

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 269: SUSAN CAIN

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we provide strategies and advice on how to climb the S Curve of learning in your professional and personal life. Stepping back from who you are to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm Whitney Johnson. Before we jump into this week's episode, I wanted to share a fantastic email I received from a listener named Ginger. She resonated with [Episode 258](#), my conversation with education expert Dr. Ulcca Joshi Hansen. Here's what she had to say. I listened to the latest episode and so thoroughly enjoyed it. It prompted me to email my school district to thank them for a pilot class that my senior son is in right now called Design Thinking. It aligns well with the concepts that Dr. Hansen spoke about. As my son has spent the year diving deep into a topic he's passionate about. Opening an affordable, online, no waste grocery store with local delivery. The episode also calmed my nerves as my son will likely be taking a gap year hopefully in Germany if the geopolitical landscape is stable. So, double thanks. Double thanks to you, Ginger, and to everyone who listens and writes in. You can reach me at any time at [wj@whitneyjohnson.com](mailto:wj@whitneyjohnson.com). We can only share a few emails here on the show, but I personally read, and respond to every single one, eventually. Now, this week, we're covering a topic we just don't talk a lot about on podcasts, on social media, or in everyday life. Sadness. It's an inescapable part of being human, but we work very hard to pretend it's not there. Our guest today says maybe we should seek sadness out. What is it about a bittersweet song, a heartbreaking movie, or a melancholy painting that recenters us in a world where we're always putting on a happy face? Susan Cain is a *New York Times* best-selling author and a self-described introvert. Her book, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking* extolls the power of listening and reflecting. Her TEDx talk on the subject has been viewed 40 million times, so she's

clearly onto something. But Susan wasn't always on the S Curve of writing. She had to make a jump from her previous life as an attorney at a moment in her thirties that she describes as freefall. A painful time that ultimately allowed her greatest gifts to come forward for the world to enjoy and appreciate. That's what her next book addresses *Bittersweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole*. It contends that sadness and reflecting on pain, including the pain of others, is something we need on a more regular basis. I was so moved by Susan's wisdom about this on a recent LinkedIn live session that I had to share it with you here.

**Whitney Johnson:** Good morning, everyone. I will tell you in just a moment why we were playing that very sad song. My name is Whitney Johnson and welcome to Calm Amidst the Chaos. I'm the CEO of Disruption Advisors, where we help you grow your people to grow your company. We talk about the S Curve of learning because every single person on this planet is on an S Curve. When we talk about tools and strategies on how to climb that S Curve. Now, as I said, you may be wondering, why did we play that sad song at the outset? Well, our guest today, Susan Cain, she said the following, "upbeat tunes make us want to dance around the kitchen, but sad music makes us want to touch the sky." I'm going to introduce you to her right now. And I hope that as you are all coming online, that you will say hello to her, give her a very warm welcome, and possibly tell her how your her work has influenced you. So, she wrote the groundbreaking book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. It was named one of the best books in 2012 by Oprah, by People magazine, among others. This week, she now has another book out titled *Bittersweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole*. It is sure to be another best-seller, but more importantly, it is sure to be another groundbreaking book. She is a deep thinker, a profoundly lovely human being, and I am delighted to introduce you to her this morning. Susan, welcome.

**Susan Cain:** Hello, lovely. Whitney. Thank you so much for having me. And good morning to everyone.

**Whitney Johnson:** Susan has just released a TEDx talk called *The Hidden Power of Sad Songs and Rainy Days*. And I want you all to know that it is a rainy day where I am. And we just played a sad song and there's a hidden power in that. And Susan is going to disclose, reveal to us the hidden power. Susan let's start off with of all the topics that you could have written on right now, after ten years, you wrote a book called, *Bittersweet*. Why did you choose this topic?

