(ACOUSTIC GUITAR MUSIC)

**DREW MILLER:** The Membership is a podcast inspired by the life and work of Wendell Berry, hosted by Jason Hardy, John Pattison, and Tim Wasem. Their goal is to curate great conversations that contribute to the health of the land and the health of our communities. Visit membershippod.com to learn more.

(MUSIC FADES OUT)

(ACOUSTIC GUITAR THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

**JONATHAN ROGERS, HOST:** Welcome to The Habit Podcast: Conversations with Writers about Writing. I’m Jonathan Rogers, your host.

(THEME MUSIC CONTINUES)

**JR:** Cindy Bunch is associate publisher and director of editorial at InterVarsity Press. She’s also trained as a spiritual director.

(THEME MUSIC FADES OUT)

**JR:** Cindy and I got together to talk about her work as an editor, as well as her new book, *Be Kind to Yourself*.

Cindy Bunch, thank you so much for being on The Habit Podcast. I appreciate you making time for me.

**CINDY BUNCH:** Thank you for having me!

**JR:** So your book is called *Be Kind to Yourself*.

**CB:** That’s right.

**JR:** And it’s about, I guess… being kind to yourself! About getting out of those patterns of self talk and all the ways we say mean things to ourselves that we wouldn’t say to anybody else.

**CB:** Mmhm. That’s right, that’s right. Especially trying to work with that voice of the inner critic is one of the themes that I think is relevant to writers. Which is the inner critic is that voice that makes you feel small and tells you you’re bad or wrong or useless. It’s the voice of shame. So, that’s kind of one of the themes.

**JR:** Mmhm. One thing I try to — or I do tell writers, is about making friends with the inner critic?

**CB:** Mmhm.

**JR:** You know? Not silencing the inner critic. I mean, there certainly are things you need to silence. But a person who doesn't have an inner critic… our word for that is lunatic.

**CB:** (laughs)

**JR:** And so… how do you… I mean, I’d be interested to know your thoughts on this. With respect to writing, I think it has a lot to do with saying to the inner critic, “Hey, could you go do something else while I work on this first draft?” And then I welcome you, inner critic… I want you to come back, just not right now.

**CB:** Yeah, that’s great. I once heard a speaker at a writers conference that said historically there have been some writers who tried to deal with the inner critic by getting the inner critic drunk. But he said he did not actually recommend that. It doesn’t really work out. But it is that problem of how do you shut down that voice? So yeah, instead, one of the stories I tell in my book — actually my editor, Al Hsu told me his wife deals a lot with the inner critic, so he actually speaks to her inner critic. Like, she’ll talk to him about this message that’s running through her mind that’s really negative, and he’ll call out that inner critic and say, “You’re being a bully! (laughs) Knock it off!” So having a friend help and support you in that is one way.

**JR:** Yeah, that’s great. I’d love to hear about how you in the middle of writing this particular book about self-talk and the inner critic… how did the inner critic treat you during this process?

**CB:** Yeah, well you know… we have a lot of ways to experience reviews and comments. Even more so, I would say, than ever with places like Goodreads and Amazon where you can see people’s thoughts about your work. And I’ve spent a lot of years helping authors process that. But I have already gotten to process a little bit myself what it’s like to have people comment and not get your work, not understand it. And sometimes I think that’s because some of these reviewers are not the right readers for your book. But other times it’s because, you know, the reviewer might add a real piece of input that you can take to heart and use in the future. So it’s discerning between those two things and going on, and continuing to do the work, is the difficulty for writers.

So I have written out for myself actually just recently a little prayer for self kindness after reading a bad review.

**JR:** Huh!

**CB:** Can I read that to you?

**JR:** I’d love to hear that.

**CB:** Um… (pause) Lord, my feelings are hurt by these words. The reviewer doesn’t seem to understand my work. I want to argue, protest, clarify, but it’s not a dialogue! My inner critic is saying, “I told you so.” Voices from my past are joining in.

Is there anything here that I need to take to heart?

Give me the wisdom to accept it with grace.

Which are the things I need to let go?

Give me the discernment to know the difference.

Guide me to the words of truth about my work.

Make the voices of affirmation ring in my ears.

Remind me of my calling and gifting.

Grow a spirit of confidence in me.

Give me the strength to continue to create.

I offer my work to you.

So, one of the things I wanted to remind myself and others in the prayer is we remember the negative words that people speak so clearly! And we forget the affirmations. And so I think my encouragement to artists would be keep those affirmations somewhere close. Memorize them or put them on a card or something else. Keep them close at hand.

And then I think the other thing I would say to writers about all this when they feel discouraged is 31 years I’ve been editing books, and I am privileged to see so many comments from readers that come in about the books we publish. And you never know. you never know who is going to be touched or helped or served or drawn to Jesus by your words. And that’s a calling, and that is part of the work that we’re called to do.

