

Belle Ame Dream Transcript

I have a dream.

I am Marlene Peterson, president of Belle Ame Center for Artful Living as well as Libraries of Hope, home of the Well-Educated Heart philosophy of learning and living. Thousands of families from around the world are gathering to learn the lost arts of opening and softening hearts through the Arts. We seek to preserve a culture of faith, freedom and family and a love of the good, the true and the beautiful.

The mother's influence in the home is central to our work. Frances Willard, one of the key leaders of the Women's movement which was originally grounded in motherhood, in her 1888 inaugural address affirmed: "Mother-love works magic on humanity." The Arts are the keys she uses to open the hearts of her children.

When the world is broken, it has always been the Poet, the Musician, the Artist, the Storyteller who resets the course.

When the prophet Samuel saw the crumbling state of his people, he opened a school in his home for young men. They called him father. While we don't have a lot of details, we know it included music, stories of their heritage, and these students in his school of prophets, prophets of the Old Testament, were all poets. They served as the leaven of Israel. We are still inspired by their works thousands of years later.

The poet Pindar is credited with ushering in a Golden Age of Beauty in Ancient Greece. As a boy, two women—Clytis and Myrna—sang songs into his heart.

When knights were cruel and ruthless, it was the singers, poets and bards who inspired an Age of Chivalry and a new code of honor.

What happens when we neglect the Arts?

Well, the very definition of barbarism is ignorance of the arts. And not surprisingly, a definition of civilization is knowledge of the arts. The more we immerse ourselves in the Arts, the more civilized we become.

When William Wilberforce felt called by God to rid 18th century England of the evils of slavery and to reform its terrible morals, he collaborated with a woman—Hannah More—and the Clapham Sect was formed. That little band of about 20 individuals met in the library in the home of one of its members and this small group changed the course of a nation and the lives of millions of people. While Wilberforce exerted his influence among the lawmakers of Parliament, it was the pen of More who shaped the hearts of a nation through poetry and storytelling. Had the hearts not first been softened, the laws would never have been changed.

One more example. When a young clergyman, Nicholas Grundtvig, found his homeland of Denmark in despair after having been ravaged by war, he undertook to save Denmark by songs and music and stories. He inspired a young Christen Kold who rented a house and invited young adults to come—it was the first Danish Folk High School where they were immersed in what members in my group will recognize

as a Well-Educated Heart way of life. Soon folk high schools were popping up all over the country and within a few years, Denmark had come to life.

But they were not schools in the traditional way we see schools. They were more like summer camps. Grundtvis taught: “Let them study together and work together and sing and play together. Let them read the Bible for themselves and discuss it among themselves....Open their eyes to the world around them, open their minds to the world of learning; open their hearts to the world of their fellow men. Let them come to know the richness of life.”

And he succeeded. As the folk high schools spread, Denmark came to life.

You see, I am not suggesting an unproven strategy for healing our world.

This healing work begins in the hearts of mothers. Already hundreds of women are gathering in Mothers of Influence circles to strengthen and support each other as they learn and enrich their own hearts. I have received hundreds of letters from mothers who have described how the Arts have transformed their homes and lives and the new light and joy seen in the eyes of their children.

Last year, I introduced the next step—the encircling reach to gather and lift others. I call this the spirit of Belle Ame. Belle Ame is a French word for ‘beautiful soul’. It implies someone with noble, elevated sentiments and thoughts.

When you invite some other families to get together with you and have a cultural night of potluck from another country while playing music from that country and maybe even learning a folk dance together, that is the spirit of Belle Ame.

When you invite some neighbor kids over and engage in fun, interactive games—without electronics—that is the spirit of Belle Ame.

When you invite some friends over and put up some easels and paint together, that is the spirit of Belle Ame. The experience goes even deeper if you have shared something interesting you have learned about fine art.

When you have an inspiring book you are reading and are dying to talk about it and get a few friends together who also read the book, that is the spirit of Belle Ame. The Art of Conversation—a lost art—is the spirit of Belle Ame.

When your teenager invites some neighbor kids to the back yard and helps them put on a simple play for the neighborhood with simple costumes and props, or puts on a puppet show, that is the spirit of Belle Ame.

When you invite people over to listen to a musician play for you, or make music together, that is the spirit of Belle Ame.

When you get together—all ages—and crochet granny squares to make afghans for the homeless shelter and carry on conversations while you work, that is the spirit of Belle Ame.

When you offer to organize a choir for families just for the joy of singing together, that is the spirit of Belle Ame.

When you organize a storytelling group to practice the art of storytelling, that is the spirit of Belle Ame.