**Susan Cain:** Well, I mean, it turned out in retrospect to be very well suited for our times, because we are going through such overtly difficult times now and have been doing for the last two or three years. But you know, as is my way, I have been working on this book for almost a decade, so I can't say that I started the book for that reason. I had no idea that was happening or that that was in our future. But the book actually really started with what seemed at the time to me like a small question that I that despite its smallness, I couldn't let go of. And the question was why, as you're saying, why did I have the response that I did to sad music? Because when I, when I hear music that has a kind of minor-key element to it, an element of yearning or longing in it, the reaction that I have kind of reliably is a sort of feeling of overwhelming love and a feeling of communion and a sense of uplift and transcendence of the everyday. I was just curious as to why that was, and I started researching this question.

**Susan Cain:** And, you know, the first thing I found out is that many, many people feel this way and that the people who have bittersweet songs as their favorite of their playlist will listen to them 800 times. While the people who prefer happy songs only listen like 175 times. So, there's something in that. But what I quickly discovered was that this was actually a much bigger question and that spanning centuries, spanning continents. All of our wisdom traditions, all of our artistic and literary traditions have been teaching us that this state of sorrow and longing is one of the great gateways that we have to creativity, to connection, to transcendence. You look at our traditions and that truth just hits you over the head. There's no way you could ignore this teaching. And yet we're living in a culture that

is schooling us in precisely the opposite. You know, it's telling us that we should always be expressing only the positive. And it's not just that that's not accurate. It's also that it's depriving us of one of these great pathways that we have. So, that's, that's a real waste.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, some of what you said in the book, that was really powerful for me. I'm going to share some of your quotes. Is that sorrow and tears? Now I'm going to start crying. One of the strongest bonding mechanisms that we have. You also said you quoted C.S. Lewis, who said "there's an inconsolable longing for we know not what." And then you describe longing as a sacred generative force.

**Susan Cain:** Yes. And we can take those two things separately about sorrow as a bonding mechanism, and then the state of the inconsolable longing. And maybe, maybe we could talk about the second one first. We are beings who come into this world, you know, from the moment we enter it, this world in tears. We are beings who come in with a sense of having been banished from a more perfect and beautiful world that we kind of feel that we belong to. And so, so there's a constant gap that we feel between this more perfect and beautiful world and the world that we currently inhabit. And we know this. You look at every religion, right? And at the core of every religion is the longing for that other place, you know, whether it's Mecca or Zion or the Garden of Eden or the beloved of the soul, which is the, the term the Sufi use. That is my favorite of all. Those are the overtly religious expressions of this yearning. But we also have countless secular manifestations of it, too. Like Dorothy longing for somewhere over the rainbow. This is core to who we are. This is why we've all experienced that moment of gazing at a painting or a beautiful interaction between people in a TV commercial. You know, and it brings tears to your eyes. And there's tears are partly because we're, we're getting a glimpse of that other place. We're getting a glimpse of the transcendent place. And we're also aware of the gap between that place and where we are at this moment. So, all of that is intensely moving to us. This impulse that we have as humans affects us in so many ways, in our relationships, in the work that we choose, in our deepest desires. So, we should become aware of it. We don't even have a way of talking about it right now.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, I think this is a good time to go to an experience that I had that you helped me understand what was happening for me. So, as part of the part of the pandemic, my daughter introduced me to K-Dramas, Korean dramas. And apparently, a lot of people got introduced to K-Dramas. But one of the dramas that we watched was Mr. Sunshine. This is a period piece that took place around the turn of the 20th century. It's about the activists that were trying fighting for independence of Korea. It's this epic love story. In that film, it's incredibly tragic. There is music that I listened to a year and a half later, and my daughter and I have a joke of like, how many seconds will it take before we start crying, listening to that music? And we felt something. And one of the things that I discovered as I was reading your book is that you helped me understand the experience that I was having, is as I watched this, and I felt this, and I cried. I felt longing. And as you said, there is an experience of sadness, but it's also an experience of deep joy.

