

MEETINGS WITH REMARKABLE EDUCATORS

PODCAST TRANSCRIPTION OF

Teri Sperry

with host

Ba Luvmour

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Ba Luvmour: Welcome to ***Meetings With Remarkable Educators***. This podcast is brought to you in part by you, our friends and supporters at ***patreon.com/remarkableeducators***. Each podcast is a dialogue between me, Ba Luvmour, and an educator who sees the greatness in their students and touches the whole of their being. These educators defy generalizations. So here's a little bit about what they've done and how I know them.

Ba Luvmour: I must admit I'm an intuitive guy and there's sometimes when you meet a person even through Zoom, or a video conference, or on the phone that you just know that they have the love, the care, the understanding, and the willingness to really dive deeply into what is meaningful and worthwhile for children. Perhaps that's the result of my many years on the trail, but I like to believe that, that emanates from the person, and Teri Sperry is just such a person. I first met her because we are actually collaborating on one of the most exciting projects I've been on in my whole career, it's called I Care and what it is, is an international organization to create accreditation for non-traditional schools and organizations, and over the months I've had much to do with Teri and always found her lively, intelligent, and just a pleasure to be with. Her understanding of what families need to approach and engage non-traditional education is vast and she shares that with us on this podcast.

Welcome Teri and thank you so much for being with us I really appreciate it.

Teri Sperry: Thank you for having me Ba. I've been listening to your podcast almost since it started and have really enjoyed all of the conversations, and I'm just really honored to be here with you.

Ba Luvmour: Thank you for that and you bring something to the podcast that we really haven't had before. And that is I guess the right word would be a center for people in Austin, Texas to rally around and to be able to communicate with. I was just on the phone yesterday with a colleague Theodore Richards who is in Chicago and actually is a former guest on the podcast. He just didn't know how to bring together ... he's popular there [in Chicago] and there's a very interesting program going ... and he had no clue how to bring everyone together in Chicago to begin to consider the kinds of things that you are doing. So, tell us a little bit about your life in Austin and what you're doing there.

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Teri Sperry: Well sure. I run *Alt Ed Austin* and it's kind of two things, it's an online resource center for families and educators to find out information about what's going on in the alternative education scene in the area, and where to find schools, where to find after school programs, and other educational opportunities, and discuss them. But then it's also an in-person consulting service that I do. I offer both private consultations with families and group workshops with groups of parents to discuss how to evaluate whether a school might be a good fit for their kids, what to look for when they're visiting schools, what kinds of questions to ask and also just to introduce people to those vast array of options that we have here.

Ba Luvmour: That's so interesting because that's exactly the kind of ... Theodore also has tremendous expertise and understanding, he's the author of several books, so how exactly did you get started and how would someone, anyone get into doing something like this?

Teri Sperry: Great questions.

I didn't exactly fall into it but it was sort of a series of happy coincidences and links that lead me into it. At the time I started the website I had just enrolled my own kid in a very small kind of under the radar little school, at the time it was for ages 8-12 I believe, and I kept running into friends and parents always talk about schools when they get together, if they have kids of school age or even before. And they would always ask me, "Well, how did you hear about this school and why haven't I ever heard of it?"

It just got me to thinking, "Well, how could we help families learn more about these little schools that don't have a big budget for marketing? They're not out there on billboards." And so, I just decided there needs to be kind of a hub of information that's easily accessible. And so, I created a website not having any experience building websites before, I just chose a very user friendly platform and started with eight schools initially that I happened to know about, partly because I had friends who were educators often coming from public schools or traditional private schools and starting their own programs feeling that they had a newer better way to connect with children. So, I put them on the website and just put it out there. Sent the link to a few people I knew and it just spread organically, and within a few months ...

Ba Luvmour: Was it pretty much an instant success? That's kind of the implication here. Was it building over a couple of years? What was the timeline on it?