I hope you are getting the idea. There is no end of possibilities. The Spirit of Belle Ame is the spirit of gathering and connecting and engaging through the arts. We are terribly disconnected to each other and to life. Loneliness is the true pandemic. This is about bringing people together and allowing them to engage in activities that have become relics of the past, but are so needed today.

“We are taught nearly everything except the one thing we ought to know—the art of living.” And I would add, the art of living well.

The arts are healing. The arts create bonds. The arts are universal in appeal. In a world divided in so many ways, the arts can bring us together.

The arts have been the means of survival under oppressive regimes. Now is the time to find ways to connect with each other in meaningful ways. This is the spirit of Belle Ame.

Your home then becomes a safe place of refuge, an oasis in a desert; the calm in the middle of a storm.

These are the kinds of activities you want to bring your children together for to satisfy their craving to be with other kids. This is what a school for the heart looks like.

This is the antidote to the soul-crushing world of electronics.

As our world moves towards virtual reality and artificial intelligence, we need a core of people who are still holding on to that which is authentic and real.

When I introduced the spirit of Belle Ame last year, I mentioned there is another part of the Belle Ame dream.

I have envisioned a campus for learning—a home for us as Mothers of Influence. It would be a place for mothers to come and connect with other mothers and learn and refresh themselves. It would be a place for families to come and be immersed in real things. It would be a place to establish the spirit of the Danish Folk High Schools where young adults can come and spend time with other young adults and be immersed in a world away from the world.

We send our kids on humanitarian expeditions to other countries. Why not have a place here for them to learn to work together and play together and have meaningful experiences together?

Love and a spirit of service is woven into everything that will happen on the campus.

The spirit of Belle Ame is to soften and purify hearts.

It would be a place to gain deeper appreciation for the arts. I see week long retreats for music, for painting and handicrafts, for poetry, for storytelling and writing, bringing in guest instructors who still include God in the creation process. It would be a place to be inspired and be filled with Light—and then taking that Light home and shining it there.

It would be a place for learning homemaking skills and learning to create, as Sally Clarkson describes, Life-Giving Homes. After all, the home, as Orison Swett Marden wrote, “Is the holy of holies..and in it lies the very secret of human progress...The highest civilizations have scarcely as yet glimpsed the

possibilities of home.” Yet who teaches home-making anymore? We aim to expand that vision of the possibilities of home. The home is central to the design of the campus.

In short, it is a place to learn the art of living. It is a Center for Artful Living.

It is not unlike the dream planted in my heart when I was a little girl. I asked my mom to read me the story of Jane Addams over and over. When Jane was a little girl, her father drove her to work with him one day through a very poor part of town. What she saw made her sad. She asked her father why people lived that way. Her father replied that they didn’t know anything better.

So when she grew up, she bought a big house in the middle of a poor immigrant neighborhood in Chicago. She lined the walls with fine art, filled bookshelves with wonderful books, and brought in musical instruments. All were welcomed into her home where they were immersed in finer things and wrapped in love. Lives were lifted and changed for the better.

To come to the Belle Ame Center for Artful Living is to have the same kind of immersive experience.

For some years, I have seen flashes of images of this center for artful living. It is in a peaceful setting away from the noise of the city. There are lush lawns and shady trees and flowers. So many flowers. I think of what Corrie Ten Boom wrote about the healing process of holocaust survivors. “You can learn to love by growing flowers.” There is a body of water for reflection and meditation. I see swans swimming, like the lake near my home where I went for peace when we were going through a season of personal turmoil.

I have seen homes in these flashes of impressions with rocking chairs on porches; homes facing inward around a beautiful parklike setting—a Secret Garden—like the book—where children can safely explore and discover and feel close to heaven. There is a stream going through the center with a bridge over the stream.

The homes are warm and inviting and restful—places to nourish bodies and souls.

There are kitchen gardens out back.

There is a large central building with classrooms.. I see a large cultural hall in that building with paned windows looking out at the trees where people can learn and dance and sing. There’s a library of old books and cozy gathering areas for conversation and for making music.

I have even seen horse trails meandering through groves of trees. There are fire pits for campfire stories and greenhouses, beehives, vineyards and orchards.

I have seen an outdoor amphitheatre for simple plays or musical performances.

This is a place to connect with real things and real people, and above all, to connect with God.

“You’re nearer God’s heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth.” –Hubert Eaton

It is like being immersed in Living Waters. It is where eyes are made to see, ears are made to hear and hearts are made to feel all the Unseen things of the world—the Eternal things, as Paul taught..

It is a place of healing.