**Susan Cain:** Yes, it is. And so, this is an experience, as I say, I've been trying to understand all my life. And the most amazing thing. I got a long letter yesterday from somebody who has now heard me talk about this, this week from a filmmaker. And he, too, he said, all my life I've been trying to understand this. He said he always called it that holy feeling. He's not a religious person, but that was the only word he could think of or the only phrase he could think of to describe what it is and how much it's at the heart of things. And part of the reason it's at our heart is because there's something about when you hear that kind of music or see the kind of film that you did that you feel much more connected to humanity than you do in our everyday, you know, smile and be happy self-presentations. I want to be clear about what I'm saying. Like smiles are great and happiness is great. I prefer to be happy than to be sad. So, I'm not saying something like that doesn't make sense, let's say. But there's something about when we're only interacting with each other through that one dimension of positivity. We're not connecting in the same way. And we know this like from the work of Dacher Keltner, who's this amazing psychologist at Berkeley, he has done all kinds of studies about what he calls the compassionate instinct. And compassion, what it literally means is to suffer with someone. Come, the come in there is, is with so it's with passion, with, with someone else's sorrow.

**Susan Cain:** And one of the things he found is that we all have in our bodies the vagus nerve, which is the biggest bundle of nerves that we have. It's at the heart of our being alive. It regulates our breathing and our digestion, sex drive. It's like really basic. And it's also when we see another being in distress, our vagus nerve becomes activated, suggesting that this is something so fundamental just to the state of being human. You know, this ability to react to

other people's sorrow and this has evolutionary roots to it. Like we think of Darwin as being about the survival of the fittest. But what Keltner says is he's just as much about survival of the kindest because the whole way that our species survived was by being able to respond to the cries of our vulnerable infants, and then embedded in our ability to have that care came the ability to care for other beings also in distress. So, not just infants and not just our own, but others beyond that. So, there is something about this route of like you watching that movie and that's tapping into your most basic impulses to see someone in distress and be like, oh my gosh, you know, I feel that, too. It's like a visceral feeling before you have a moment to think about it.

**Whitney Johnson:** I remember when I first was experiencing this, there was a piece of me that was actually angry. I didn't want to feel as deeply as I was feeling. And so, this goes back to what you were just talking about, this positivity. We don't, we don't actually even know what to do with those emotions. And so, one of the things that I think is going to be so important about your book is you're giving people words, you're giving people permission to feel things more deeply to long for things more deeply expanding our repertoire. And if we can feel those things, going to Susan David, and I love the story about Susan David, in your work. Being able to share those feelings then or feel those feelings, we as we get better at feeling then we're, we're going to have a more. Well, how sorrow and longing make us whole. One of the things that I thought was interesting, you talked about how understanding longing can actually help us save our relationships.

**Susan Cain:** Yes, it can. And I'm going to answer that in a question. I just want if I don't know exactly how you normally respond to chats, but there was something that just came across the screen about the vagus nerve, and I would love to comment on it if I could.

**Susan Cain:** Someone, Talar said. Seems like some people have a more vulnerable vagus nerve than others. And I just wanted to say, yeah, your intuition Talar is totally correct. And Dacher, the psychologist at Berkeley actually talks about this. He, he, he says that there are some people who are vagal superstars, that that's his word for them. And these are the people who like from the time they're kids, they're like helping their classmates with, with their homework and, you know, intervening on behalf of the bullied kid and that kind of thing. And that's probably because these people are physically reacting more to, to the experience of seeing someone else in, in difficulty.

**Whitney Johnson:** Susan, does this go to your quiz. You have a quiz that people can take in your book. Does this help you? Does that quiz help you determine if you've got that more sensitive vagus nerve or not?

