes.

Susanna: One day at a time. And that was very difficult. For me.

Nat Damon: One day at a time.

Susanna: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nat Damon: And then adjusting to that mantra, one day at a time, was difficult for you, is that what I just heard you say?

Susanna: Yes, it just ... every second of parenting for me ... was or is, depending on the day for me now, but it certainly was just a torturous experience. Because I think it was largely because I didn't know what I was doing. And there were so many unknowns. And I am just like a control freak in general. I mean, I'm a Capricorn, I'm part Asian, I just ... I can't ... I'm just sort of built this way. Which is no surprise that I have the daughter that I do, really. But I just felt so helpless. I'm like, I don't even know what to do because I don't even know what this is. I'm not sure what this is.

Nat Damon: Was there anybody then who and at some point, at one point, who actually was able to give you a definition of what this is?

Susanna: I mean, ultimately, yes, a development pediatrician, a psychologist, gave us sort of a formal diagnosis, or rather eligibility for services under the autism spectrum disorder, ASD, diagnosis. But it was really one of my sisters who called me, she's an educator, she had a few children of her own at that point, and she called me up one day and I'm certain that she was the family representative, I'm sure

everyone was talking about it and it's a sensitive thing, you know? That's really hard, I mean, I'm sure it was so hard for her to call me. And she said, "You know, Susanna, I've been thinking about Arizona and I just ... I'm not sure what it is, but there's something different about her." And I said, "Okay, well what do you mean? What do you mean by different?" And she said, "Well, it's just I don't know what it is, but I just know, being around kids, there's just something different. And so I think maybe you should look into that."

Susanna: And so immediately I knew that she was right, but I was also in so much fear of like what does that really mean? And I said, "What am I supposed to do?" And she said, "Well, I think maybe you should start with your pediatrician." I was like, "Oh, yeah, okay. Sure." I didn't even think ... we don't know. You don't know what you don't know, right? So I started there, I started with calling my daughter's pediatrician, and that was tough because he was like, "No, she's fine, everything's fine, there's nothing quote, quote wrong. I mean, she hit all her developmental milestones, she has words, she walked at 12 months," all of these things. There's a checklist, right? And so she crossed all of those things on the list and I was left with nothing.

Susanna: So it took me some time to get to the right place, but ultimately and eventually I did, mostly because I was quite tenacious about it and I just also was driven by this internal gut feeling of mine as a mother that something was different. And I didn't know, I didn't know anything about autism really, I didn't know anything about ... I mean, I had never even known anyone growing up with a child who ... I remember a close family friend that had a child who had some difficulty with speech and language, but we just ... it was not something that we knew about growing up. And certainly in the Taiwanese culture, we just ... there's barely even a word to translate autism. I had to have that conversation-

Nat Damon: Fascinating.

Susanna: With that side of the family, it's very fascinating.

Nat Damon: Yeah.

Susanna: Anyway, all of that to say it was a process, it was a journey, and it was not a warm and fuzzy one.

Nat Damon: Did receiving the label for the first time of autism for Arizona, how did that make you feel?

Susanna: Well, it was sort of this round about way to actually receive the actual ASD, autism spectrum disorder diagnosis. First it was like, "Oh, well there's sensory processing issues. Oh, there's dyspraxia. Oh, there is motor planning-"

Nat Damon: So it looks like they were doing the very specific like components, but not lumping it all together?

Susanna: Correct.

Nat Damon: At first.

Susanna: And I think maybe because that is a difficult word to hear, and I think professionals understand that. I was told that she had autistic like behaviors, right?

Nat Damon: That's as gentle as-

Susanna: Right?

Nat Damon: Yeah, yeah.

Susanna: And so I said, "Okay. Okay." I took her to the West Side Regional Center and had a full assessment done by a psychologist there, and that was probably the worst experience of that period of time, because she was an older woman who really did not have any bedside manner, and I think I needed that really badly at that time, and I took Arizona to get assessed and right away she looked at me, she was like, "Oh, this looks a lot like autism. But you know that, right, Mom? You know that." And I was just like, "No." That's why I'm here, I don't know anything. And it was just a joyless, colorless room-

Nat Damon: I'm sorry.