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- Teri Sperry: I would say it was a near instant success in that yeah within a couple of months I was regularly getting calls either from educators asking how they could get their school or program listed on the site, or from parents saying they had found the site, found it useful and had some questions, and were asking me about my insights about individual schools, and asking for help comparing them and figuring out which would be best for their kid.
- Ba Luvmour: So people were really pretty thirsty for this, really looking.
- Teri Sperry: Yes. It clearly was meeting a need in the community. So now its seven years later and from the small beginning of eight schools listed in our alternative school directory we now have 48.
- Ba Luvmour: 48? And do they report back that it's attractive, in other words that parents and other people are finding them due to your website?
- Teri Sperry: Yes, absolutely. I've had several school directors tell me that either we're the main source of enrollment for them or that we're 50% of the calls they get are coming either through our site or through consultations or workshops, in one way or another they're coming through *Alt Ed Austin*, which is really gratifying because that's the whole purpose of why I started it.
- Ba Luvmour: It must be tremendously gratifying and I know you also publish a newsletter, which I look forward to reading. How many are on your subscription, or how many newsletters do you send out each month? To how many people?
- Teri Sperry: I believe we're around 2,500 on our subscribers list.
- Ba Luvmour: 2,500?
- Teri Sperry: Yeah.
- Ba Luvmour: Austin must be a hotbed for this then, that's quite a list.
- Teri Sperry: Yeah, Austin really for quite some time has been a hotbed of educational innovation and thought. I have a few theories about why that is. Part of it is the culture of Austin itself, which is very sort of proud of being off beat and sort of different than the rest of Texas, and there's a really strong entrepreneurial spirit, kind of a DIY maker movement is very strong here. Lots of home schoolers as well. But also, kind of on the flip side of that we have extremely low funding for our public schools, and so that leads a lot of families to be dissatisfied with the educational services their kids are getting in

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the public system, and looking for something different. Many of these families don't have the budget for traditional private school tuition, and they aren't necessarily looking for what traditional private schools have to offer, they're not necessarily looking for an elite prep school.

Ba Luvmour: The prep schools and that sort of thing.

Teri Sperry: Prep school, exactly. They want something that better matches their family's values and the way they're raising their children, and looking for more holistic programs. And then there is another factor that makes it kind of easy to start a school here in Austin is that we have really loose regulations, so it's easy to just kind of hang your shingle and call it a school.

Ba Luvmour: All of that is similar in Oregon and here in Portland alternative education is also very, very strong and I sense it's growing just tremendously throughout the country. I think that's wonderful. Oregon also has terrible public schools. Obviously there are some good ones here and there, but in terms of national ranking it's down way near the bottom. Yeah, those are all very important contributing factors, but it's a step though to go from being a clearinghouse if you will and a promoter to being a consultant. What is that step about for you?

Teri Sperry: I spent most of my adult life as a freelance editor mainly editing books for scholarly presses and some textbooks. And so ...

Ba Luvmour: Okay, well I'm writing a new one Teri so I think maybe I'll be sending it your way.

Teri Sperry: Oh.

Ba Luvmour: I'm sure you're not busy at all, right?

Teri Sperry: No, we can talk. We can talk. My sister is also an editor and we're working on a book together. I don't know if we've talked about this before, but yeah maybe...

Ba Luvmour: No, go ahead; what book are you working on?

Teri Sperry: It's going to be called *The Alt Ed Explainer* and up until very recently I had a regular column actually in our monthly newsletter called the Alt Ed Explainer in which I would take on a question that I'm often asked or a question that was submitted specifically for the explainer to kind of illuminate a specific term or concept in

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education that is on parent's minds. We've covered many, many, many topics over the years and I realized that we could collect them and turn them into kind of a handbook for parents who are starting down the alternative education path and want to better understand, what is the difference between Montessori and Waldorf? And what is a progressive school? What is Regio Amelias? And what do they mean by *project based learning*? What is *holistic education*? What is meant by *differentiation*? Those kinds of things.

Ba Luvmour: Those are really important questions and I encourage you, I get similar questions all the time, and the distinctions are actually yeah the distinctions are actually really quite important to people. So, an outdoor school might still follow a traditional academic curriculum that's a lot different than a holistic school, which tries to be more relationship based then co-develop the curricula with the child and the family.

Teri Sperry: Right. Yeah, so we're adding a few chapters and some introductions, and soon we'll have a handy little guidebook for parents. And hopefully ...

Ba Luvmour: Yeah, so then your consulting practice is just straight forwardly, "Hey what kind of school are you looking for? Let me help you organize around what's available." And put them in touch with that? And so, that would imply also getting to know the families and their values? Would that be a correct description of your consulting practice?

Teri Sperry: Yes. Normally I have a family fill out a pretty extensive questionnaire before they meet with me so that we don't have to cover all of those details when we're meeting in person and it kind of gives us a basis for starting. That questionnaire covers all sorts of things from the abstract to the very detailed and practical. So we talk about what their values and priorities are around education, their own educational background and baggage they might be bringing to the decision. What fears they might have about taking a leap of faith into something very unconventional? And then we talk about their specific children's learning styles, differences, personality, interests are a really big one. And then we talk about practical things like what part of town do you live in? How far are you realistically able to commute to the right school? Financial considerations and things like that.

