

Betsy Kindall: I'm Betsy Kindall.

Nicole Fairchil...: I'm Nicole Fairchild.

Stacy Moore: And I'm Stacy Moore.

Betsy Kindall: And this is Arkansas A.W.A.R.E., a project to advance wellness and resiliency in education.

Nicole Fairchil...: Hey everybody, welcome to the Arkansas A.W.A.R.E. Podcast. We are here today with our atlases open. Not literal atlases. [00:00:30] We've been diving into Brene Brown's book, Atlas of the Heart, and we did last week jump ahead a little bit further into the book and talk about despair and hopelessness. But we're going to go back to closer to the beginning of the book right now. We're going to talk a little bit about this concept of boredom. So in the book, Brene defines boredom as the uncomfortable state of wanting to engage in satisfying activity, but being able to do [00:01:00] it.

Stacy Moore: Unable.

Nicole Fairchil...: Unable to do it. Oh yeah, thank you. Unable to do it. And then she talks a little bit through there about how even when she's coding data for writing that as she's bored to tears and just maybe even doing something that's a little bit more mindless, that that's when ideas will start to bubble up. That it's when we're bored, that we get [00:01:30] ideas.

Betsy Kindall: Crickets.

Stacy Moore: So it's the opposite of, what's that called in the movie Sing? When you're in your zone?

Betsy Kindall: Yeah.

Stacy Moore: The flow, when you're in it and you lose track of time because you're so invested. So this would be the opposite of that?

Nicole Fairchil...: Yeah.

Stacy Moore: But things still emerge, is what you're saying.

Nicole Fairchil...: Yeah, I think flow is, I think, the opposite. Boredom is ... I think I would almost define it [00:02:00] in irritated emptiness.

Betsy Kindall: And I think about my kids a lot when we have these conversations. And I was thinking about one of my kids lately who was talking about being in a class and she was not just complaining really. She really wasn't. She was being genuine in

the fact that she's truly a little bored in that class. And for me, what I took is she's really lacking the necessary stimulation that she needs to [00:02:30] be engaged.

Stacy Moore: I think that's the important word in here that I take away from it. Because a lot of times if my kid's say, "I'm bored," I'm like, "Hey, there is all kinds of ... You can help me wash dishes, you can do the laundry." But the satisfying, that word in this definition, so satisfying activity.

Betsy Kindall: Yeah.

Stacy Moore: So it may be something like coding, but it's not satisfying. I'm busy, but I'm still bored.

Nicole Fairchil...: Or maybe it is just the inactivity that we always try to avoid. So when I'm thinking about this and I'm thinking about the state of our [00:03:00] students right now, I think some of it is maybe pandemic-related and the pandemic maybe was a factor that just made everything that was coming to a head worse, but I think about our inability to be inactive.

Stacy Moore: Okay, so this makes me think about, okay, when you get on your phone and technology and all those things are firing ... What is it? Is it dopamine that we get that surge of?

Nicole Fairchil...: We're addicted to it.

Stacy Moore: We're addicted to it. So then if you're in a classroom and you don't have that, it's not satisfying. You're not getting that same-

Betsy Kindall: [00:03:30] That's what I mean. I don't want to make ... I think it's a misconception that boredom means that you're inactive. I think you can do things and still be bored. I think you can be involved in activities and still have boredom.

Stacy Moore: And I think my kids can sit on the couch and we can think of different things they can do, but it all sounds boring. I don't understand noise, but ...

Betsy Kindall: Well, and I was saying about my daughter who said that she's doing her work, but it's not stimulating. [00:04:00] It's not satisfying in the way that engages her.

Stacy Moore: There's a search for something satisfying. There's a search for something that's going to fill a want, a desire.

Nicole Fairchil...: Okay. And so I think the thing that I'm thinking about this is we have so many other satisfying dopamine producing options that the stuff that really needs to

be done in most cases, we are bored with. I think [00:04:30] we might be bored with things people were not bored with a hundred years ago.

Stacy Moore: Okay. And then I think we've had this conversation before, but is that not why mindfulness has made this resurgence? I think about people probably didn't have to think about being mindful back in the day at some point, that there was times of quiet. There were times of not TVs blaring and phones and music and all these other things.

Nicole Fairchil...: Yeah.

Stacy Moore: And so now it is new that we have to stop and say, "Okay, just let your mind [00:05:00] not think."

