

## **Podcast Series: Holistic Nature of Us**

### **Episode # 53: Meet: Dan Blanchard, Teacher, Coach, Author**

**<https://www.judithdreyer.com>**

Hi I'm Judith Dreyer,

Thank you for joining me for this pod cast series "The Holistic Nature of Us".

My intent is to take us, you and I, into a better understanding of the concepts behind our holistic nature and how that ties directly to the holistic nature of the world around us. How can we connect the dots in practical ways that we are nature and nature is in us?

I will be featuring authors and educators, practitioners and others whose passion for this earth helps us create bridges. We'll see what's trending, what's relevant to our world today, not just for land use but to connect the dots between nature and ourselves. It's time for practical action and profound inner change so our natural world is valued once again.

Today I am so excited to introduce you to Dan Blanchard. He is the best selling author, an award winning speaker and an educator, as well as a two time Junior Olympian Wrestler and a two time Junior Olympian Wrestling Coach. However, Dan admits as a youth he was more of an athlete than a student. He has now successfully completed 14 years of college and has earned seven degrees. He teaches Special Education and Social Studies in Connecticut's largest inner city high school where he was chosen by the AFTCT as the faith and voice of educational reform and is now on the speaking circuit for them. Dan was with the team that put forth Connecticut's new social studies frameworks and is also a member of the Special Education Advisory Board to the Connecticut State Department of Education. In addition, Dan is a teacher consultant for the University of Connecticut's Writing Project. And finally, Dan is a double veteran of the Army and the Air Force.

Welcome Dan, it's a pleasure to have you here today.

DAN: Well thank you Judith, I'm really happy to be here and I love it when I get some time to spend with a fellow educator as yourself and a fellow

author. When I read your book “At the Gardens’ Gate” as you know, and I enjoyed that. I really like your whole holistic approach that you did. I’m a big, big fan of educating the whole child and what I do as an educator and what I do as a coach and what I do as an author and speaker. I think we’re going to have a great time today Judith and share some great information here today.

JUDITH: Oh, I think so too. Dan is the author of the book “The Storm – Grand-Daddy’s Secrets” and I know he’s got several projects that are being born from that one effort that he actually...a dream he followed through on, a dream he made happen, and now he is an award winning speaker and I’m delighted to have his expertise and his experience here today.

And so, the question I ask Dan is, can we use the holistic model to grow better men?

DAN: Absolutely. I mean so many times I think back to when I was a young man and I didn’t have a lot going for me. You know I was like an athlete and I would have been much further along the path by now. You know I would have succeeded a lot easier if I was a little more holistic and a little more well rounded in things. I wasn’t a good student but if I was like a good student, if I had great social skills, if I was a good athlete, you know and let’s say I don’t know if you have a creative imagination, a creative genius I could have definitely been well, more holistic, more balanced and I would have done really well. When I think back about myself from being a young man and I think back about where I did have success, I had success in sports. And when I think about what made me successful in sports, it was the whole holistic nature. As a wrestler I had technique, experience, you know moves, strength, balance and the list goes on and on and on of how well balanced I was a wrestler and even as a football player too, when I played football. And that gave me a lot of success. It helped me have a lot of success. So now moving forward through my life Judith, I realized that I needed to become better balanced, more holistic. And I think about your East principle. You know, like where was my weak link? And my weak link was in the academia realm, in school. I went to college and there I was nothing but a C student, I’m coaching wrestling. I’m still a great athlete but my weak link is academics. You know I’m already an army veteran, but my weak link is way on the East, right? I haven’t developed that whole Eastern Philosophy throughout of the holism. You know, I’ve got to develop my academics. So I just charged full-speed into college life and I’m going to