**Susan Cain:** That's interesting. The quiz is not intended to measure the vagus nerve. Exactly. But I do have a great question. In the book, a bittersweet quiz that I developed together with the psychologists, Scott Barry Kaufman, and David Yeadon, who are these amazing superstars and bittersweet types themselves. And the quiz, would it, it measures your proneness to find yourself in a bittersweet state of mind, let's say. And it asks you questions like, do you react intensely to music, art, and nature? Do you draw comfort or inspiration from a rainy day? Have other people called you an old soul? And the quiz is still in preliminary study form. But there have been really interesting correlations that we found that people who tend to score high on this quiz also tend to score high in a state called absorption, which predicts creativity, and to score high on measures of awe and wonder and transcendence and spirituality. And then there's also a small correlation with anxiety and depression, which I think is not surprising. Which is not surprising, you know, as with all human attributes, you know, there's the, there's the positive side. There's the negative side. And I think it's a question of understanding which way you're leaning and, and making the most of your way of being. But with bittersweetness, some people are probably come into the world-oriented that way, but other people get their through life experience. After you've experienced enough of the, the trials and triumphs of life, it tends to shift you in a more bittersweet direction.

**Susan Cain:** So yes, about relationships, it's so helpful to understand about ourselves as humans that we come into the world with this proverbial longing for Eden. Because what happens is when you enter a new relationship with someone where you're really together, you're. You're really falling in love. You feel, especially in the beginning stages. You feel like you've gotten to Eden, you know?

**Whitney Johnson:** Yes, you do.

**Susan Cain:** Yeah. Yeah. And. And you could even view a love relationship as an, as an enactment of this most fundamental human longing for everything that is most perfect, beautiful, good, and true. So, there you are, you're in Eden, and then a few months later, you know, you start understanding you're not anymore. Because the person you're with is not actually perfect, good, beautiful, and true all the time. And neither are you. And that's just how it is because we're in this world. And if you don't understand this about yourself and about humans, you're going to ditch that relationship and go looking for your next dose of Eden. Right? But if you do understand it, it becomes a lot easier to forgive your partner's imperfections and your own. And that's not to say, you know, there are some relationships that aren't meant to be, and the incompatibilities really do make them inadvisable. So, it's not to say all relationships are to be stuck with no matter what, but just to really understand this dynamic.

**Whitney Johnson:** I thought that was so useful to, to see. So, for everybody who's thinking, you know, I love my partner, I love my husband, I love my wife. And to understand when you have those moments, it's not that you don't want to be with them. It's there's a longing that is saying, I want to be whole, but it has nothing to do with that person. I think a lot of crises in relationships could be avoided if people understood this.

**Susan Cain:** Exactly. And to try to, there are other ways to tap into that longing and to get those brief glimpses of Eden. And sometimes those moments are going to come within the course of your long-term relationship, too. But they exist in many different manifestations, whether it's the artistic or, or the spiritual or, you know, nature or whatever it happens to be for you. Another thing is to really do a little bit of self-examination and think about, well, where is the place that I tend to get those, those glimpses of that which I long for and how can I spend more time in that place? So, for me and for many people, it comes quite reliably through music. Listen to it at a certain time of day.

**Whitney Johnson:** Like for you, what time of day do you listen to music?

**Susan Cain:** Well, I listen to music all through the day. But there's a certain type of music that I listen to best in the evening, like this type that we're talking about of like sad or bittersweet music. If I listen to it before I go to sleep, it's like, yeah, it's another dimension. Whereas I don't actually love to listen to it first thing in the morning because it's not kind of consonant with this state of mind I'm in at that time or want to be in.

**Whitney Johnson:** You tell a story actually in your TED talk, but also in your book about you were about to make partner at a law firm and in our words, you basically got pushed off the S Curve and you weren't going to partner. But in many respects, that was the universe, that was providence giving you this nudge toward what you really wanted to do. So, to your longing. Can you just talk about that briefly?