Nicole Fairchil...: Yes.

Betsy Kindall: Rest.

Stacy Moore: Rest. That's the key.

Nicole Fairchil...: And maybe these are unrelated topics, but if I lay them out here before you guys, I know that you are both smart people and you can help me put them together. But for whatever reason, I was thinking about this idea of boredom and how it really can and does produce new and creative ideas. Sometimes we get our best flashes of genius when we're bored, when we don't have something [00:05:30] else going on.

Betsy Kindall: And the quote in the book says, "Boredom is your imagination calling to you."

Stacy Moore: Oh, I love that.

Nicole Fairchil...: I love that.

Stacy Moore: Okay, so you're going to be surprised that this even comes out of my mouth, but on YouTube.

Nicole Fairchil...: Wow.

Betsy Kindall: Cue the clapping.

Stacy Moore: This person that I follow on YouTube. I know.

Nicole Fairchil...: Yeah.

Stacy Moore: I know, I know you're shocked.

Nicole Fairchil...: Stepping out there, Stacey.

Stacy Moore: No, she talks about her kids. And I felt this way as a kid too, we were just thrown outside. Not literally.

Betsy Kindall: Yeah.

Stacy Moore: But we did get locked [00:06:00] out of the house once.

Nicole Fairchil...: My mom had a cowbell. She just rang the cowbell. We'd come from the neighborhood.

Betsy Kindall: Yeah.

Stacy Moore: Well, you've got to stay outside. You have to stay outside. And this lady on YouTube was saying the same thing, that if they say they're bored, they say they're bored, eventually they're going to find something, their imagination is going to come to life. Those sticks become forks. They become javelins, they become all kinds of things. So I can see definitely where that plays out in our kids and in life.

Nicole Fairchil...: So we've got that concept. Here's the second concept. [00:06:30] I'm not trying to ... We usually steer clear of anything current events or political or whatever. But this, I've been thinking about teacher shortages and this just grabbed my attention thinking about this idea of boredom. So recently there was a New York University professor that was fired. He taught organic chemistry for a long, long time. And recently he had students complain that his course was too hard. So what the student said was [00:07:00] that the course was too hard, he was dismissive, unresponsive, condescending and opaque about grading. And what the professor said back was that he has noticed a decline in student abilities since about a decade ago. And that he did make his exams easier and he had an unusual amount of students who still did poorly on them.

He said, then the pandemic hit and in the last two years they fell off a cliff. He said, and this is a CNN [00:07:30] article here, it says that this professor isn't alone in observing this dynamic, that many experts have observed this in quantified grade inflation and lowered academic standards. And then on top of that, we know remote learning was not successful the way we wanted it to be. And the article goes on to say that students who completed their high school years during the pandemic seemed to have no idea how to study. Now is it just me or are these two concepts [00:08:00] somewhat connected? First of all, here we've got a professor who has been a great professor for decades.

Stacy Moore: Did you say he got fired or did I just make that up in my head?

Nicole Fairchil...: He got fired.

Stacy Moore: He got fired.

Nicole Fairchil...: For his course being too hard. But it's my understanding that organic chemistry is a course that's meant to weed people out in premed.

Stacy Moore: It is hard.

Nicole Fairchil...: But it's meant to be hard. It's meant to weed people out.

Stacy Moore: Well, that does a good job.

Nicole Fairchil...: So you get good doctors. Yeah. So you get good doctors. That's the point. So [00:08:30] here we are. It just felt to me like a mirror reflection of what I hear from educators. I need to keep academic rigor. That's part of my job. And yet I've got, quote-unquote, we've talked about it a lot, "unmotivated students." And to me, this is just another picture of this same idea that we've got educators who are wanting to do their job well and have academic rigor and then we've got kids that are somehow just [00:09:00] not able to grab hold of it the way they did decades ago. What are your thoughts? Am I crazy or are those things

Stacy Moore: I can tell you what I'm thinking, but you may not ... My thing, this is what I'm seeing in schools, are that students, yes, we are looking for academic rigor still. We are trying to push ahead to those same expectations we've had. And this is probably not going to be great, but a lot of the students that I work with that end up having issues with behavior, they do not have those prerequisite skills. [00:09:30] They do not have the skills, and so we're pushing ahead in class and pushing, pushing and they are falling behind.