Ba Luvmour: Tremendous, it's just tremendous. It's such a needed service really for everyone in the alternative education community. I'm just so thankful for you to be doing this and of course we know each other

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because we're colleagues in developing an accreditation approach for these alternative schools.

Teri Sperry: Right.

Ba Luvmour: How did that happen? In other words, here you are and you're doing this and it has to be keeping you quite busy and it's a tremendous service and yet you and some colleagues of yours down in Austin decide, "Hey, what about real accreditation for alternative schools?" How did that come about and how do you have time for it?

The old time question, right? Once we open these doors all of a sudden there's so much, it's so rich and so interesting, and the people we get to deal with are so just committed and profound, it's really exciting. So, how did that happen for you in terms of the accreditation group that we are both part of now?

Teri Sperry: I've been working for several years, almost since the beginning of Alt Ed Austin, with a group of local alternative educators who formed a kind of loose coalition that eventually became a non-profit organization called the Education Transformation Alliance. We collaborated on events, and would meet regularly, and two of the people who I became closest to through that process Nichi Andra and Ali Ronder, who both had experience running small alternative schools, talked regularly about other things that we could do to support the alternative education movement, and particularly just support those running schools, and trying to fill enrollment, and make their programs really sustainable over the long haul. And one thing that kept coming up was the issue of accreditation. Here in Texas schools do not need to be accredited, there's no laws that says they need to and yet most parents believe that it is necessary or that their kids might not be able to get into a good college if they're coming from a non-accredited school.

Ba Luvmour: Sure, well you can see that because as you said parents they're doing something unconventional, a lot of them are kind of right at the border of wondering, "Is this really going to work?" So the accreditation would allow them to step over the edge in many cases.

Teri Sperry: Right. But, from the alternative school director's perspective getting accredited through the traditional accrediting agencies has often meant that they would need to make major changes in their programs and curriculum, which they weren't willing to do. It's why they started the school in the first place, to do things differently.

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They just weren't finding accrediting bodies that would allow the flexibility they wanted to be able to really do their programs right.

Ba Luvmour: Well speaking as a parent wouldn't the perception be, "Well, how valuable or how meaningful is this accreditation process if it's not going through traditional channels?" Are they getting it out of a cereal box? What's going on here?

Teri Sperry: Right. So that's one of the reasons that we decided we wanted to work with you and Josette, Ba, because you bring decades of experience and this enormous body of knowledge about relationship based education, which is exactly what we wanted to focus on for our accrediting process. And so, reaching out to you and also to a group of international experts who we hope will be filling out our board of advisors, we feel brings a lot of authority and credibility to our accrediting agency.

Ba Luvmour: Yeah, I think people don't really understand just how many profound, and well respected, and well established people with doctorates, or teaching in universities, or have done profound research over many, many years are really involved in all this and it is sort of the providence of holistic education. It goes all the way back to the founding of America and it's always attracted people from Emerson all the way through to people like Parker Palmer, many other people who see this as essential for the whole human to unfold. And the advisory board will be spectacular I'm sure. So that's what will give the parents the confidence to move forward in this process.

Teri Sperry: Right. We'll also be looking at all of the kind of main things that parents most worry about like safety, and are the schools actually abiding by their by-laws or their other founding documents? Are they doing what they advertise that they're doing? So that's a big part of it.

Ba Luvmour: Yes and their financial stability, I know that's a big concern for parents, they want their kids to be there for several years if it meets their goals and needs.

Teri Sperry: Right.

Ba Luvmour: So this is pretty extensive and I want to go back to you, that sounds like another whole position, how do you do it?

Teri Sperry: Oh yeah.