Susanna: Without any toys or color or anything and she's just telling Arizona to do all of these things, and she's like, "Grab the comb." And I was like, "Oh, but we don't use the word comb, she's never heard the word comb." Like she's heard the word brush, she's heard the word ... So it just ... she was like, "Yeah, she can't ... no, no, yep, look at that, autism." I mean, just very ... I mean, perhaps she was on the spectrum too, I don't know. And that's something I've learned to sort of be gentle about, in terms of people that I meet that maybe can't quite connect. But either way-

Nat Damon: Yes.

Susanna: It was a difficult, difficult, very tortuous, emotional process for me. And I'm actually quite happy that I'm sitting here in front of you today, because there were definitely periods of time where I was like ... I'm so depressed that I cannot imagine moving forward with my life, and being happy, and having any sort of thriving relationship with my daughter. And certainly not with myself. So anyway, let me just acknowledge that right now as I'm sitting here in this room with you, because it is a night and day, for sure.

Nat Damon: It really has been an experience, a journey, the way you're describing it as also trying to find hope, and finding hope. When you were flying blind in a sense, right? I mean, this is as you said earlier, there's not even a word for autism in Taiwanese, really. Really that really sums it up, and that's your extended family. And how you've been brought up. And this idea of just feeling alone, and looking ... that's why I asked you before about how did it feel to get the diagnosis, to get the label, did that open up suddenly a new community for you, or was that a period of acceptance. And I guess my question is, Susanna from 14

years ago, Susanna today, acknowledging this journey that has been full of challenge, and as we know, and I think we've talked about this in the past, it's through the obstacles, and the confrontations, and the real dark nights of soul that happen to all of us.

Susanna: Yes.

Nat Damon: Right? All of us.

Susanna: Yes, yes.

Nat Damon: At points in our lives, that we either emerge flourishing, actually. And I'm not trying to bait your answer, by the way, because you might not be flourishing-

Susanna: Yeah.

Nat Damon: But you seem like you're flourishing. Or it's you can go the other direction and wallow. And I don't meant to put the onus on the person, because life can also throw incredibly challenges and wallowing is the only option, really. But you know what I'm getting at. So Susanna from 14 years ago, today. How do you describe 14 years ago, how do you describe you today?

Susanna: Yes, 14 years ago, and specifically because I was so hell bent on becoming a mother, first of all, just my whole life I wanted to be a mother to lots of kids. And so 14 years ago I was just starting the journey. I was newly married, I was getting ready to just fill my house full of kids. And I just had this idea that my children would be raised the way that I was raised, because I turned out just perfectly amazingly well, you know?

Nat Damon: Fabulousness right in my presence.

Susanna: Right. So I was like, I learned how to behave well, I learned social skills, I learned how to be polite, I learned how to get straight As, I learned all of these things. Okay, so I know how to do that. I'm going to pass that on to my mini mes, all my mini mes who are-

Nat Damon: Your brood.

Susanna: Who are going to come after me.

Nat Damon: Your flock, yes.

Susanna: Yes, I had a perfect idea of everything. And so that ... that was who I was 14 years ago, really. Because I was able to quote, quote, "control", there's that word again, everything else in my life. If I wanted to do well in school, I studied really hard. If I wanted to make the cheerleading team, if I wanted to ... if I wanted to play first clarinet in the ... whatever, marching band, I studied, I worked hard. So I'm like, you can make things happen. Like I can do it myself, I don't really need anyone else to assist me so much. I can figure it out, if I want

to get that job, I will get that job. If I want to get into the college that I want to get into the college, I will get into the college.

Nat Damon: Because you have all the tools.

Susanna: I have all the tools, right. So I just felt like it was the same with parenting. So if I need my child to do something, I will just study, and learn, and train my child to do the things that I need her to do. And furthermore what society needs her to do, whatever it is, right? So I learned very quickly on that forget about it, because as soon Arizona was born she just commanded so much attention. She was a fussy, fussy, fussy child, she had loud, wailing cries all day, it turns out she was allergic to almost everything under the sun. At one point she was allergic to everything that was orange, beta carotene.

Nat Damon: Ah, fussy.

Susanna: She couldn't have like sweet potatoes, and carrots, but how did I know? All the baby food is like mashed up sweet potatoes, and carrots, and maybe some beets thrown in. So I was like, oh, okay, and so that was the first sort of very challenging journey for me, was realizing that I have this child with myriad food allergies, she was covered head to toe in eczema, rashes, she was so uncomfortable. And that probably took a year and a half to figure out exactly what she was allergic to, and then slowly eliminate foods from her body. So that was first sort of foray into oh, this is a different kind of parenting. How am I supposed to fix ... I can't fix this.