From the beginning I have felt that this campus was meant to be a living monument, an outward expression of the power of small and simple means. As I pondered on funding it, I was reminded of the story of the Relief Society building. The Relief Society is one of the largest women's organizations in the world.

About a hundred years ago, the Relief Society leaders also felt a need to create a 'home' for their organization and needed to raise half a million dollars, which is the equivalent to about 5 million dollars today. Rather than looking for wealthy benefactors, they looked to the women within the organization itself to raise the money, inviting each member to donate \$5.00.

Inside the building today is a room filled with account ledgers on shelves arranged alphabetically. Here is a record of every woman who contributed. When I was there, I pulled down the 'J' register and found the name of my grandmother who was poor as poor could be, married to a potato farmer in Idaho Falls, Idaho. But she had managed to find a way to contribute her \$5.00.

That building was built by small and simple means. Frances Willard's words—"Mother-love works magic on humanity" were followed by "Organized mother-love works miracles." Here was a miracle brought about by many women working together for a common goal.

At its opening celebration, two attendees turned to each other and said, "We didn't know \$5.00 could buy so much!" They looked forward to the future when their daughters and granddaughters would admire "this house our mothers built for us."

Can we likewise look forward to the future and imagine our granddaughters and great granddaughters admiring the beautiful campus "their mothers built for them" by small and simple means?

As I thought on this principle, an idea started to take shape and form. What if we could create a community platform where we could provide support to those who are trying to implement a Well-Educated Heart lifestyle in their homes while providing classes in the Arts and use it as our primary fundraising vehicle?

Here is one of our first miracles.

We launched this new platform just four months after the idea formed with an initial budget of \$99 to create it. Belle Ame at Home opened with nearly 1000 families in the community creating a potential annual revenue of over three quarters of a million dollars. . A portion of that needs to go to pay our teachers and operating expenses, but the majority of funds being generated can be used for the Belle Ame dream.

If each member brings in just one or two family members or friends, can you begin to see how we might be able to achieve this dream?

We treat these funds as sacred funds. We know many families are making sacrifices to be part of this community.

Belle Ame Center for Artful Living is now operating as a non-profit charitable organization and Belle Ame at Home is recognized as our primary fundraising arm.

Of course we welcome free-will donations and if there are those of you who want to offer scholarships to Belle Ame at Home to families who simply do not have the means to participate, that is an option as well.

Belle Ame at Home is the prelude to the campus experience. Those who are raised up in this way of learning and living will have a greater capacity to truly appreciate the things that will take place there. And by the way, Belle Ame at Home is not just for young mothers. We will need seasoned parents who are well grounded in the principles of the Well-Educated Heart and the Arts to come and serve as mentors and guides for our young adults in the Folk High school experience and other offerings. What they will learn and study through this platform will prepare them to serve.

When I first shared this dream, I likened the team that will build this to a symphony orchestra, under the hands of a Master Conductor. I am not the conductor. I am simply the stage manager, gathering the players who are already well practiced and skilled for the parts they will play. It has been amazing to watch the men and women with just the right talents, skills and knowledge feel drawn to this work and offer their services. We already have contractors, builders, craftsmen, artists, home and landscape designers, gardeners, teachers, and those with knowledge of caring for animals and even legal counsel, all willing to play their parts. It has been another miracle.

We are now looking for a home – a place we can start building and gathering. I thought we had found the right place. We were generously offered a place to build our campus on a beautiful property in Missouri and I had moved forward with that in mind. But a couple of months ago, it became clear to me that this was not the place, which didn't make any sense. But I broke off the arrangement with my partner.

Within a few weeks, a series of events that could only have been divinely orchestrated started unfolding and I found myself in Missouri walking a large, beautiful property. It wasn't even on the market at the time.

The first thing I noticed when I walked the property were sheep grazing in a pasture by a beautiful spring fed pond. The sheep grazing was significant to me. Built into the Belle Ame at Home community is what we are calling pasture learning. Although it wasn't planned, the initials of Belle Ame at Home spell BAAH and our first community art event was creating this beautiful painting of a shepherd, reminding us that "My sheep hear My voice." We understand that 'True education is between a child's soul and God' and our work is about softening and opening hearts so we can hear His voice.

This property is primarily used by a sheep farmer who loves his sheep. Raising sheep has been in his family for generations. I met with the owners while I was there and they said they were considering selling the property.

There are already orchards with mature fruit trees and woods with streams running through them, already cleared for creating walking trails. There are buildings including a large barn and homes.