develop myself. I'm going to read books. You know I'm going to develop myself academically every which way I can. So now if we fast forward Judith to like all these years later. Now I see teachers that have the content. You know academically they're there, but what are they missing? What's their weak link. You know their weak link may be that they're forgetting that they're in the people business. They're forgetting that people come first, students come first. No, their weak link is that they're not focusing on their social skills with their students. You know they're so caught up at content being king that they forget that we're in a people business. Their weak link is that they need to work on their social skills and people skills and they need to work on their relationships with the students. And going up the ladder, the administrators. They need to work on their relationships. Their weak link is their relationships with their teachers. You know they may know their data. They may know their content, they're strong there. But where's the weak link? You know they're not thinking holistically. They're thinking well, data, data, data, data. That's not good enough. That's not good enough. They've got to work on their weak link out of the east and work on their social skills, people skills, relationships. You have to be well balanced in this world regardless of what your profession is. You know you just can't be driven by the science of your profession, the data of your profession or the content of your profession. You need to definitely think, you know, in Eastern terms of where's my weak link? How can I be more holistic? How can I improve the holism of what I do. And if you do that, then you to can become a champion in your field.

JUDITH: So do you feel...for my listeners. What Dan is referring to is, I have a Medicine Wheel, the four directions that I base all my podcasts on. And not all speakers need to speak or to address every principle on the wheel, but Dan and I have talked ahead of time. For my East we're talking about holism and the basic principle is, every part affects the whole. And if one part is weak, the whole part has a weakness within it and I think Dan, as an educator, you've had great insight into not just your own development but what you see as a problem in the school system, where the weak links are. You are becoming a spokesperson in CT to try to create remedies, to try to make them stronger in a sense. But can you tell us a little bit in the classroom how you apply that? What do you see as the weak link in a child and how you might approach that? And we're talking about men today too, so what do you see as the weak link amongst our young men?

DAN: Well in today's virtual world and text and computers and video games and all that Judith, our kids are really lacking social skills. There is no doubt about it. You know they don't know how to look you in the eye and shake your hand. So, what I do in my classroom is I deliver great content, interesting content but what I do is I also work on the relationships and the social skills with my students. I meet them at the door, you know, and shake their hands, look them in the eye, call them by their names. You know I try to encourage them to call me by my name. You know there's like this inner city thing going on where they always say, "yo mista, yo mista" you know and then it's like, that's not going to work in the outside world. You know that's not hurting my feelings but that's not going to work in the outside world. At least call me Mr. B. I try to remind them, not in an angry way but in a loving empathetic way. I try to remind them, listen you want to call me Mr. B or Mr. Blanchard. That stuff is going to work better in the outside world than the Yo Mista, You Mista, you know what I'm saying or Hey, give me a pencil, you know what I'm saying? It's all the manners. You know the right way to approach someone.

I try to work on all these social skills and teach them these social skills because they just don't have those social skills; they're lacking them. And in many cases, I've had students that have been like Yo Mista. That stuff, that's just for old white people. And I'm like oh, hold on a second and it's kind of broken my heart that that's what they think. But due to the fact that I have a relationship with them whenever they say stuff like that that might get mad, or I stay stop it might get them mad. We're always able through a relationship, we're always able to like to sustain that relationship. You know it's one of the principles of your south. We're always there to sustain that relationship and regenerate and get back to that relationship regardless of whether or not we're mad or upset or feel hurt right now because of something that the other did. Because we have strong relationships, we're able to get back quicker. We know that we love each other and care about each other and we're looking out for each other, so we're able to get back quicker to the original state of our relationship and able to sustain that progress that we're trying to promote in the classroom. For some of these things I think we're able to make a lot of progress.

JUDITH: Do you have a story because I think that would be so heartwarming as a teacher to have somebody come in with a little bit of an attitude, because you teach high school, that's where the attitude is really obvious. And they're learning and growing and stretching as a human being

and fitting into their new skin as it grows every day, you know? Do you have a story of somebody that was really at the end of the year, thanked you for that?

DAN: Yeah. Well I have a story right now about an athlete I'd love to share. I had this boy Peter and I had him, we were going into a wrestling tournament and the other coach couldn't make it for whatever reason, had some family commitment in another state. I'm running a wrestling practice the night before and I tell Peter, I say hey – and Peter was also in the same high school that I worked at. He wasn't a particular student of mine, but I saw him in the hallways.

This story, something like this could relate to students as well but I'm just going to use the athlete story this time. We're doing this wrestling practice and at the end of wrestling practice I say, "hey Peter you're one pound overweight buddy. You've got to make weight for tomorrow."