Nat Damon: Right.

Susanna: You know? I mean, I can certainly learn how to change her diet, but I can't fix her inability to process certain foods, right? So that was that.

Susanna: And so that sort of began the journey of ... I call it my letter A journey, because all of her diagnoses to this point have all happened to start with the letter A. And coming full circle now, I'm just like well, A is for Arizona.

Nat Damon: [crosstalk 00:29:21]

Susanna: Yeah, because that's the name of my memoir that I have been working on for seven years. But it's an emotional book to write, but ... still working on it.

Nat Damon: The world awaits that memoir, Susanna-

Susanna: Yes.

Nat Damon: Because it's your ability to articulate and to really be open about the subtle, and the nuances, and the emotional ... the feelings that come up with being the mother of Arizona. I love the title, A is for Arizona, we will all watch out for that book when it comes out. And then you today. You today, and I'm asking two questions, two part question, one is what traits do you have in yourself today, do you identify in yourself today, that you did not exercise or strengthen until

the arrival of Arizona. And then my second question's going to be what have you done with your wisdom, and how are you paying it forward, and feel free to brag. So ...

Susanna: Mm-hmm (affirmative), yes.

Nat Damon: We all need to hear what Susanna's daughter-

Susanna: My wisdom, by way of lived experience second by second every day, what I have learned, or who I am now that's different than who I was 14 years ago is someone who is just more sort of able to be sort of in flow, in terms of releasing as much control as I possibly can around what I want things to look like and how I want things to be. So I have to release so many ... I've had to release so many expectations for my child, but it really has been this very parallel journey, because as I have learned to fall in love with my child for exactly who she is, I've also internally done the work, like, oh, but I'm ... there's nothing broken with me either. I mean, it's really this beautiful thing.

Susanna: And so as I'm learning to take care of the little girl that I was 35, 40 years ago, I am realizing and understanding what that five year old needed. And I'm able to apply that now toward my parenting of my specific child, who also happens to be a daughter who also happens to be like my spitting image. It's really quite phenomenal, this sort of spiritual journey that I've been able to be on with her. And I am a completely different person in terms of just believing in possibilities, above and beyond myself. Autism is, to me, is just this majestic and beautiful expression of diversity. And I am honored to be sort of walking this walk with my child.

Susanna: And really being able to support and honor her in her expression, which by the way, is not always appropriate and is not always easy. I mean, the things that come out of her mouth. I am so grateful that she is so ... I'm so grateful that she can communicate with me verbally. And the words that come out of this child's mouth, you're just like [inaudible 00:32:42], "I want to cut your head off and dribble it like a basketball. You're the worst mother ... " Yesterday doing homework, she was just not having it. And the things that came out of her mouth like just darts at me. I was like, ouch. And I've learned to respond like there's something deeper than those words, right? So it's like, "Okay, good to know, let's talk about it." She's like, "Well, I'm just really frustrated." So I've learned how to give her the space to express herself, like, "Whatever comes out of your mouth, you're not in trouble, let's talk about it. Let's write about it, let's sing about it, let's draw about it. Whatever it is, let's get it out."

Susanna: And I did not have that outlet as a child. And so ... and I think a lot of us do not have that opportunity to fully express, right, fully express. And so my work with her is to be able to hold that space for her and her full expression, and then also I have learned as well to equally be able to fully express myself, which is sometimes not easy.

Nat Damon: Express yourself to your daughter, express yourself to others-

Susanna: Yes.

Nat Damon: As the mother of Arizona, and what her needs and your needs via her needs are, right? And this idea ... I mean, this idea of space. It brings me back to the beginning of our conversation, actually, when you were talking about, "Would you like chips?" And it was only when Arizona was in her room, far away, that you heard her from the other room as she's facing the wall saying, "Yes."

Susanna: Yes.

Nat Damon: That's space, so there's physical space, and there's also ... clearly you're articulating the opening, the broadening of your construct, the space in your mind, the lens you look at the world has been broadened, to say the least, right? Because-

Susanna: Yes.

Nat Damon: Possibilities, space and possibility.

Susanna: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Nat Damon: Right?

Susanna: Yes.

Nat Damon: Like there are different ... I don't mean to put words in your mouth, I'm trying to actually hopefully sum up what you just really were teaching us, which is your sense of ... your awareness of possibility has grown tremendously, almost like anything is possible, because look at the lens through which Arizona is viewing the world. It's certainly not the lens in which you look at the world, and you brought up to look at the world. Yet what a beautiful lens, and what a beautiful world.

