

**JULIE:** Good afternoon everyone and welcome to the call. I'm Julie Isaac, founder of [www.writingspirit.com](http://www.writingspirit.com), offering creative tools for writers to help you navigate the journey from idea to completed manuscript, and then on to publication.

I'm here today with Susan Piver, the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Hard Questions: 100 Essential Questions to Ask Before You Say I Do*, and her new book, *How Not to be Afraid of Your Own Life*, which offers insight and information from Buddhism, about conquering the fears that hold you back.

She's regularly featured in the media, including appearances on Oprah, The Today Show, CNN, and in *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Money*, and others.

Susan is a graduate of a Buddhist seminary and an authorized meditation instructor in the Shambhala Buddhist lineage. She leads week-long meditation retreats for writers several times a year. You can find her schedule and the locations for her upcoming retreats at [www.susanpiver.com](http://www.susanpiver.com)

Hello Susan. How are you today?

**SUSAN:** I'm fine, thanks. How are you?

**JULIE:** Oh, great. This is going to be fun.

**SUSAN:** I'm looking forward to it.

**JULIE:** I see that you're about to lead a new meditation retreat for writers in a week. Are you looking forward to it?

**SUSAN:** I'm looking forward to it very much. I have tremendous love for this combination, meditation and writing. They seem to go together extremely well.

**JULIE:** I agree. And that's what I'd like to talk to you about today.

So, Susan, what type of meditation practice do you teach?

**SUSAN:** I teach a practice called Shamahta, which is a Sanskrit word that means calm abiding or tranquilly abiding. It dates from the time of the Buddha, about 2500 years ago, and is a basic breath awareness meditation; meaning, instead of allowing your thoughts to absorb your attention, you place your attention on your breath instead.

**JULIE:** Susan, how does meditation relate to mindfulness?

**SUSAN:** Well, meditation, I guess could be thought of as the cultivation of mindfulness. Because mindfulness, it's come to be associated with many things, but I think all it is, is attention to the present moment, being in the present moment. Meditation is practicing being in the present moment so that when you're off the cushion, you can more readily employ mindfulness as you wish.

But it's not something in our very speedy world that we can just suddenly do. Okay, now I'm mindful, or I need to be more mindful. Well, yeah, we all need to be more mindful, but it's not a matter of will. It's a matter of practice and experience and a cultivation of mindfulness. And that's what meditation does.

**JULIE:** Is there any aspect of surrender in that? Surrender to the moment? Or is it more cultivation?

**SUSAN:** Well, I don't know. What do you mean by surrender?

**JULIE:** When talking about the willfulness and focusing on thought and not being in the moment. To me, being in the moment is a relaxing, is surrendering. So, I'm just wondering how that relates to your view of mindfulness and being in the moment?

**SUSAN:** I think you used the key word, which is relaxing...which is, I guess, the same thing as opening. I suppose surrender could mean the same thing. But at the same time, if you're focused surrendering, you're not paying attention. You know what I mean?

If you're engaged in surrendering, you're not so much engaged in what's happening. And sometimes it feels great to be engaged in what's happening, but sometimes it doesn't feel very good. And you wish you didn't have to. But, nonetheless, the ability to relax enough to relate with your world is critical. Perhaps you could call it surrendering or relaxing or allowing. I think we probably mean the same things by these words.

**JULIE:** Actually, I'm glad you said that because it just focused in my mind very much, is the word awareness.

**SUSAN:** Yeah.

**JULIE:** And, that, to me, captures that state of beingness.

**SUSAN:** Yes. It's very relaxing to be aware.

**JULIE:** [laughter]

**SUSAN:** And everything that is not being aware is kind of stressful.

**JULIE:** Yes. It takes energy to avoid being where you are.

**SUSAN:** Yeah, it does. It takes, and it takes energy to be where you are. It, it takes practice.

**JULIE:** That's interesting.

**SUSAN:** So, there's no easy route. I don't think.

**JULIE:** Now that we've philosophized, how does meditation and mindfulness help a writer go deeper, open up more, or write with greater authenticity? How can this help them?

**SUSAN:** This is a really great question, and I love thinking about this question. My answer to it is always evolving. And I learn more, the more I practice both.