**Susan Cain:** Sure. Okay. So, I had wanted to be a writer since I was four years old, but, you know, I graduated from college and started thinking maybe that wasn't so realistic. And my father sat me down and said, you know, it's very romantic to want to be a writer when you're 15. But when you're 35 and you can't pay the bills, it may not feel so romantic anymore. And he had grown up in the Great Depression, so he had, you know, a very protective and practical view, which I kind of inherited in a way. And so that made sense to me. And I went to law school, and I actually really liked it in a lot of ways and, and kind of plunged into that career. And then this moment came. I mean, I was already feeling like the whole time I was in it, I very much had the sense of being an expat living in a foreign country, speaking a foreign language. But it was that's also very exhilarating. So, that was kind of my experience. So, anyway, this moment came when I found out I wasn't making partner and the first reaction was just the sense of everything falling down around me because I'd been working like a maniac for a decade in the service of this goal. But then a few weeks after that, I ended up I also left or ended a seven-year relationship that I had been in that had always felt wrong.

**Susan Cain:** I was in my early thirties when all this happened, so, I'm like suddenly in this moment. That I can only describe as freefall. Like everything. No love. No place to live. I'd moved out of my apartment. No career. It was just this moment of deep transition. I fell into a relationship with another guy who I became obsessed with. It was just one of those crazy, obsessive moments in your life. And he was a musician. Yeah, we've all been there. He was a musician. He was a lyricist. He was very lit up and. And I couldn't get out of this obsession and. And had a very indulgent friend named Naomi, who listened to me tell my stories about him on endless repeat. Until one day, Naomi said to me, if you're this obsessed, it's because this person represents something you are longing for. So, what

are you longing for? And the answer literally came just like that. It was like it was so clear suddenly that he, this man was a representation of my version of a more perfect and beautiful world. Like the world of art and music and so on that I had actually wanted to be part of all my life. And I saw it instantly. And that's when I really started writing for real at that moment. And the obsession fell away. I know that sounds too crazy to believe, but it's true. The obsession was gone, and I started writing.

**Whitney Johnson:** I have to say, when I, in reading your book, we're not going to recount it here because I want you to read her book and listen to her TED talk. But the letter you got from your now husband to encourage you to write was just astoundingly wonderful.

**Susan Cain:** Yeah. You know what? He's still like that to this day. Like, you know, like, my, my new book just came out, and he's, like, tracking it on Amazon every hour. And, and yeah, he's amazing.

**Whitney Johnson:** As well he should. Okay, so, Susan, what are you longing for right now?

**Susan Cain:** You know. I'm actually not right now, knock on wood. I'm not I'm not in a state of deep longing in the way that I was at that stage of my life. Because at this moment in time, I'm kind of exactly where I should be and feel incredibly lucky about that. I still and always will have that state of existential longing. You know, the kind that we come into this world with. And as I say, you know, it's triggered almost nightly when I listen to that kind of music. But I don't have a kind of love longing, or career longing or that kind of thing at this moment, just because I'm lucky to be where I should be. But I will also say that I looked a lot into the teachings of Sufism while I was writing this book. That's the mystical side of Islam, and in particular the work of a teacher named Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, who I've gotten to know a little bit. He's a wonderful guy and he talks about how, you know, his language in the course of a spiritual path that, that at the beginning, the longing is very, very intense. But as you move along, the longing tends to subside, and other things come up in its place. So, I don't know. I don't know if that's what it's like or.

**Whitney Johnson:** I want to play with that for just a minute. So, if I think of the S Curve, when you're at the launch point of an S Curve and there's something you deeply want, the longing probably is very big. But you start to, and as what I hear you describing is you start to embody who or what you want to be. The more you move up that S Curve and it's no longer outside of you, but it becomes you, then the longing falls away.