Susanna: Yeah. Yes. Yes. Breathtakingly so. Really. I mean, I am in awe to just be in that with her. And by the way, I have also taught everyone around her to be in that with her as well. And so talk about paying it forward, I feel like that is the way I think in which I have been able to really spread sort of awareness and acceptance around my daughter, around autism, around different. And I was married for a while and Arizona's father and I were divorced and separated so it's been about seven years now. And so during that period of time, I really leaned on my girlfriends, and I have an amazing support tribe around me. And so my girlfriends are all of Arizona's aunties, so they just have learned how to just be with her, and respond to her, and express with her, and receive, and not take things personally, and just like go through that process. I mean, it has been life changing for them as well, whether they're mothers or not.

Susanna: So it's just the gift that keeps on going, right? We're doing a big Lunar New Year feast on Sunday with-

Nat Damon: Happy New Year, by the way.

Susanna: Thank you.

Nat Damon: Yeah.

Susanna: Thank you, thank you, year of the rat.

Nat Damon: Yes, yes.

Susanna: And it's just a bunch of girlfriends coming over and we're going to do a little sort of council ceremony and circle around just intention and all of these things, and Arizona will be very participatory. And it's just ... I just feel like I'm just living this purposeful life, sometimes when I'm just not even sure what I'm doing every day. "What am I doing with my life?" You know?

Susanna: So I'm so grateful for these experiences and for what Arizona has brought. I just feel so much more present in my life, like in every ... I feel so grateful for the tiniest little things. I just really do not take one little tiny thing for granted. And Arizona has shown me that. Because I think without her I would still be like go, go, go, go, go, go, go, go, you know? Over achiever or whatever, just go get 'er, just nonstop. And this has allowed me, she has allowed me to take a breath.

Nat Damon: Beautifully said, and the incorporation of purpose as well here. I just finished a book actually by William Damon, who's of no relation to me actually, but he's a professor up at Stanford, and he has a book called The Path to Purpose. And it's a book about the importance of purpose in all of our lives, and what happens when you suddenly find yourself disconnected from your job, and from your world, and you are wondering that question when you wake up in the morning. Like, "What is my purpose? What is my purpose?" Purpose is actually everything. And a gift, one of the gifts that Arizona has given you I'm hearing is this sense of purpose. Every day you've got this sense of purpose. "I am the mother of Arizona." And yeah, I imagine every parent would feel this sense of purpose, a similar sense of purpose. In your particular situation, you've taken this purpose and you have actually paid it forward, we'll say it again, to others, and also in a formal way. So if you can take a few moments and kind of share with listeners and viewers here, what have you done with this concretely? And how can people benefit from your wisdom, Susanna, outside of this podcast?

Susanna: Mm-hmm (affirmative), sure. Yeah, so I am an advocate for special needs families, but specifically I'm a life coach for special needs families, and that's sort of a broad term and comes in different modalities, but I work with families one to one. Really my passion, honestly Nat, is to work with the parents, to allow them to realize that their life is not necessarily going to be put on hold, right? There is also so much availability to them in terms of finding their own passion, their own outlet for creativity, their own outlet for expression, all of that. And I teach what I most need to learn, and what I'm currently learning which is there is so much possibility for my child, yes, and also for me too. And so that is what I teach to the families that work with me, the parents that work with me.

Susanna: I actually just launched my first online course, which is all about ... it's called Life Management for Special Needs Families, an Ultimate Resource Guide for Creating a Thriving Life. And so I talk a lot about logistical, practical hints and tips of sort of getting through this journey, but I also really tap into emotional self care, spiritual practice in terms of really just honoring not only your child for who they are, but also honoring ourselves for who we are. And so that is available, I use a platform called Teachable.com, and it's been just a great platform for me. And I'm a blogger, and I'm finishing up my memoir, so ...

Nat Damon: A is for Arizona.

Susanna: A is for Arizona, I know. Remember I was telling you about it like just five years ago. Yeah, so I ... all of these things, I wrote a little handbook on my top seven tips for self care as a special needs parent. I have-

Nat Damon: How can we access that handbook?

Susanna: So I actually have a digital copy that is available if you email me. My website is SusannaPeaceLovell.com and so you can pretty much reach everything you need to get. I think I ... do I have stuff about my class up there? No, well, I will.

Nat Damon: Yeah.