If you think about it, when you write, two things are required. Not much different than what's required of a musician who is playing in a band, for example. When you're writing or playing an instrument, you have to have complete absorption in what you're doing. Your writing is very precise. You want the right word, the exact one. You want to capture the right feel or visual or piece of dialogue or whatever it might be. Very precise.

At the same time, for both writers and musicians, each one requires a sense of panoramic awareness, a kind of letting go at the same time. If a musician doesn't listen to the other people in the band, he or she will go in the wrong direction. But if he or she takes his or her mind off the instrument for one second, then it's all a loss. So, same for a writer. You have to pay attention to what you're writing. You have to hold your mind to the page, which is not easy. At the same time, to have a sense of spaciousness so that you can sense what is rising in your mind.

So that combination of precision and spaciousness is exactly what meditation is. You have the precision of focus on the breath and the spaciousness of awareness of what is going on in your mind and around you. So, combining those two things, there aren't many activities that combine those two things, but meditation and writing do.

So, I've come to the conclusion that they're not different, being creative and practicing meditation. It's not so much that one supports the other. They're not different.

**JULIE:** Well, would you say, in a certain sense, that writing is meditation? Or do we meditate to help our writing?

**SUSAN:** Well, I'd say that both are activities that stand on their own. And meditation may or may not help your writing. It supports my writing. But, that said, that's not its purpose. It would be a mistake, I think, to say I'm going to meditate so that it will serve my writing. Meditation is just so much more vast and mysterious than that, you'd be doing it a disservice to pin it to a particular endeavor.

And I don't think that writing is meditation. It is *meditative*. Many things are meditative, taking a walk, cooking, swimming, yoga. Anything that requires synchronization of mind and body—but they're not meditation. Does that make sense?

**JULIE:** Yes, it does.

Are there any specific writing practices that would help someone write from this more aware, spacious sense?

**SUSAN:** Well, I think that it's good to practice meditation every day, or most days. And then you see, over time, that it has an effect on your writing. For everyone it's different. So, I would hesitate to say, "If everyone meditates for 20 minutes and then picks up a pen, thus and such will happen."

But I can say that my strategy, my process is I meditate and then I do free writing or morning pages or whatever you would call it. And then I sit down to write. For me, that is the magic formula. And that's what I teach on my meditation retreats. That's what we do for five days. Meditate, free writing and then do your personal work.

**JULIE:** Now, is this how you created your latest book *How Not to be Afraid of Your Own Life*? How did meditation and mindfulness help you create this new book?

**SUSAN:** Well, the book was pretty much about meditation. It is about how and why meditation has an impact on fear. Because you may think, oh yeah, if I meditate I will be less afraid. But...why? Why does sitting there watching your breath have all these amazing effects? So, that's what the book is about.

Any day that I didn't meditate, I felt like such a loser. Because, I was like, I'm writing a book telling people to do it. [laughter]

**JULIE:** What? You're not absolutely perfect? Oh no! [laughter]

**SUSAN:** It was a great support for my practice, yes. [laughter]

**JULIE:** When I read the title of your book, *How Not to be Afraid of Your Own Life*, I immediately in my head said, “Oh, how can writers not be afraid of their own writing?” Because writers have so many fears, self doubt, and fear of submission, and putting their writing out there and getting rejected. What are some of the fears that you see that writers face?

**SUSAN:** I’ve not yet met a writer that doesn’t face the same fears that all writers face. And it’s completely mysterious to me, and an objection of great fascination for me, this fear. Because it is completely predictable and it seems to be universal. It’s just this incredible vulnerability.

What is required when you sit down to a blank page is, is to first make yourself vulnerable. Meaning: permeable, touchable, connected with your own inner world. Not in a formulaic way, but in a genuine way. The gate to the process is vulnerability. And without passing through that gate, you may get a lot of words on the page, but I don’t think you’re going to get very good writing. So, it’s just part of the territory.

And then, no matter how brief it is or how loved you are by whomever you’re sending your work to, even just a paragraph to someone who’s read everything you’ve ever written and worships you, it’s accompanied by this incredible feeling of doubt. It’s like taking your clothes off and walking into someone’s office, going, so, what do you think?

And it’s completely predictable. I don’t know why it is that way. But we all have to fight through this to get to work. It’s really interesting.