And they don't understand, because two years ago compared to now, it's not the same. It's not the same. We can't compare apples and oranges. They're not the same. Every year in education, we could trust by the time they got to seventh grade, they would know maybe these expectations or this kind of curriculum. I don't know if it was COVID, I don't know if it's society, but at some point, again, I [00:10:00] cannot tell you necessarily one behavior referral that I have gotten where there's not an academic skill deficit.

Nicole Fairchil...: Okay. So when you say prerequisite skills, you're talking about academic.

Stacy Moore: Academic.

Nicole Fairchil...: Yeah. Academic skills.

Stacy Moore: And social emotional. Now if you want to go there, there's social emotional and social skill deficits two. That's where a lot of behavior, but just even with those, the academic, where it's that same expectation. I think about this professor and I think about how he had to lower that and he still [00:10:30] has a significant

number. So I don't know where that happened. I don't know why that went down. I don't know if it's technology, I don't know if it's the phones or I don't know. But I can testify that the students in schools are struggling and teachers may still have those same high expectations, which we want. That's part of Marzano, we need high expectations. But I'm telling you, until we meet them where they are on those skills ...

Nicole Fairchil...: Yeah.

Betsy Kindall: Yeah.

Stacy Moore: ... they're going to flounder. And so I don't know what that [00:11:00] means for him. And I don't know what that means for his students, but in my understanding, it's not a case of study skills.

Nicole Fairchil...: It's not. You're saying it's not.

Stacy Moore: If core study skills are honestly even in the picture.

Nicole Fairchil...: Well see, and I wondered about that because he's saying they don't even know how to study. And I wonder how much of that's because in their mind, studying is not enjoyable. Or what was the word here? Satisfying.

Stacy Moore: Well, I've heard that ...

Nicole Fairchil...: Satisfying.

Stacy Moore: ... for 15 years, as far as worried about our students when they went to high school, they wouldn't have study skills. And I remember as an eighth grade teacher teaching my kids how to study,

Betsy Kindall: I was going to say, why do we [00:11:30] expect them to have it if we don't teach it?

Stacy Moore: Exactly.

Betsy Kindall: We have To teach those skills. That's a honed craft, studying.

Nicole Fairchil...: It is.

Betsy Kindall: And we don't really do it very well.

Nicole Fairchil...: But how much of studying is embracing boredom? I think some of it is. When I think back to when I'm studying, I am probably reading things. I'm not super interested in, memorizing things that don't light my fire. It's not like it's necessarily [00:12:00] satisfying.

Stacy Moore: See, I think with me it is, but I think I'm thinking of a different kind. I think that it's one of those things about being able to put off that satisfaction. Because I studied because I wanted a grade. And was I bored? I can't even say I was bored because I was busy.

Betsy Kindall: Yeah, but see-

Stacy Moore: I don't know if I would've said studying was boring.

Betsy Kindall: That's why I shook my head. Because I was thinking about my girls and I don't think it's boredom. They literally didn't have the skills, had I not taught them, they would not [00:12:30] know how. And they want to make the grade. So for them, they're willing to do that, to be successful.

Stacy Moore: Now, would they rather be playing basketball instead of studying?

Betsy Kindall: Well, sure.

Stacy Moore: Yeah. So that's that satisfaction component that's not there in studying.

Nicole Fairchil...: And maybe when they get to college and they're making their own decisions, they just choose more satisfying activities. I don't know.

Betsy Kindall: Well, and I think when you come back to boredom, back to what you said, we have to meet them where they are. But that is in every landscape of that continuum, [00:13:00] whether that be at the top or at the bottom or at the middle. And I think it comes back to yet again, we're talking about meeting every student where they are, not just those that struggle.

Nicole Fairchil...: Yeah.

Stacy Moore: Okay. So I agree and on that article, when he said two years ago there was a cliff.

Nicole Fairchil...: Well, he said ...

Stacy Moore: Because is [00:13:30] that a 2022?

Nicole Fairchil...: He said students who completed their high school years during the pandemic seemed to have no idea how to study.

Stacy Moore: Well, but that makes sense, right?

Nicole Fairchil...: Oh, he did say, in the last two years they fell off a cliff.

Betsy Kindall: Why would they?

Nicole Fairchil...: That's what he said.

Stacy Moore: In the last two years they fell a cliff because ... Does that mean that those first couple years in high school or throughout high school, that's when they're getting those skills?