And he goes, "Nah, I'm going to go the next weight class." And I'm like, "nah, don't do that you've got to go the same weight class you went last week because we already have a kid in the other weight class, so I need you to go 135 not 140. You've got to go 135 lbs. "

And he's like" nah, nah I'm going to go 140." And I've got to tell you Judith, a lot of these kids you know they're used to kind of telling people what they're going to do. I'm like "No, you're not." I said," you're not going to bump another kid who doesn't deserve to get bumped out of his weight class. You're going to lose the pound tonight or you're not going to wrestle tomorrow." And he was mad, and he swore at me. And as we're walking around, you know we left the wrestling room and we're walking laps in the hallway. And I said, "Peter, I have never sworn at you before and I will never swear at you ever. I don't expect you to do that to me. I said but here's the deal, you're going to make weight tomorrow or you're not going to wrestle. It's as simple as that. Make weight tomorrow or you don't wrestle." So, what I did not know was that the other wrestler coach told him he could bump up.

JUDITH: Oh no!

DAN: He never shared that with me.

JUDITH: Oh no!

DAN: Inner city kid, angry, doesn't have good communication skills, but you see where I'm going with this. I had no way of getting a hold of the other coach. He was out of reach. The next day Peter comes in. He makes weight. He has a great wrestling tournament. Makes it to finals. Loses in the finals and we go about, and we have a great season and he ends up going up a weight class and he doesn't have to suck weight any more. He has a great, great season. We have a couple greater seasons after that. You know I was really wondering if I was going to have to bench him that day. But I didn't. We have a couple of great seasons after that. He comes back as an assistant volunteer wrestling coach, helps me out for free and stays with me for a couple of years, you know for free. And I say to him, I say "Peter how did that happen. Remember we had that fight and we were arguing about your weight. I go, I mean you turned out to be such an amazing wrestler, such an amazing young man. You know we've got an awesome relationship. I go how did it happen? How did you get so good? How can we take what you did and help share it and spread it among the younger people? I went how'd you do it?" And he goes, "coach I just wanted to be like you." That's all it was. I wanted to be like you. And that was it. That was it you know? I was a great wrestler. I was a great coach and I was a guy who wore my heart on my sleeve. And I loved those wrestlers. I would have done anything for them. And you know even practicing with tough love, I would have done anything for them, and he just wanted to be like me Judith. And now he's a fine young man raising a family of his own.

JUDITH: That's such a beautiful story because there's something in your initial response to him of tough love that probably affected him quite deeply even though maybe neither one of you realized it at the time. But it must have sparked something within him to be better and that's the beauty of the story, how can we be better?

DAN: Yeah. When I think about it, I mean I would say thinking about what you do come out of the west. I would say that there was reverence there. You know he respected me for my abilities and for my tough love. He respected me and he respected himself more, you know, because I didn't let him take the easy way out. I made him. I made him lose that pound or he was going to be sitting and not wrestling. And when he lost that pound and did not take the easy way out, he probably gained some respect and some reverence for himself and what he could do, what was within his abilities and what was within his reach. You know? And when you do that sort of thing you respect yourself. You respect your coach. You respect your

teacher. You know it just naturally flows into respecting others. It naturally flows into you're walking down the hallway and you see a piece of trash, a candy wrapper, or a juice bottle somebody left on the ground, thrown on the ground, and you know you bend down and you pick it up because you have respect for the school and respect for the environment. You know you throw that stuff away and it just snowballs and builds into bigger and better things and a bigger better person.

JUDITH: Right and then that's growing self-esteem and I think when we have more self-esteem, we can have more self-respect. It has to start on the inside in order to move to the outside world that we live in. And that's a piece that I'd like...I love educators like you who try to encourage students to get it. Get it on the inside first. Respect yourself, you know? And then take that a step further and respect the environment that you're in. Don't throw the trash on the ground. Somebody has got to pick it up, etc. and that fosters respect in so many different levels. That's a great example.

So, let's go to the north. I'm a big one on nature's intelligence and how we can learn from her. I'm learning so many exciting things around the world about the innovations that people are making but again, we're not taught that there's an intelligence in nature. We're taught the facts about nature but we're not taught about the intelligent operating system that exists within nature. Do you see that happening amongst you students at all?