**JULIE:** Yeah, because if vulnerability is the ground from which we open up and write, and yet, one aspect of that is bringing fear on. There does seem to be almost no escape. And yet, one, through experience, learns to relax and accept even that.

**SUSAN:** Yeah. Not having fear is not an option.

**JULIE:** It’s how you deal with it.

**SUSAN:** Yeah, and it’s how you value it.

**JULIE:** Oooo.

**SUSAN:** Because it’s not a nuisance. It’s a form of wakefulness. Fear is accompanied by heightened sensory precision. You can hear someone

coming from a mile away. You can smell danger in the air. Your senses are heightened. Your awareness is on 11. [laughter]

There is a real quality of wakefulness to fear. It's not a matter of disposing of it, or of even saying, "Oh well, I'm afraid, but I'm going to go ahead anyway." It's sort of a matter of inviting it to the table. You say, "Yes. Please come in. Please accompany me. Please let me join my energy with you." And it's a good sign in a sense. It's a sign that a boundary is being approached. You don't want to willy-nilly run over your boundaries. But if you can bring skillfulness to your fear, that's a very powerful thing. It brings power to the words.

**JULIE:** Yes. Now, what creates fear?

**SUSAN:** Well, one way to look at it is, what creates fear is a sense that things are not okay the way they are. Acceptance or surrender or allowing or relaxation, whatever it is that we talked about some moments ago.

**JULIE:** Hmm-hmm.

**SUSAN:** Those things are incompatible with fear. You can't be afraid and relax at the same time. [laughter] You can be relaxed about your fear however, which is a wonderful thing. But I think a sense that things are not okay the way they are is what causes fear.

I am a Buddhist and in Buddhist thought fear expresses itself in three ways. They are called The Three Poisons. And they are: Passion, not the good kind, means more like desperation; aggression; and delusion.

So, when we don't want things to be the way they are, or you're afraid they're going to be a particular way and you don't want to open your eyes, we tend to either become desperate, like "please, please, please make everything okay." Or aggressive, "I am going to make things the way I want them or else." Or delusional, "Everything's fine. There's nothing wrong." So, passion, aggression and ignorance are forms of fear and they're all different expressions of not wanting things to be as they are.

**JULIE:** So, you would say that some of the things you just mentioned, relaxation, awareness. These help dissolve fear? Is there anything else that helps dissolve fear?

**SUSAN:** I think relaxation is the key. And by relaxation, I don't think either of us means falling asleep in front of the TV, or not caring. Relaxation, in this case, means openness and awareness and the ability to see what is happening. And to tolerate what is arising within you and around you,

even under very difficult circumstances. And you can remain open, even when things are very intense. That is my definition of fearlessness.

**JULIE:** Hmm-hmm. Well, it's interesting because, you know, I haven't done too many of these interviews yet. So, I started very, kind of excited, but also nervous. And there was a relaxation just in beginning, in acting as opposed to the nervousness of worrying just being in my head.

**SUSAN:** I totally know what you mean and I think that is a great, great point. The moment you sit down and engage with what you are afraid of, whether it turns out well or poorly, your anxiety recedes. That's a very magical thing.

**JULIE:** Well, it's amazing how when, if you're coming to a part in your writing that you're a little nervous about it and you find yourself procrastinating, and finally, you sit down and you start writing, and all of a sudden it just starts to flow.

**SUSAN:** Yeah, and you're like "What the hell? What was I so worried about?" Yeah, it's really amazing. It's really amazing. And somehow that procrastination: going towards your computer and away from it, somehow that's part of the process. It just is. [laughter]

**JULIE:** That's true. Don't want to judge it.

**SUSAN:** It just seems to be there.

**JULIE:** Yeah.

**SUSAN:** I know people writing books, and whatever, often say "Well, you just have to be disciplined and say you're going to write from nine to noon and never diverge from it." I don't know that I necessarily agree with that. Everybody has their own process, but being disciplined about your process whatever it is, is quite relaxing actually. [laughter] Mine happens to be very scattershot.

**JULIE:** Well, then I also find when you've disciplined yourself in the sense of trying to force yourself to do it, "Okay, I've got to now, have to." You put so much pressure on yourself that that actually works against you. That the easiest way to get disciplined is through commitment. Because the more you care about something, the more you're committed to it, discipline becomes a breeze. It's not something you have to force yourself to do. It's something you want to do.