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- Ba Luvmour: Where does the time come from?
- Teri Sperry: Back to that question, how do I ...
- Ba Luvmour: Back to that question, yes.
- Teri Sperry: Yeah, it's a balancing act. To some extent my consulting work is cyclical. There are definitely busier times of year as application deadlines approach I tend to get more families wanting consultations and there are slower times. The summer tends to be a little bit slower, so I try to get in my writing time and working on other projects like this accreditation project. I'm self-employed; I'm the boss here so I can sort of divide my time as needed as things come up. I'm now feeling much less busy than I was in the early part of the fall because I was pouring a lot of my energy into a big event, *the Festival of Learning* here in Austin, which was kind of a school fair combined with celebration of all of the different ways that we can learn and all the different things we can learn as children and adults in school and outside of school.
- Ba Luvmour: Was it the schools that are part of Alt Ed Austin, did they have booths? Was it that kind of thing?
- Teri Sperry: Yes. They all had exhibits, a lot of them offered hands-on activities or other kinds of activities to engage students and their families as well as just getting out information about their schools. But we also had programs like the City of Austin's Watershed Protection Department helping people learn through hands on activities how pollutants get through the watershed system. We had arts programs, we had martial arts, we had nature education programs, stop motion animation, sex education, yeah just ...
- Ba Luvmour: Wow, that sounds amazing. Was it well attended?
- Teri Sperry: Honestly I was a little disappointed in the turn out. It was an unexpectedly and unusually cold windy and wet day, and part of the festival was outdoors so it could have been better, it wasn't too bad, but we're sort of exploring other times of year and maybe other venues where weather won't be as big a factor.
- Ba Luvmour: Sure.
- Teri Sperry: But all in all it was a successful event. We had around 50 different programs. We had 20 schools and around 30 kind of other educational programs participate.

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Ba Luvmour: That again sounds like a tremendous amount of work and time to put together and I know on top of all of this that you have a family.

Teri Sperry: Yes I have a family and one of the reasons I took on organizing this new event this fall was my son had just gone off to college and I honestly was kind of filling that void by throwing myself into event organizing.

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A wag met the wise fool, in his pocket he had an egg.
"Tell me wise fool are you any good at guessing games?"

"Not bad," said the wise fool.

"Very well then, tell me what I have in my pocket."

"Well give me a clue then," said the wise fool.

"It is shaped like an egg, it's yellow and white inside, and it looks like an egg."

"Some sort of cake," said the wise fool.

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Ba Luvmour: So, many, many families speak to me and say, do you have any concrete examples of people from alternative education going to what they would call good colleges? I do in my experience, but tell us a little bit about your son's educational experience if you would.

Teri Sperry: Oh, sure. He started out in a brand new progressive charter school and he was there from kindergarten through third grade. And then he was in a small kind of home based school. And then he was at a small alternative middle school and eventually graduated from a small alternative high school, which was just fantastic. And he applied to seven colleges and was accepted to all of them, and received substantial merit scholarships, and was able to go to his top choice school, which happens to be a very unconventional fantastic liberal arts college in Canada.

Ba Luvmour: That's amazing. Many people go to alternative schools go through what here is traditionally called 8th grade and then they want to go to the public high school, some of them want the socialization of it, other times parents get concerned and say, "Well if he has that right high school diploma then he or she can go to the college of their choice." What was that like in an alternative high school? I don't think people really understand that part of it very well.

Teri Sperry: I run into that all the time and honestly a big public high school is maybe the right choice for some kids. For my own he really preferred small classes, discussion based classes, lots of one on one mentoring and guidance, and his particular high school really emphasized those things. He also is kind of an interdisciplinary thinker interested in lots of different things, and finding ways to put them together, explore them together, and his school was interdisciplinary in that way as is the college he's at now. And so, it was a really great fit for him.

But also I really like to reassure my client families that these days with the competitiveness sort of ratcheted up every year in college admissions what I'm hearing college admissions officers tell me in person and also publishing in major publications is that they are looking for candidates that stand out from the crowd. They get stacks and stacks of really great on paper perfect applications. Many of the college bound students feel that they or their parents feel that they should take as many AP [advance placement] courses as possible and so forth, and check off all of the boxes for volunteer, and extracurricular activities, and internships. So, it's really hard to stand out in a stack of applications like that, unless you've taken a very unusual path in education. When you do that you have some really interesting things to say on a college application interview.

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If you've spent the time, and had the time and encouragement and coaching in this kind of high school to figure out who you are and really explore your interests in depth, then you have something interesting and unusual to say in your college application essays.

Ba Luvmour: Exactly. I found the same as you have and been able to get help many alternative learners get into really top end schools without any problem at all because they do stand out. My own daughter was a river guide and a ropes course facilitator by the time she was a junior in high school, so then she had all those different clients that she dealt with when she was hired in these different occupations.

Teri Sperry: Right.

Ba Luvmour: That kind of thing and they go, "Whoa, how did you manage that?" So, it is very important because so many parents are right at that place because of the challenges in public school and because of the needs of the kids. How many high school students do you know that are dissatisfied with their public high school? I know many.

