Belle Ame Dream Redo

I have a dream…

I am frequently asked if I have plans to start schools based on Well-Educated Heart principles or if I would support others starting Well-Educated Heart based schools. And the answer is no, for a lot of reasons.

For one, the heart of the mother is central to this work. Her personality, love and influence transcends lesson plans. It is the heart of the child attaching to a mom and growing to be like her that is woven into all that I teach. This is especially true in the prime heart years before the age of 8. It is around the age of 8 that neuroscientists verify a child’s brain begins to develop its reasoning faculties more fully. That is when it makes more sense to begin to introduce more academics into the learning environment. But even then, an individual path in academics is much more successful than forcing compliance to someone else’s timetable.   
Every child is different.

The philosophy is grounded in individual growth and adapted to personality, circumstances, capabilities, and inclinations. When you have a classroom of children, you necessarily have to implement more structure to the learning to be able to maintain control. And the more structure in place, the less freedom to grow. We are aiming for that true education that is between a child’s soul and God, and that requires a lot of freedom.

The ideal learning environment is the home and today’s homes have access to learn absolutely anything you want to learn. It’s a miraculous age we are living in! So to stifle learning by fitting it into a one-size fits all curriculum that everyone passes through is contrary to everything I am trying to teach you.

Remember—we are trying to do something that has never been done before . I believe we can because we have resources available to us that no generation before has had access to. My belief is that we took a wrong turn about a hundred years ago and that there needs to be a course correction. We are seeing the fruit of that age-grouped, compulsory, academic focused, teacher-as-authority path reflected in the state of the world today—and it isn’t good. Freedom is shrinking. Hopelessness and despair are rising. Lewdness and vulgarity are growing. Faith, Freedom and Family are all under attack. The world has turned upside down in that bad is now seen as good and good is seen as bad. . We can’t keep doing what we are doing and expect different results. That is the definition of insanity.   
  
I’m inviting you to think way outside the box and be willing to leave things that are comfortable and familiar to you and try to be among those looking for new paths. We are learning from the past to understand our present so that we can make a course correction for those who follow us.   
  
So when I see people taking a few elements from Well-Educated Heart, such as the rotation schedule or even the arts, and plugging them into an environment or curriculum that is contrary to what we’re trying to accomplish, it’s not going to get us where we need to be.  
  
I don’t have all the answers, but I am taking clues from educational reformers from the past to see what we can do differently.

When the prophet Samuel saw the crumbling state of his people, he opened a school at his home in Ramah 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 for Israel.

When William Wilberforce felt called by God to rid 18th Century England of the evil 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. 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 been softened, the laws would never have been changed.

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 you would 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. Grandtvig 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.   
  
You see, I am not suggesting an unproven strategy for healing our world.   
  
I am saying the work can be done primarily in our homes and neighborhoods and does not require large institutionalized buildings or government approval and funding.

I have laid the foundation by suggesting to you that change starts in the hearts of the mother. You have been encouraged to gather with other mothers in Mothers of Influence groups to strengthen and support each other in these new-old ways of thinking and raising our children. And the most important part of the work is enriching your own heart.

And now I would like to introduce the next step—the encircling reach to gather and lift others around you. 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 food 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. Especially if you share 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.

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, 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 in 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.”  
  
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.

If you listened to my podcast #200, 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 and 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.

But not without its challenges to get there. I can see the eye rolling and the groans you may face. But I have also seen the change once our young people experience ‘real’ things.

Now, there is another part to this 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 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 .

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 have not forgotten God. 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 Orisen 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.” 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.

For some years, I have seen images of this center for learning flash through my mind. 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. There is a body of water for reflection and meditation. I see swans swimming, like the lake near my home I went to for refuge when we were going through a season of personal turmoil.   
  
I have seen homes in these flashes of impressions with rocking chairs on porches all facing inward around a beautiful parklike setting—a Secret Garden—like the book. The homes are warm and inviting and restful—places to nourish bodies and souls.

There are kitchen gardens out back. There is a stream going through the Secret Garden with a bridge over the stream.

There is a large gathering room with paned windows looking out at the trees where people gather to 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 and beehives and vineyards.   
  
I have seen an outdoor amphitheatre for simple plays or musical performances. It is an immersionary experience to be there, connecting with real things and with real people, and above all, connecting with God. 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 teaches. It is a place of healing.   
  
The dream started taking more shape and form a couple of years ago when I was invited to speak at a conference. It is the conference where I spoke about the five things that would heal our world. I had been so reluctant to go. I had been away from home for so long and I didn’t want to go anywhere. For several days, I wrote in my journal, “I don’t want to go” until one day I wrote down a strong impression that came: There are things there you need to see for yourself. Go!