**SUSAN:** That's absolutely true. And faith plays a part in that too. I don't mean in the theistic sense.

**JULIE:** Hmm-hmm.

**SUSAN:** I just mean, you have seen the results of your work. You've seen your capabilities, to whatever degree. And faith in those things can enliven your discipline as opposed to pure willfulness. Although, that said, sometimes pure willfulness is just what you've got to employ.

**JULIE:** Especially when there's a deadline looming. [laughter]

**SUSAN:** I hear that loud and clear.

**JULIE:** Now, Susan. You talk about the qualities of gentleness, delight, confidence, and joy in your book. How can writers apply these qualities to their life, or to their writing, to help them lessen or eliminate their fears?

**SUSAN:** Well, I think there are three ways that people can apply these lessons. And the foundation for what I'm going to say is the practice of meditation. Without that practice, these things become very difficult. Because practicing meditation teaches you how to do these things. They're not conceptual. You actually learn to do them, not just to think about them.

So, when you meditate, you are with your experience as it is, without judgment. And this cultivates a kind of gentleness towards yourself. As writers, we're all afraid of who we are in some sense. We don't have something important to say, that we will not be able to do it. That we will go blank at the critical moment, or be inadequate in some way. And that self-judgment, that inner critic can do a lot of damage. And cultivating some gentleness towards yourself, including everything that's great about you and everything that's a mess, is very helpful in the writing process.

And when you are able to be gentle with yourself to say, "Well, whatever arises within me, I'm going to be able to make it okay. I'm going to be able to be with it." It's very relaxing and with that relaxation comes another quality, which is a reduction in fear of others because you're okay within yourself. So, we all fear what people will say about our writing, whether we admit it or not.

So, we're afraid of someone's judgment about our writing. Whether it's our parents, or the public, or our editor, or whoever it might be. And we're afraid of being judged, or criticized, etc. And you have to deal with people when you're a writer, editors or publishers. We often approach those people with a lot of fear. That's understandable. I'm not criticizing that.

But you can learn, instead of fearing other people, to take delight in them instead. It doesn't mean you have to like them. It means being open and curious about them. When you take delight in people, as your primary,

sort of engagement with them, as opposed to defensiveness, that is a very softening and magnetizing quality.

So, that brings me to the third kind of fear, which is fear of life. Fear that things are not going to go the way you want. Fear that you'll never get published, or that you will and everyone will hate it, or that you'll be a success and then you'll fail, or fail and then succeed, whatever it might be. (All of which has happened to me by the way.)

When you can be gentle towards yourself and sort of take delight in other people, this imparts a very wonderful kind of confidence that is not based in arrogance. And it's unconditioned. Meaning, it's not like you'll be confident as long as things go your way. You can be confident as the great waves of life crash over you.

So, this is the formula for joy, I think. The ability to be gentle towards yourself, take delight in others, and be confident that you can meet your life. What else do you need? Joy results from that.

And part of that joy, in my experience, is based in the kind of arising of what Buddhists call "auspicious coincidence." Or maybe people would call synchronicities or harmony or congruence between who you are and what your world presents you with. A kind of harmony evolves. And your inner world and your outer world begin to match. And that is my definition of a good life. Not a feeling, but the sense of "I'm here in my world as I am and all is well."

**JULIE:** That's great. What I really like about that is, starting off with the gentleness. So, it's not so much acceptance in the sense of trying to make it okay. As much as just being gentle with yourself and where you're at in this moment. One thing I find is that when the fears come up, which they do, I've learned to kind of recognize it. And in that recognition of "Oh, there it comes again," there is relaxing. So, that seems to be the embodiment of what you talk about, the gentleness.

**SUSAN:** I think it is.

**JULIE:** And it really does make a difference when you know, "Well okay, here it is again," or "This too shall pass." You know, rather than trying to force it to be what you want or beat yourself up, "I've been writing for years, why is this still happening to me?"

**SUSAN:** Yeah. It's very empowering and relaxing to be able to get with your own experience without beating yourself up. I mean, I think people think, "Well, I'll be gentle to myself when I do everything well, when my life's

together. But I'll stop trying if I'm too gentle towards myself. I need to drive myself around the clock." And that's very, very harmful.