As I walked the property, I could see how we could start bringing families on property right away for learning experiences and opportunities to serve and work. The other property was very raw and would have taken at least two or three years to get some basic things in place before we could even think of inviting anyone there.

And now the exciting news is that the owners have contacted me to tell me they would love to sell their beautiful and well-cared for property to our Belle Ame Center for Artful Living.

While options have been talked about to purchase the property privately, my heart is telling me that we are in line for another miracle. If we can come up with a significant down payment, the owners are willing to carry the balance on contract.

What that means is that the land can be bought and owned by the Belle Ame Center for Living non-profit.

So, in this story of the Belle Ame Dream, you will determine how this next chapter will be written. Are there enough of us who want to make this dream come true? You can help by joining our Belle Ame at Home community and also sharing this website and video with family and friends and inviting them to join or make a donation. We have just a couple of months to raise this down payment. But we have a good head start with funds that have already come in. It's not impossible.

Now some of you may be thinking that the campus is too far from you and you won't benefit. Remember—everything that will happen on this campus will be an opportunity to learn. Isaiah saw our day and wrote: "They shall not build, and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat...mine elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands."

Enjoying the work of our own hands is in the spirit of Belle Ame. We need to re-learn many of the skills that are being lost. As gardens are created and houses are built and decorated, skilled workers will work beside your family members to teach them new skills, hopefully with little or no cost to members of our community. And we will be broadcasting out to our Belle Ame community many of the learning activities that will be going on live at the campus.

We hope in the future other campuses can be built as the spirit of Belle Ame grows, all for the purpose of learning that which can be taken back to your own homes, neighborhoods and communities. It's like scattering seeds.

Our desire is to inspire a new generation to move away from being consumers and instead become creators and producers. We have adopted the motto of James Oglethorpe who, with a group of other English nobleman, devoted themselves to lifting others. Non sibi sed aliis! Not for himself but for others!

On New Years Day, 1917, a young man named Hubert Eaton stood on a hill overlooking a gloomy cemetery overgrown with weeds. The place wasn't far from where I grew up in Southern California. He had just lost a fortune in a silver mine and needed a job. A friend told him a job had opened managing this cemetery. As he stood on that hill, he suddenly had a vision open up and he didn't see it as it was, but rather what it could be. He not only transformed that cemetery—which is now known as Forest Lawn in Glendale, California. He transformed the whole business of dying. He knew he had succeeded when a couple wrote and asked if they could be married at the cemetery.

And how did he do it? He brought in fine art from around the world, and musicians and planted trees and flowers and everything about life and living and the glorious hope of eternal life. Central to the design—his life long quest—was a Christ who smiles and loves us. The Good Shepherd.

My message to you is that which can transform the business of dying can also transform a dying world. Hubert Eaton grew up not far from where we hope to build our Belle Ame Center in Missouri and I know he would be very pleased with the work we are doing.

The day he stood on that hill, he sat down and wrote a Builder's Creed that is preserved in stone at the entrance of the cemetery. I don't think he would mind one bit if we borrowed from the spirit of his writing and adapted it as our Builders Creed—a message to those who will read it after we are all gone.

We—your mothers and grandmothers—believe in a happy Eternal life.

We believe, most of all, in a Christ that smiles and loves you as we know He loves us.

We therefore know that the educational institutions of today are flawed because they depict an end, not a beginning. They have become places that do nothing for humanity save a practical act, and that not well.

We therefore, prayerfully resolve on this day in 2023—we shall endeavor to build at Belle Ame a place of learning as unlike other places of learning as sunshine is unlike darkness, as eternal life is unlike death. We shall try to build at Belle Ame a great park, filled with towering trees, sweeping lawns, splashing fountains, singing birds, beautiful statuary, cheerful flowers, noble architecture with interiors full of light and color.

We believe these things educate and uplift a community.

Belle Ame shall become a place where lovers new and old shall love to stroll and watch the sunset's glow, planning for the future or reminiscing of the past; a place where artists study and sketch, where musicians bring heaven to earth; where poets touch the dull gray day and set it aflame with color and sunshine, and storytellers stir slumbering souls.

A place where the broken-hearted will be healed, the captive will be liberated, and the blind be made to see the Unseen things of the world—the Eternal things.

The sorrowing soul will be soothed and strengthened because it will be God's Garden.

The Builders' Creed, the Builders' Dream

I found it interesting that he didn't sign his own name. Nor will we sign ours. For we are but tools in the hands of the Master Builder.

It will take a miracle to accomplish this. But miracles are simply God's fingerprints.

I have a dream. I hope it is your dream now, too. Organized mother-love can work miracles. May this dream come true that we may all live happily ever after.