Teri Sperry: Oh so many.

Ba Luvmour: They often say to me, "I'm there for my friends", or "I like two out of my five courses" and that sort of thing, and there's just not this enthusiasm and curiosity for learning.

Teri Sperry: Right.

Ba Luvmour: And alternative high schools can provide that, that's very important for all of us to know about that.

Teri Sperry: Yeah, and I think another thing with these smaller alternative high schools can provide is a positive social culture for the school, which it's just really hard to do in a school with thousands of students. They're able to really bring out what's so great about teenagers that kind of gets shifted to the side or suppressed in really negative school cultures where it's cool to dis your friends or it's cool to do really unhealthy behaviors. In my own kid's high school there was a great amount of effort and time spent on creating the kind of culture where the kids felt like they could be themselves, they could be their best selves, they could show each other compassion, it could really welcome new students and feel like they fit in no matter who they were.

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- Ba Luvmour: Well that is a conversation I often have and many of the parents will say, "Well, what about diversity if it's a small school?" Diversity is very important in our culture right now. Isn't there a loss there? How do you respond to that question?
- Teri Sperry: Well that's a tough one because it's probably the biggest downside I recognize among small private schools. It's hard and every single school director I know really wants their school community to be more diverse than it is. They're constantly looking for ways to make that happen.
- Ba Luvmour: It is one of the challenges. I know that what we tried to do was just get out more, and get more involved in anything we could, and get into some exchange programs. We really did want to have at least economic diversity if we couldn't have ethnic diversity, so we had a very robust scholarship program.
- Teri Sperry: I think that's really important, yeah. Also, some schools I know here offer work study or work trade programs for parents who can offer their skills, and time, and energy in exchange for a break on tuition, that's pretty popular. It doesn't work for everybody because not everyone has the time or flexibility to be able to do that, but several schools have opened very intentionally in underserved parts of town.
- Ba Luvmour: How are they funded Teri? If they're underserved then that implies that there's ... well no school ever has enough money to do all that it wants to do, I know that. But do they have backers, and grants, and that sort of thing? You know that we've run three different schools and we really did depend for at least 30-40% of our budget on giving, on donations, on grants and that sort of thing. Is that how these schools in the underserved communities are funding themselves?
- Teri Sperry: Yeah to some extent they practice all of those methods. Honestly I've seen school directors sacrifice their own salaries in order to just get a school off the ground, to just figure out, "All right, can I live on ..." can they live on their spouse's income for a couple of years until the school is sustainable and, "Can pay me a salary?" Seeing that help then. I've seen other schools that get a grant, kind of a startup grant from just one affluent family, or company, or foundation. And then grants, small donations, kindly landlords give them a really sweet deal on building rent. Whatever they can do, yeah. It remains a challenge.

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- Ba Luvmour: Teri we're actually kind of at the end of our time and I always like to ask the podcast guests if they have anything specifically that they haven't shared that they want to or any particular pearls of wisdom that they can offer to us as a way of signing off.
- Teri Sperry: I would just like to invite any of your listeners who are parents to really consider ... is your child happy, flourishing, or thriving in school? And if not, to consider looking at some really different alternatives. Because there are many out there. You don't have to live in Austin or Portland to find a really great unconventional little school. Sometimes they are hiding under the radar right under your nose, and do a little digging and asking or contact somebody maybe even from a different town, like you Ba or me, who might have some contacts wherever you're living that help you find the right fit for your kid.
- Ba Luvmour: That's great. You know the alternative education resource organization, AERO does also keep a really great database and keeps a very good website going on this as well.
- Teri Sperry: Yes that's right.
- Ba Luvmour: Yeah, and has conventions twice a year, and this June is going to be in Portland, so are you coming to visit Teri?
- Teri Sperry: I do plan to be there, yep.
- Ba Luvmour: Really? You coming to Portland?
- Teri Sperry: Yes I am.
- Ba Luvmour: All right. I have plans, I will talk to Josette about it and we will make some things happen.
- Teri Sperry: Yeah, I was really excited to see it's going to be in Portland this year.
- Ba Luvmour: Pretty exciting. Well thank you so much Teri and thank you for the valuable, valuable contributions you make to education and to children and families, it's so appreciated.
- Teri Sperry: Well right back at your Ba.

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This is Ba Luvmour reminding you that, holistic relationships with children leads to joy and self-knowledge with the adults in their lives, with respect for you and for children everywhere. See you next time.