**JULIE:** The last chapter in your book is "Freedom from Fear: A Seven Day Meditation Program." That gets me hopeful. Can I really get rid of my fear in seven days? [laughter]

**SUSAN:** Well, you can come to a different relationship with your fear. [laughter] Absolutely. And believe me, you don't want to get rid of your fear.

**JULIE:** Fear deserves to be honored.

**SUSAN:** For it's inherent wakefulness.

**JULIE:** Hmm-hmm.

I have a question. There's a quote that I really like in your book. You say that "tension between the real self and self image causes frustration to build and build." That's a very powerful statement.

And what I would like to know is, what your definition of the real self is and that relationship with self image because so often we think that our thoughts are the real us. And so, we don't have that sense of the deeper, real self. And yet it's always there affecting us. So, I would love to hear you talk about that relationship.

**SUSAN:** The real self is, it's a matter continual discovery for each of us and I don't think there is a "Okay, I've gotten to my real self now and it's okay." [laughter] One way to think about it and this is the way I think about it, is your real self is sort of what you are genuinely experiencing. And perhaps beyond that, what has enabled you to observe your experience, is a good place to start thinking about who my real self is. Mysterious, it's a mystery.

Nonetheless, we have a continual sense of who I should be in each moment and overall. We predicate our sense of happiness on having the right self image and we have what, in our society, what I have called image poisoning, which is thinking that the way things look is what they are. So that if I look happy, I am happy. If I look successful, I am successful.

And continually confusing what is actually arising within you versus what you think should be happening within you, or to you, or how you might look to others, just causes enormous frustration, and leads to tremendous anxiety.

So, you may or may not be successful. You may or may not weight 92 pounds or whatever it is you think you need to be. But whether or not you achieve the things you think you need, your happiness will never be predicated on those things. It will only be predicated on the ability to relax with your experience as it arises, which you cannot predict.

**JULIE:** Wow.

**SUSAN:** It's scary. It's saying, "I'm going to let go and I'm going to not know. I'm going to not know who I am from moment to moment. And allow who I am to present him or her self." That's a very brave thing.

**JULIE:** That's interesting because it's almost saying that our image of our self is there to protect us from the unknown because we're afraid of it.

**SUSAN:** I think that there's a lot of truth in what you're saying.

One of my great spiritual teachers is Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who was the founder of Shambhala Buddha's lineage, which is the lineage I practice in. And he said once this, "Everyone's biggest fear is fear of space." That's really interesting, I've contemplated that for years.

**JULIE:** Wow.

**SUSAN:** What does that mean? And I think this is what he means. Well, this is a possible answer to what he means. It's the fear of not knowing who you are from moment to moment and instead, allowing yourself to arise from moment to moment. And that causes a lot of fear. And I think that's the cause of fear.

**JULIE:** Yeah. One of the other things that you've said that I wanted to ask you about is you've said that happiness can be the most fearsome of all. Second, of course, to space. [laughter] Because there is so much to lose.

**SUSAN:** Oh yeah.

**JULIE:** And that almost sounds like fear of happiness, fear of success. For a writer, we all have this dream of putting our work out there and yet we're afraid of it at the same time.

**SUSAN:** When you do achieve something that you really, really want, like you have something published or you fall in love or whatever it might be. You simultaneously, or I, I guess I should just speak for myself, I simultaneously feel the ephemeral nature of that thing and how fragile it is and how easy it will be to lose it.

I experienced this when I got married. This was my primary experience of getting married; it was like a death meditation to me. [laughter] My poor husband. It's like, "I love this person and we're going to get married and spend the rest of our lives together, god willing, but someday this is going to end. Somehow we're going to say goodbye." So, to walk into this preciousness with the knowledge that one will have to let it go, arouses tremendous feeling.

Without acknowledging the impermanence of whatever it is that is making you happy, there's a failure to appreciate it properly. And it, instead of being a source of joy, it becomes an adornment. You understand what I mean? It becomes an item in your image arsenal that goes against a genuine engagement with something or someone. So, to make it real, an acknowledgment of impermanence has to be there. Otherwise, it's a device.