I had arrived the night before and was the first speaker in the morning. I wasn’t even sure what the conference was about or who my audience was. After I finished speaking, I was looking around the large room we were meeting in. There were paned windows all around the room that looked out at groves of trees. I felt a pull to step outside and walk the grounds. It was a beautiful, peaceful setting with lawns and shady trees. As I walked around the property, it was almost as if someone took me by the shoulder and shook me. Open your eyes! Look around! It’s all here. Everything is prepared.

Here was a small lake with swans swimming—just like my swan lake that had brought so much comfort to me in a turbulent time of life. There was a little amphitheatre on the lake, porches with rocking chairs, cozy meeting areas in a library of books, miles of horse trails, greenhouses, a circle of houses around an open green area with a stream through it—and a bridge over the stream. When I picked up a map of the property, the area in the middle of these houses was labeled Secret Garden. I later asked the owner why he named it that. He said he had no idea.

As I looked up at the bookshelves that lined the loft, the thought came: Count them. There were 12. My bookshelves at home are arranged around the 12 months in the rotation schedule.

As I walked the property, I found myself unexplainably weeping because of what I was feeling. I saw the property not just as it was, but what it could become because of the images already planted in my mind. And I said out loud—but none of this is mine. It isn’t mine to do anything with.

I went back to the conference center and found a quiet table by myself to process what I had just experienced when I was approached by a man who sat down and introduced himself. He had recently moved there and was helping in some of the care of the property. I found myself sharing what I had just experienced. I shared the idea of bringing families, young adults and mothers to a place like this for an immersion experience like I described.

He thought the owner would be open to the possibility and I could hardly believe this vague dream that seemed years away suddenly had the potential to become a reality much sooner than I had thought, which caused me to do some serious thinking about what events would look like.

The owner was approached and was willing to consider letting us use the property and when I announced it to the Facebook group, I had hundreds of families express excitement to come and lots of volunteers willing to help organize family and mother retreats.

I met with the owner of the property in his home in January of that year and he shared what a special property it had been to him and how he had come to acquire it. The best word I can use to describe what I had felt was that I was walking on sacred ground. And as he told me the story behind it, I understood why I felt that way.

So it surprised me when I just as strongly felt to call it all off not long after our meeting.

One month later, in February, Covid hit and the world shut down.

I kept in touch with the owner who had decided to take the property in a different direction that no longer made what I envisioned a viable possibility.

Still, the ideas for a center for learning—a home for Mothers of Influence and the Well-Educated Heart—kept pouring into me. It now had a name: Belle Ame: Center for Artful Living. As I said, Belle Ame is French for Beautiful Soul. It refers to all that ennobles and uplifts. It wasn’t a place for people to come and live—it was a place to come and be inspired and then to spread that influence far and wide.

The location had been ideal. The property I walked was at Adam-ondi-Ahman in Missouri in the very heart of America. A very fitting place to tend to hearts.

I kept in touch with the man who was helping take care of the property. Not long after that, he told me he had purchased a beautiful property about 20 minutes west of the ranch. It was almost 150 acres. He invited me to come see it, and so my husband and I flew out there and he showed me around it. I especially kept noticing all the butterflies as we made our way around the property in his truck and finally ended up in a grove of trees.

That night as I tried to fall asleep, I kept seeing the butterflies and the question posed in my mind, Marlene—what do those remind you of? And instantly it made me think of my dream where Hans Christian Anderson took me around a meadow filled with butterflies and flowers. And in the dream, we ended up in a grove of trees.

I didn’t know quite what to think because my new friend had other plans for the property.

But I continued to share pieces of the Belle Ame Dream with him. And then one day, he called and told me that things had changed. And he sent me a sketch of where the Belle Ame campus could be built.   
  
It would sit on about 40 acres of the property, with a central campus of twelve beautiful homes with front porches and rocking chairs facing towards a parklike setting—a secret garden-- that will be able to accommodate between 100 and 200 guests at a time. . At one end of the campus will be a learning center with a large ballroom and library and places to gather and carry on conversations and classrooms to meet in.

He thought a stream could pass through the Secret Garden in the center. And he already had plans to create a lake next to it. He showed me how the land sloped that would be perfect to turn into an amphitheater and how the stage would be backed by trees for good acoustics.

He already had plans for developing the rest of the property with vineyards, orchards, beehives, greenhouses, horse trails, animals—I especially loved his description of the baby animal nursery—and gardens. It would be a place of learning.