DAN: Oh yeah, no doubt. They're having less and less nature time, less and less time outside. I always encourage my kids, you've got to get outside and throw the ball around the backyard. Minimally you've got to do at least that. And I don't know about maybe not the true nature of being outside in your backyard or throwing the ball around would do it. You know you've got to get in shape. Go for a nature run. When you run on the street that constant pounding on our joints and your knees and ankles it's not good for you. Get out there and run in nature or do a nature trail run where your foot lands slightly different every time you put it down on that softer surface and different muscles are stressed in a more natural manner than the pounding on the curved street that lets water run off of it. Get out there. Get in shape. Be one with nature, breathe in that fresh air instead of that stale musty air that in your bedroom everyday as you're locking yourself in there playing video games. You know what I'm saying? Or you're inside that stale classroom, why not get outside? I mean if you look nature's intelligence is everywhere. I mean I look up and I see the flight of a bird, you know. And

when I see that flight of a bird, I see them always flying in a wedge formation. Now if you're a runner, you can run in a wedge formation. If you're a swimmer, if you're a bike rider You know look at the best bikers in the world in the Olympics, they ride in that wedge formation. You know what I'm saying? The same wedged formation that a bird... you know I was in the Army, you know, and when we were on a mission taking a hill or whatever we did it in a wedge formation, you know what I'm saying? You see that nature's intelligence everywhere that humans can adapt and use for our own benefits and improvement of what we do.

JUDITH: Yeah that's a really good reminder too because I'm thinking when you talk about the wedge formation I'm thinking about the migratory birds, you know when they head south. There are so many lessons about a lot of corporate businesses use in their training models but when we fly in that wedge there's a support for the lead in the V and anybody gets tired gets to go to the back of the line and everybody takes a turn and then there's support. And if somebody's injured of course in those migratory birds they often will, somebody will go down to the ground. One of their members will go down to the ground and stay with them until they feel better. And again, that's right there in nature that shows us a better way to do it. A better way to be in community so to speak and a school system is a community. It's not an independent entity. It's like a city unto itself and it's got all the compartments and departments of a city within its structure and within its walls and within its community. So that's another great example.

DAN: Yeah, we're surrounded by patterns in nature and examples in nature of how to do the things that we're doing better. There's no doubt about it and sometimes just that quiet or that piece of mind, or the melody of nature's sounds, sometimes brings us back to a deeper search within ourselves. You know it helps us to bring out, stop and think about stuff that we wouldn't normally do in the normal hustle bustle.

JUDITH: Right.

DAN: Whether in a big city or whatever else that we're doing. You know, I think it helps us listen to our gut. It helps us with intuition and then when I'm having an issue or a problem, one of the things when I do my best is when I go for a run. I go for a trail run, a trail walk, whatever and you'll see your intuition just speaks to you when you're out in nature doing that sort of

thing, and you come back with a lot of answers that you didn't have beforehand.

JUDITH: Well let me ask you this Dan, how do you take that opportunity into a middle school? For example, the school that you work from, do they have any kind of a courtyard where they grow food? Do they have any kind of a courtyard where they model nature in some way?

DAN: Well we have over in my school district at New Britain High School, we've got a greenhouse up on the roof of our building. It's a huge building so there's a lot of room up there. And I know a lot of other schools have similar things, so I would encourage all the schools out there to find a way to, you know, create some kind of greenhouse to get your kids involved in some kind of agricultural component of their education. Now the other way that I would encourage, you know, looking at your center element of what you...intuition we talked about a little bit already, but I'm a big, big proponent of even if you can't get out of the classroom, maybe you use the first 5 minutes of the class as a free write. You know it's absolutely silent in the room. No talking is allowed, no looking around is allowed unless you're kind of looking into your own mind. But you do some kind of free write for like 5 or 10 minutes and if you have to provide a topic, then provide a topic. But from there, you know kids creative genius, kids intuition, kids getting back in touch with their inner being, that sort of thing could come out with some kind of free write if you've got no other options that's always an option. And it's great because you're teaching your kids writing, your kids are writing so that's a good thing.