Nicole Fairchil...: It may be, that may be where the study skills really come in.

Stacy Moore: I know that's probably what our high school teachers would've told us as middle school teachers is like, "Okay, y'all prepare them."

Nicole Fairchil...: Yeah.

Stacy Moore: And they do have to learn in high school. It is where they [00:14:00] have to ...

Betsy Kindall: Figure it out.

Stacy Moore: Figure it out. They're more independent, they're on their own. There's less parent. I don't know. And I don't know if there's a correlation there, but I agree with him that there has been a change. But I don't think it's just in high school and college.

Betsy Kindall: No, no, me neither. I do graduate level courses and I can say that, but it's been before the pandemic.

Nicole Fairchil...: Really.

Betsy Kindall: It was.

Nicole Fairchil...: Yeah. It was.

Betsy Kindall: I don't know about you, but we've all been through grad school and did you ever even consider turning something in late?

Stacy Moore: No way.

Nicole Fairchil...: [00:14:30] Oh Heavens.

Betsy Kindall: And if you did, what would you get?

Stacy Moore: A zero.

Betsy Kindall: Not the case anymore. Not the case.

Stacy Moore: So it's like something has been slipping too.

Betsy Kindall: Something shifted. I don't know what it is. But definitely there's been a shift.

Nicole Fairchil...: So I guess for the everyday educator and our K-12 schools, I don't know what this means, but I think all these concepts are swirling around. You know what I mean?

Stacy Moore: Yeah.

Nicole Fairchil...: What are you laughing [00:15:00] about?

Stacy Moore: Because I just have all these thoughts that I feel, and please call me out if I'm wrong. I feel that the same level of expectations are there for teachers to get the same level of performance from your students. Whether your administrators say, "Don't worry about it," or not. In the back of my mind as an educator, if I went back tomorrow, they would still be there.

Nicole Fairchil...: Yeah.

Stacy Moore: And so if that's still there, that's not changed. [00:15:30] But their skills have changed. There's a discord there.

Nicole Fairchil...: And I think-

Stacy Moore: I don't mean to be pessimistic. I really don't.

Nicole Fairchil...: No, no.

Betsy Kindall: No, and I think also what happens in Atlas of the Heart is she also goes in and talks about disappointment and regret and setting those expectations and what happens. What does it mean to set expectations? How you see that in your head and what happens when you don't reach those expectations?

Nicole Fairchil...: Right. And so similar to what you're saying, so these New York University students felt comfortable and confident to put in [00:16:00] a complaint and say, "This stuff is too hard." And basically what they said, they noted that this professor didn't offer extra credit and didn't make his lectures available on Zoom. And those were things that they felt, I guess should be a part of college.

Stacy Moore: Yikes.

Betsy Kindall: My eyes are big because ...

Stacy Moore: My mouth dropped.

Betsy Kindall: I know. He didn't make his lecture available on Zoom.

Nicole Fairchil...: But what happens then?

Stacy Moore: That did not happen in my day. We could not guarantee on get that.

Nicole Fairchil...: [00:16:30] But it's similar-

Stacy Moore: You were there in the classroom.

Nicole Fairchil...: Absolutely.

Stacy Moore: Not even online.

Nicole Fairchil...: But it's similar to what we're talking about in K-12 education. Because right now, when we think about this with college, we're saying, "Yeah, don't let the standards slip." But then when it comes to K-12 education, we're saying, "Yeah, but pay attention to where the students are." And so I think, gosh, there's just such a ...

Stacy Moore: And I'm not even saying, don't necessarily let the standards slip. I don't like the idea that they can do less and get the same degree that I have.

Nicole Fairchil...: Well, I don't like the idea.

Stacy Moore: That's not [inaudible 00:17:00].

Betsy Kindall: [00:17:00] We can talk about K-12 and higher education in the same bowl.

Nicole Fairchil...: But that's how they're being prepared for it.

Stacy Moore: They are connected. They are connected.

Betsy Kindall: Higher education is voluntary.

Stacy Moore: But that's true. There is a difference.

Betsy Kindall: That you pay for.

Nicole Fairchil...: Yeah, I know. But as far as I'm concerned, I want doctors who did a dagum good job in organic chemistry.

Stacy Moore: Yeah, that's true.