**JULIE:** Wow.

**SUSAN:** Now we're in big girl territory. [laughter] I've never wanted to get to big girl territory, but to me this is like, "Okay, let's be very serious here about what we're doing when we fall in love or reach for what we aspire to." It's, obviously, there's nothing more worthy of your time and attention than those things, but at the same time, they break your heart.

**JULIE:** Yeah. Well, and a lot of times too, with writing it's having the dream all your life and for whatever reason not having the courage to follow it can break your heart.

**SUSAN:** Absolutely. I agree. It's a different kind of heartbreak, I think. And it's always so lovely when there's somebody or something to blame. [laughter]

**JULIE:** Not my fault. Conditioning.

**SUSAN:** When you step into what you want to do, there's nobody to blame anymore.

**JULIE:** Yeah.

**SUSAN:** There's nothing between you and what you want anymore. And that is very scary. But it's worthy, a noble challenge. And not taking it on creates more suffering than taking it on. For me.

**JULIE:** Well, what about when what's holding you back, you know it's yourself, your fears, your beliefs, is there a way that you have found to help get past

habits of reaction, or habits of fear that have become engrained in a certain sense? Is there a way to really root them out and let them go?

**SUSAN:** Well, meditation is critical. I don't mean to keep harping on it. But without awareness of how your mind works, what hope do you have?

**JULIE:** That's true because that's what's getting in your way.

**SUSAN:** You're just going to hope for the best, or you're going to apply theories to your behavior, as opposed to really stopping, sitting down, turning around and looking your life right in the eye.

My teacher, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, wrote a wonderful book called *Turning the Mind into an Ally* and it is one of the best books I've ever read, and I'm not just saying that because I love him. It's a spectacular book on meditation.

He equates an untamed mind to an untamed horse. If you jump on the back of an untamed horse, the chances you're going to get where you're going are fairly slim. You just hang on and hope for the best.

And it's the same with an untamed mind. Which is, until you introduce some sort of meditative practice, it just goes, it just bounces all over the place. And trying to get it to act a different way without first taming it is like riding an untamed horse. You just hang on and hope for the best. And then your chances are kind of minimized.

So, meditation is very important and I'm a huge fan of the single step theory, which is a made up name for just doing the next step. Whatever it is that you're afraid of, don't even think about doing it. Think about doing the next step one would do if one were to do it.

If you want to write your memoirs, don't say "I'm too afraid and I need to get over my fear before I tell this story of something that happened in my life." Just think, I may do it and if I was, what would the next step be? The next step might be just writing a line list of what happened. It might be outlining it. It might be reading a book from someone who experienced something similar. It doesn't mean you have to do it. Just do that next step. And then reassess.

It's when you put it on yourself, "I have to do this" or make a big proclamation or giant sweeping commitments that things become very disorienting. How do you know if you want to do it? Just try it. Try one thing and see if you still want to after that one thing. And then if you do, try the next one thing. It's not fancy, but it works.

**JULIE:** We do all these pros and cons in our head. When really all it takes is try it and see.

**SUSAN:** Yeah, don't do the pros and cons.

**JULIE:** Yeah.

**SUSAN:** Just do one thing. [laughter]

**JULIE:** Well, it's interesting. I do want to make one comment on the taming of the mind and you began that speaking also about awareness. And I think those two really kind of go hand in hand because I do a different spiritual practice, but I have found that the greatest releases I've had, where, like a lifetime's habit of emotional reaction will let go in an instant and be gone forever. Hasn't come from trying to make it happen, but has come through simple awareness of what's really going on and telling the truth about it. And in that awareness it just lets go.

**SUSAN:** Yes. I know exactly what you mean. I so appreciate what you're saying. It's like awareness itself is self liberating. Meaning, just shining the light of awareness on something liberates it.

**JULIE:** Yes. It can be quite, amazingly powerful and usually unexpected.

**SUSAN:** Yeah.

**JULIE:** Because you can't make it happen. At least I haven't found a way yet. [laughter]

**SUSAN:** Well, I know. You can try and try and try. You sometimes, you know, it won't happen, but then [laughter] some day it does.