JUDITH: That's interesting. Yeah that's another way. I would suspect that some teachers might even take them to the ocean with sound or take them into the forest with sound or have birds playing in the background. You could do things like that in the classroom to bring some of nature in the classroom if possible. But I know it's a hard thing for inner cities. There's not that many trails right near by and so some of the students live in apartment buildings so they can not put anything outside or grow anything outside, so they are missing that element. And if you add in the fact that I think today some of our parenting has become fear based. Where we've lost some freedom as children. Have you seen that?

DAN: Yeah. It's always more efficient to rule by fear. It's always quicker, more powerful, more efficient but I never liked that strategy. I know parents

are overwhelmed today with a lack of time and all that stuff, so sometimes you just fall right into that fear based parenting, fear based teaching, fear based administration or whatever it is, but I always thought the other way leading through love was a much, much better way.

And in the end a more powerful way in the end, you know because when you go through fear, when somebody turns their back then the other one is going to do something. You know what I'm saying? But when you lead through love you could turn your back whenever you want, and no one is going to do anything to sabotage you or sabotage the mission. As a matter of fact, they're going to be working just as hard when you're not around, which is not a case or not the dynamics when you do it out of fear.

I mean I never, I remember times when I used to bring in little like musical devices that had like the sound of the ocean, the sound of nature, birds chirping in the woods. And sometimes I would lightly play that in the background when I was teaching or lightly play that in the background during different times of the day if I wanted the kids to have some free time or some quasi meditation time, you know? Or when the kids come back from lunch they're usually pretty fired up and pretty hyper and kind of off the wall, so I used to do just a little meditation listening to nature's sounds music for about 5 minutes when they came back. Especially the younger kids when they came back from lunch just to kind of like ground them, or center them, so that we could get back to doing what we need to do and with our academics because I found out if I didn't do that, it would take longer for them to settle back down and it would be harder for me to teach them the academics.

JUDITH: Yeah, I can imagine that. Well Dan this has been wonderful. We kind of walked around the wheel today and I'm really grateful for that.

Do you have any other...three tips you'd like to summarize before we sign off?

DAN: Yeah, I would say whenever you're working on yourself or even working on trying to help others, I would say **always, always, always look for ways to improve the relationship**. When you look for ways to improve the relationship, a lot of other things will fall into place. The other thing I would say is always **look for ways to improve your communication skills**. That young wrestler, if he had just communicated with me and not gotten

mad, and just communicated with me that the other coach had given him permission to bump up a weight class it could have saved us a lot of problems. And the fact that I communicated back with him in a really good way instead of one of anger, that allowed us to go forward in our relationship. The third thing I'm saying is you **always have to lead by example**, which I did for that boy Peter when he said he just wanted to be like me. And the best way to lead by example is you've got to always work on self-improvement. You've always got to be reading, talking to high quality people, always be working on self-improvement and then when you're working on self-improvement nonstop, you're becoming that high quality person that people are going to want to mimic or emulate and become. They're going to want to become that person that you are and your going to get people's respect and get people's friendships easier. People will engage with you quicker. So definitely work on those three things always: your relationships, your communication skills and your self-improvement.

JUDITH: That's great and that's a great summary because you hit every point that you talked about today which I'm really grateful for.

I'm inspired and I love the fact of Dan's commitment to growing better men. I know in some ways our young men, there's a myth about men, you know? We have a lot of myths in our culture about men. They don't have emotions. They're tough guys, you know, they don't feel anything and that's really so, so, so untrue. And Dan is working to bust up some of those myths and create, by example, and you never know where it's going to go or who is going to be affected by it, but he walks his talk is what I'm getting at in his classroom, on the coaching field and also with his kids. Dan is the parent of five beautiful children. So again, inspiration and motivation, I love it!

DAN: Thank you Judith.

JUDITH: You're welcome. I'm going to say good bye for now. This is Judith Dreyer. I'm the author of "At the Garden's Gate", book and blog. My book is available through my website [www.judithdreyer.com](http://www.judithdreyer.com) as well as several distribution arms such as Amazon, Nook, Goodreads and more. I'd like to remind all of you that a transcript is available for each podcast. And please like and share them. Let's get the word out and let's support each other. And remember, **now** is the time for practical action and profound inner change so we value our world again.

Enjoy your day.