**Susan Cain:** That is so perfectly said in one sentence. That's exactly it.

**Whitney Johnson:** Okay, let me tell you what I'm longing for.

**Susan Cain:** Yes.

**Whitney Johnson:** And what I did because I read your book. Okay. I am longing to be able to be more present in my life every single day, to be able to just take today and say, I'm doing everything I want to do today. Not waiting till tomorrow when I feel more calm, when I feel less anxiety around it. So, when I read your book and you talked about the Leonard Cohen concert, again, everybody, you have to read her book. I'm not going to tell you everything. Go buy it this week so she makes the number one New York Times best seller. I had been wanting to go to a Jacob Collier concert. He's a musician. Phenomenal. And I looked at a couple of months ago, and I thought, well, I don't really have anybody to go with me. I'm not going to go. When I read your book, I said, I really want to go to this concert. I want to have the experience of seeing him in person. So, I said to my daughter, would you go with me? She said yes. So, we bought tickets. Charlotte, North Carolina, April 30th. We are going to drive down there, and we are going to go see Jacob Collier in person. And that happened because I read your book. I responded to that longing to be more present in my life.

**Susan Cain:** Oh, my gosh. I love that. I have goosebumps listening to that story. That's incredible.

**Whitney Johnson:** You've shared all of this. What do you want us to do now? So, what's your call to action for everybody listening? What's your call to action?

**Susan Cain:** I'm going to give you two. One of them is what we've just been talking about, which is follow your longing where it's telling you to go. I mean, first identify it. And then the second one is the great lesson that I took away from being immersed in this bittersweet tradition for the last decade is. That. What we can really do. We all are going to pass through moments in our lives of pain, and there's a kind of fork in the road choice when that happens. And one fork is to kind of maybe suppress the pain or ignore it in some way. And then invariably we take it out on ourselves or on the people around us. But then the other choice is to weather it, withstand it, but feel it. But also seek in some way to transform it into beauty in one way or another. So, that's what artists do, and they're like lighting the way for us in doing that. But it doesn't have to be like, you know, like create a painting that hangs on a gallery wall. That's not really the point. It could be baking a cake, or it could be performing an act of kindness for somebody who has experienced a similar pain to yours, whatever it is. The idea is to transform pain into beauty wherever you can.

**Whitney Johnson:** So beautiful. And that goes back to what you had said is that it's a sacred, generative force. It's to treat it as turn that pain into beauty, create something with it, allow it to be generative. What's been useful for you in this conversation?

**Susan Cain:** Gosh. I mean, I really loved the way you just summed up everything that I was talking about in in such practical terms for people and especially that that insight towards the end about the way that once you embody that, that which you're longing for, the longing itself subsides and you become that state that, that's an incredible thing to aspire to.

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I'd like to share two big takeaways from my chat with Susan. Number one, when we only connect through happiness, we're missing something. It's natural to push difficult feelings aside. We want to appear put together in front of friends and colleagues. But we're living in a world of hyper positive newsfeeds full of vacation photos, promotions and smiling children. Don't shy away from an opportunity for true vulnerability. And when that's not available, seek out that music in a minor key or a melancholy Korean drama. There's a reason history's most enduring art is about loss and struggle. When you're feeling off, try tapping into it.

Number two. We enter this world in tears. I love the poetry of this. From the moment we're born, we're longing for something more. It's part of us and acknowledging that makes us more resilient. I loved Susan's example from relationships. When you start falling in love, you've arrived in Eden. A few months later, that feeling may simmer down. If you bail in search of the next dose of Eden, you may be in for a tough time. When you understand your own longing, you're more willing to accept and forgive imperfection. And that kindness goes a long way.

For more on navigating our emotional life, listen to [Episode 157](#) with Susan David, who Susan Cain talks about in *Bittersweet*. For more on vulnerability, listen to [Episode 189](#) with Brené Brown. And if you want to hear my first interview with Susan, that's in [Episode 14](#). And yes, I did go to the Jacob Collier concert. I'll include a [link to the newsletter](#) where I wrote about it in the show notes. Thank you again to Susan Cain for joining us. Thank you for listening. Thank you to our producer, Matt Silverman, audio engineer and editor Whitney Jobe, and production assistant Stephanie Brummel.

I'm Whitney Johnson

And this is Disrupt Yourself.