**JULIE:** Well, it's interesting. It's like, why does it happen this moment? Why couldn't I have done it last week or last year or a couple of decades ago? But that's the mystery of life. It took whatever it took to get me to this moment to be able to let it go.

**SUSAN:** Amazing. [laughter] What a mysterious design.

**JULIE:** Yes. But, no, no. I want to know and I want to control it. No, no.

**SUSAN:** I want it yesterday.

**JULIE:** That's right.

- SUSAN:** That's how I feel. I'm very driven. [laughter] I'm ambitious and I'm driven. Sometimes that's good and sometimes that's not so good.
- JULIE:** How do you balance the desire for certain outcomes and the state of just relaxing into what's happening, into awareness or meditation?
- SUSAN:** Well, what's happening is I'm feeling very ambitious and I try to relax with that. As opposed to, saying I need to choose a different place to be right now. I try to be skillful about my actions. And just because I feel something, doesn't mean I have to act on it. But for better or worse, I have a lot of intensity and a lot of whatever you might want to call it. Not unusual, but I have a lot of intensity and a lot of passion and I was born that way and that's all there is to it.
- JULIE:** That's a good thing.
- SUSAN:** It is what it is. It's been a gift and also difficult. Whatever it is that's great about you is also your biggest difficulty. I don't know why it is that way, but that's just how it is.
- JULIE:** Your biggest curse and your biggest blessing, all in one.
- While I've still got you for a few minutes, I would love to ask you some questions about your writing.
- SUSAN:** Great.
- JULIE:** I see that you've done two series of books. You've done *The Hard Questions: 100 Essential Questions to Ask Before You Say I Do*, *The Hard Questions for an Authentic Life*, and *The Hard Questions for Adult Children and Their Aging Parents*. And you've also done the *Joyful* series: *Joyful Mind*, *Joyful Birth*, and *Joyful Wedding*.
- SUSAN:** Yeah. That's right.
- JULIE:** And I was wondering. Now did you plan these as a series? Did you put these in your book proposal to help you sell a book? Or did you sell one book and the success turned into three books? How did that work?
- SUSAN:** For *The Hard Questions*, I sold one book and the success turned into three books. For the *Joyful* series, that was sold as a series.
- JULIE:** Oh okay. And do you think that *How Not to be Afraid of Your Own Life* might be a series? Because I can see *How Not to be Afraid of* fill in the blank, several more books.

**SUSAN:** They thought the title, when I first sold it to them, was *How Not to be Afraid of Your Own Wife*, which that would be a best seller I'm quite sure. [laughter] But, I don't know the answer.

**JULIE:** Life will tell.

**SUSAN:** Exactly. Everybody's got to figure that one out on their own. [laughter] There are no plans to make it a series.

**JULIE:** Oh okay.

**SUSAN:** I'm working on my next book, as you know.

**JULIE:** And you're about to go on a one month meditation writing retreat.

**SUSAN:** Yes.

**JULIE:** Everyone would love that, but are you able to sometimes do that and also write during your busy normal life?

**SUSAN:** Yeah, definitely. I mean, that's my job. I am a writer. This is my full time job and that's that, of course, I have other things in my life. [laughter]

**JULIE:** You have a full life. Well, good. I'm glad to hear it. [laughter]

**SUSAN:** And I teach and I do some consulting, and so it's not just living a purely writerly life. But, yeah, I try to write everyday. I also, for me, it's like critical to get away, even if it's just for a weekend.

**JULIE:** Hmm-hmm.

**SUSAN:** And sometimes when I get really stuck, or I, like "God, I'm at a deadline and I've got nothing and I don't know what to do next and whatever it is I'm working on." If I can, I try to go away, even if just overnight. And that really helps. We all have our tricks. I go sit somewhere not in my office. That's where I do my best writing. I recently started sitting with a friend in hotel lobbies, which I highly recommend. We don't talk to each other. And hotel lobbies are usually pretty elegant.

**JULIE:** Hmm-hmm.

**SUSAN:** And they have snacks nearby.

**JULIE:** Oh, I hadn't thought about that.

**SUSAN:** Awesome. Hotel lobbies are great. I highly recommend that.

**JULIE:** Oh, that's a great idea.

Okay, I have to ask. Let's face it. Being on the Oprah Winfrey Show is the Holy Grail for writers. I know so many authors who have Oprah Winfrey on their dream boards and want their book to be on Oprah Winfrey. So, how did that happen for you? Did you pitch a show to her or go the 'be on the show' link, or did they find you?