It was suggested that we enter into a partnership: Belle Ame Center for Artful Living would now have a a home at Weatherby Faith Farms.

This was to be a project built with and for Love. Not for profit.

I had been thinking I would need to now find investors. That’s the normal path. So I created a website to begin to share the dream, intending to particularly send it to those who might be in a position to help financially. I only shared it with a handful of people who then shared it out to their circle of friends, and the response was overwhelmingly positive and I got a flood of emails from people who wanted to offer their talents and skills and be part of the Belle Ame Dream. Several of them shared they had had the same dream acting on them.

But something felt off.

And the feeling came this campus was meant to be a living monument of the power of small and simple means. Then I remembered the story of the Relief Society Building. The Relief Society is the women’s organization of the church I belong to—one of the largest women’s organizations in the world.

About a hundred years ago, they also felt a need to create a ‘home’ for their organization and needed to raise half a million dollars, which is 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 one of them to donate $5.00.

Inside the building today is a room loaded with account ledgers on the walls arranged alphabetically. Here was 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 as poor as poor could be, married to a potato farmer in Idaho. But she had managed to find a way to contribute her $5.00.

That building was built by small and simple means.

At the opening, 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 would admire “this house our mothers built for us.”

Let me say it again--The Belle Ame campus is meant to be a living monument to the power of small and simple means built in a spirit of love and unity. If it is to be built, it will be built by us as Mothers of Influence, or it will simply not be built.

Can we look forward to the future and imagine our granddaughters admiring the beautiful campus “their mothers built for them”?

The campus will grow according to our ability and desire to grow it. We will start with the large grassy area in the center of the campus where we will come together in tents, if that is all we can do. . And grow from there.

We are so used to the consumer model where someone else risks their money and someone else plans the entertainment and we simply come and consume.

This is a creator model where we will take part in the building and the planning and the creating. Everything that happens on this campus will be an opportunity to learn. Everyone who comes will leave the property better than they found it. Love is built into its very foundations. Much of what will happen on the campus will be done in the spirit of service.

Picture bringing your family to plant flowers and trees and learning to build homes. 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? And to gather with like-minded families?

Isaiah saw our day and said: “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 also in the spirit of Belle Ame. We need to re-learn many of the skills that are being lost and that will also happen on the Belle Ame campus.

Someone recently asked me if I’m afraid people might not get on board with the Belle Ame Dream; that people won’t be willing to donate the necessary funds and services.

I said I’m not afraid of any of those things. I’m afraid they’ll all say yes!

And I was reminded that almost every time angels came to deliver glad tidings of great joy and goodwill towards men, their first words, before they could deliver the message, had to be: “Fear not!”

I have been blessedly assured this dream is way bigger than me and I don’t have to carry it alone. I had an image of a beautiful symphony orchestra come to mind and felt that the players have already been practicing their instruments and their parts and are fully prepared to come together and perform under the hand of the Master Conductor. As lovely as is the sound of a solo instrument, it doesn’t compare to the music of a full symphony orchestra.

For me, I hope to find my place on the back row where I can pluck away at my harp strings. My main job right now is to gather players and make sure we are all playing from the same master score of music.

Of course, it will require money for this dream to come true.

In my grandmother’s day, women came up with all kinds of ways to generate funds for their building. So I asked myself what can I offer?. I hope you’ll ask yourself the same question. And the thought struck me that I am offering you many things for free through Libraries of Hope and the Mother’s University. I know that I could probably password protect all the resources on my site and make a lot of money for myself. That has never set well with me. I have never wanted a business relationship with you.

But what would be really pleasing to me is if you made a freewill offering if you have found value in these resources that I could then contribute towards creating our home campus, which will, in turn, turn around and offer you more benefits and bless your life. I know generally how many people are using the free resources. If each of them contributed even $20 a month, it would get us well on our way. This could be one stream of revenue.

These contributions provide a tangible measuring stick of interest in this project. If very few of you find value enough to make monetary contributions, then the Belle Ame Dream is only a Dream.

I know this is a risky plan. It was also risky to start Libraries of Hope with no financial backing, but rather to move forward in faith based on an impression the Lord was preparing a network of others who, in His timing, He would begin to gather from around the world. To watch that unfold has been miraculous to me.  
  
 Statistically, when others have tried raising money in the way I am suggesting, only a small number of those who use the services are willing to make a contribution. And if a dollar amount is suggested, they overwhelmingly choose the smallest amount.

To succeed will require changing the way human beings have been doing things since the world began.

But isn’t change what we are trying to do?

Let’s show the world what love and dreams and small and simple means can build.

This is the Spirit of Belle Ame.

I