Susanna: Yes. So but anyway, I am ... I just want to help everyone, I just want everyone to feel so honored and joyful that these perfectly intact souls have chosen us to be their parents. I mean, I really ... we should just really stop and take a minute and be like, "Wow, we were entrusted with this. How amazing is this?" Your sister chose you to be her brother. Like really, your nieces chose you to be their uncle. Like how ... come on, let's just like take a minute to really let this sink in.

Nat Damon: And I love that your work with other parents of special needs children, particularly parents of special needs children, it focuses on how that unique parenting relationship connects with their own self discovery. And clearly, through this whole conversation it's clear what Arizona has taught you about you, and your focus on the parents, on getting to know not just your child and their individuality, but yourself along the way, what a gift.

Susanna: Yes. Yes, and I'm living it.

Nat Damon: And you're living it, yep.

Susanna: So I feel like something's working because I'm the happiest I've ever been in my entire life. Like something's got to be working, right? And I was also the most miserable I'd ever been in my entire life not too long ago-

Nat Damon: Yes.

Susanna: Nat, so I really am like okay, if I can just share a piece of the joy that I feel in my life with just somebody else, then I'm going to climb to the highest mountaintop

and just share everything I can possibly share with everyone who is ready to receive it.

Nat Damon: Well Susanna Peace Lovell, sharing a piece, many pieces of your joy in today's beautiful, beautiful conversation. I'm going to conclude us, unless there's anything you feel like you've left out in terms of just ... okay, perfect. I'm going to leave us with two quotes that I discovered when I was kind of preparing for our conversation. And Jean Vanier, I don't know if you've heard of Jean Vanier, he just passed away about a year ago actually, it was I think June of 2019, so last year. And he was French, he grew up in France, and he was a Catholic priest who noticed the tragedy of back in the 40s, 50s, 60s in France, most ... many, if not ... many kids who had special needs and were falling behind, quote, unquote, were moved to institutions.

Susanna: Yes.

Nat Damon: Totally dehumanizing, and there's a whole other dark, scary side of what ... we'll also look at how we've evolved, but anyhow, and partially due to Jean Vanier who said this must stop, this is absolutely insane, you don't treat human beings this way, we are all creatures of God. And so he started this organization called L'Arche, okay, or the Arc, or the bridge. And we did is he set up, and now this is in 30 countries around the world including the US, and Mexico, and France, and 27 other countries, which is he set up these residential areas where adults with special needs live, coexist with normally functioning, I don't know how we call ourselves, but people who are not diagnosed with special needs. And they live their adult years in community, in concert with each other. And the ... I encourage anybody to read about what Jean Vanier's done with L'Arche, and the impact its had-

Susanna: Wow, wow.

Nat Damon: In the human, human connection, and the lessons learned so much more from people like you and from me.

Susanna: On both sides.

Nat Damon: On both sides.

Susanna: Yeah, yes.

Nat Damon: It's dual.

Susanna: Yes.

Nat Damon: So just two quotes I'll leave us with and just for us all to kind of ponder and meditate on after this ends. Number one is from his book called Becoming Human. "To reveal someone's beauty is to reveal their value by giving them time, attention, and tenderness. To love is not just to do something for them, but to reveal to them their own uniqueness. To tell them that they are special and worthy of attention." Goes both ways.

Susanna: Goes both ways. Wow.

Nat Damon: Right?

Susanna: Yes.

Nat Damon: What you've learned through Arizona about your own uniqueness-

Susanna: Yes.

Nat Damon: And that you are special in your way, Susanna. And obviously the way you're showing Arizona how unique and beautiful she is. And then number two is this book that he wrote called Eruption to Hope. Quote, "Living in a society where simplicity has been submerged by criticism, and sometimes by hypocrisy, is it not comforting to find people who can be aware and who can marvel? Their open natures are made for communion and love."

Susanna: Wowzers.

Nat Damon: Right?

Susanna: Amaze.

Nat Damon: Right?

Susanna: Amazing.

Nat Damon: Open, broadening, just everything-

Susanna: Wow.

Nat Damon: You talked about.

Susanna: Yes. Wow.

Nat Damon: So but leave it with those two quotes and with all the wisdom and just incredible conversation with you, Susanna, today. Thank you so much for being a guest on Reach, Teach, Talk. It's been really special having you here.

Susanna: Yes. Thank you for having me, Nat.

Nat Damon: Wonderful.

Susanna: Yeah.

Intro/Outro: 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.