**SUSAN:** I didn't pitch them. They found me.

**JULIE:** Oh cool.

**SUSAN:** As far as I can tell, this is the way it happens 90% of the time. They decide to do a show on a topic. They do research. I don't know their operation inside out, obviously.

**JULIE:** Hmm-hmm.

**SUSAN:** But, my understanding, and when I've spoken to other people who have been on or what I deduce is that they decide to do something on a topic. And then they research who has something to say on that topic. And then they contact you. So, I had no clue. [laughter] My book had been out, you know, a year and a half or something.

**JULIE:** Oh wow.

**SUSAN:** Yep.

**JULIE:** Yeah, that was a surprise. What was it like to be on the show?

**SUSAN:** It was awesome. It was great. I was on twice. The first time they came to my house and taped an interview. But then they did a follow up to that show because the show turned out to be really popular and then I was on the show in the studio. And it was amazing. It was fantastic. It's an amazing, amazing operation.

They, everything they did, they did the right way. And I'm not just saying I slept in a nice hotel. I mean, I did, but the way, it's just orchestrated so beautifully to make you feel comfortable and to keep you focused and to make it work. And, I know it's the Holy Grail. Everybody says, "Gosh dang it, if only you could get on Oprah" or whatever.

But I really learned from my experience that it's not just a matter of getting on Oprah. Because I was on with four other authors both times and only my book went on *The New York Times* bestseller list.

And it's not because I was great and they weren't. It was because my book was really simple, *Hard Questions to Ask Before You Get Married*. And it wasn't just me going "blah blah blah, this is what I think." They got couples to do it and the focus was on those people. And then I was there saying "Well, thus and such is important" or whatever it might be.

So, not just like, "Oh let me get on television and tell people what I think about things." It's more like "Can its usefulness be demonstrated?" That's really the key.

**JULIE:** That's great to know. [laughter]

**SUSAN:** And it's hard sometimes to keep your mind on that, because you think, "Well I have something really valuable I need to tell the people of America." And that may be true indeed, but nonetheless, so what. Usefulness demonstrated is very helpful.

**JULIE:** And that's actually good to keep in mind, simply for writing your book. Simplicity and usefulness are a good combination.

**SUSAN:** They're a very good combination. Unless you're writing fiction and you're...

**JULIE:** Well, that's true. [laughter] But I'm talking non-fiction.

**SUSAN:** I mean, if you're writing self-help, which is what I do. You want it to be useful.

**JULIE:** And that's how I'm creating this site. I'm always keeping in mind, "All right. Simplify, simplify. What can they use? What can they do with it?" I don't want to just throw out information at people.

**SUSAN:** I think that's really critical. And kind.

**JULIE:** Yeah.

**SUSAN:** The information may be the greatest information in the world, but how do you use it? That's what I live for. I try to talk about, "Well, how do I do it, me, Susan, how do I do that?"

**JULIE:** And the other part of that, of course, is actually using it.

**SUSAN:** Yes.

**JULIE:** Because I've read a lot of books or bought a lot of programs and I'm a lifelong learner. I love learning new things. But there's a difference between learning and doing.

**SUSAN:** I completely agree.

**JULIE:** It can really satisfy a mental yearning for knowledge, but if you don't do it, it's not really going to help your life. And if you can think of that in terms of how you're going to help your reader as you're writing ...

**SUSAN:** Hmm-hmm.

**JULIE:** It's invaluable.

**SUSAN:** I completely agree. It's invaluable. And that's what it's about. It's about serving more than anything else.

**JULIE:** And, one last thing. Susan, I've noticed that at your website the title of the home page that appears by the top of my browser says, "Be fearless, dream big, and love a lot."

**SUSAN:** Yes. [laughter]

**JULIE:** I love that.

**SUSAN:** Oh good. [laughter] I, what more do you want? [laughter]

**JULIE:** A motto for living: Be fearless, dream big and love a lot. You can't lose. Okay, thank you so much.

**SUSAN:** You're welcome. Thank you.

**JULIE:** Okay. Bye bye.