Betsy Kindall: Well, sure.

Nicole Fairchil...: For them to work on me or my family.

Stacy Moore: Especially anesthesiologists, please. Get their math right.

Nicole Fairchil...: Yes. We need the math right.

Stacy Moore: You really do. Because they're going to be taking care of us.

Betsy Kindall: Can I see your transcripts before I hire [00:17:30] you as my doctor?

Stacy Moore: Before you put me under. I don't know. I think it's a fascinating conversation because I do think that as teachers when I go in, they feel like they're having to, what's the correct word? Concede, to lessen, to go down, to meet. And there is some concern about skill versus will. Is it because they don't have the ability or they just don't want to do it? It's not entertaining enough. And I used to say, I'm not an entertainer [00:18:00] as an educator. I'm not up here trying to entertain.

Nicole Fairchil...: You're not trying to get the dopamine firing.

Stacy Moore: No. And compete ...

Nicole Fairchil...: Not necessarily.

Stacy Moore: ... with the video games and television and things like that.

Nicole Fairchil...: Yeah.

Stacy Moore: But if there is this shift.

Nicole Fairchil...: I just wonder how much it might be useful for us to get a little more acquainted with boredom.

Stacy Moore: I think it's great. I need more in my life.

Nicole Fairchil...: I do too. [00:18:30] The other thing I was thinking when I was reading this is that this book, if you just take a look at it, it has wide margins. There's big, huge white spaces all over this book.

Betsy Kindall: And I'm sure that's the reason.

Stacy Moore: You could get me going in a whole different direction. Because though as a society, do we put wide margins?

Betsy Kindall: No, we don't.

Stacy Moore: And I hear about other countries where they actually go home for tea time. Is that true?

Nicole Fairchil...: I want it to be true.

Stacy Moore: Do they actually go home for nap time? And I'm like, why? What in the world, why?

Nicole Fairchil...: [00:19:00] I know.

Stacy Moore: Would we not be more productive? Are there not studies out there? I'm sure there are. We'll find them.

Nicole Fairchil...: I know Stacey, but there's a part of me that thinks is the culture ... Here we are in this tug of war between standards and expectations and the skill level that people are really at. And we're trying to figure out this really nice balance. But maybe it is a bigger culture shift than any of us are really willing to look at.

Stacy Moore: Oh.

Nicole Fairchil...: That's what I'm wondering, I guess.

Stacy Moore: I was at recess-

Betsy Kindall: I think absolutely, for sure.

Stacy Moore: I was at recess today.

Betsy Kindall: You were?

Stacy Moore: I [00:19:30] was at recess today. And this is saying too much and this is why I just can't think about other people listening to it.

Nicole Fairchil...: Okay.

Stacy Moore: I'm just going to talk like I'm talking to y'all.

Nicole Fairchil...: Okay.

Stacy Moore: I was seriously thinking if we went back to not one room schoolhouse, but where you taught and you let them play. Because these kids were playing and by golly, they needed to get that energy out there playing football. They were swinging, they were whatever. And how much have we squeezed that out?

Nicole Fairchil...: Yeah.

Stacy Moore: How much have we squeezed out that play [00:20:00] for our kids?

Nicole Fairchil...: Yeah.

Stacy Moore: 10 and 11 year olds.

Betsy Kindall: So much so that they can't be kids.

Stacy Moore: Yeah. 10 and 11 year olds are still kids.

Nicole Fairchil...: Yes, they are.

Stacy Moore: And in therapy, they always would say that kids work is done through play.

Nicole Fairchil...: Yes, absolutely.

Stacy Moore: And so we're squeezing that out. And I honestly had this moment where I sat there and I was looking going, if we went back to schools where And all of these initiatives that we've had are for good reasons and they're good purposes and we're trying to get good things done, but oh my goodness, how much white space do we give our [00:20:30] kids during the day?

Nicole Fairchil...: I know. Just I wonder, what if the culture shift is bigger than we've imagined? What if that's what's necessary?

Betsy Kindall: Food for thought folks. Food for thought.

Nicole Fairchil...: Wow. This was a deep one.

Betsy Kindall: I know. Let us know what you think and if you have things to say, we want to hear them.

Nicole Fairchil...: Yeah, we do. Please write and review the podcast or send us a message or comment on the Facebook post where we say we've got a new episode that's dropped. We'd love to hear from you.