**JR:** Yeah. That’s so good. And Flannery O’Connor said — and I’m paraphrasing — but she said when I put the work out there, um, you know, some people may be… it may be a stumbling block to some people. Some people may be drawn to Christ. I don’t know what’s gonna happen. It’s not my business, it’s God’s business.

**CB:** Yeah, yeah. That’s right.

**JR:** My job is to do the work.

**CB:** Yes, yes.

**JR:** And theres so many things that keep us from doing that. It’s so easy to fall into this whirlhole of self… self everything, right? Self-criticism, self-aggrandizement… just thinking about self self self. And writing’s just not a good… we get it in our heads that writing’s gonna do things for us. To neutralize self-loathing or to make me feel loved. You know? There’s all these things we expect writing to do that… that little donkey can’t carry that much of a burden.

**CB:** Mmhm.

**JR:** And um, so I think it’s so important that writers get out of that self whirlhole and think about loving the readers and reaching out beyond the self. Because it’s that self-centeredness, I think, that’s such an enemy of writing.

**CB:** Yeah. Yeah. So that’s, I mean… it’s interesting, because I think that’s a lot of the role of the editor as well. It’s to step in — my former colleague, now retired Jim Hoover — Jim was the editor for *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* and a number of other Eugene Peterson books, and he taught me a lot. And he would talk about how the editor is a bridge between the reader and the author.

**JR:** Huh.

**CB:** And so I really see that role. I step in and sort of help the author speak to the reader effectively. And I think that’s a big part of the input that we’re trying to give to authors. And I hope it helps the authors to see the editor as… kind (laughs) if they think about it in that way.

**JR:** So what did you learn about your role as an editor from being a writer being edited.

**CB:** Yeah. Well, so my colleague Al Hsu was my editor, and I had edited his book *Grieving a Suicide* and another book on the suburbs before that. So it was turnabout, both as colleagues and as him editing me, and I saw how excellent he is. A couple things about our process: one is that we give a developmental report, and then the author revises before we start doing any copyediting or line editing. And so I saw the value of that process. Um, I had an author once say to me in reference to those reports that the editor writes about 9 times out of 11. (laughs) And when she said that I thought, oh okay! Those are decent odds. I’ll take those odds! So I found that to be fairly true.

Again, how I think about it is I don’t always have the solution that’s gonna sort of resolve the issue that’s coming up. I can point to the issues, but often the author has a better solution or a different solution, so I might suggest several things and invite the author to find the way through the question. So I found that to be true. And the other thing is time away and then coming back really helps, so we really encourage authors to do that during the developmental reading process. Normally authors get six or eight weeks away and come back really fresh, and that helps.

**JR:** Uh huh. And so your authors… they are sufficiently timely to allow for that six to eight week break?

**CB:** Well, a book takes a long time (chuckles) to get done.

**JR:** Yeah, right.

**CB:** And I think it’s very well worth it. I’ve certainly found it for myself. Every time I’d go away and come back is I would see things. Of course, the danger is you could do that forever. You’ve got to stop it at some point.

**JR:** Yeah, right. It’s really hard to get distance from your writing, and the easiest way is to put it away and come back later. Although I’ve found myself in situations more than once where I was so late on the manuscript, on delivering the manuscript, that I didn’t, you know… (laughs) I didn’t have six or eight weeks.

**CB:** Sure. We’ve had those instances where we’ve had to rush it along, and some things… some art serves itself better for that than others.

**JR:** Yeah, right. So… I do have this question, to return to the idea of being kind to yourself.

**CB:** Mmhmm.

**JR:** Um… (pause) Being kind to yourself probably isn’t the same thing as going too easy or soft on yourself.

**CB:** Mmhm.

**JR:** How do you sort of keep your feet to the fire and hold yourself accountable when you are being kind to yourself? I’m drawing a — I know I’m making a false distinction, a false… whatever the word is. I know you’re not saying being kind to yourself is the same as being self-indulgent.

**CB:** Right. Yeah. The book is not about having spa days or things like that.

**JR:** (laughs)

**CB:** So, I noticed the song that Andrew Peterson had written called “Be Kind to Yourself” as I was actually fairly deep in the process. It’s a delightful song, and he asks the question in the song like this: “How does it end when the war that you’re in is just you against you against you?” And I take that as an echo of Romans 7. “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”

So, there is sin. I think for Christians it’s important to stop and say, okay, there’s sin that we have to acknowledge and confess. But then it’s that confessing and moving on in the light of grace that I think some of us need to be reminded of. Um, so when I become aware of sin, I can make a choice to address it with self kindness. David Benner writes in *The Gift of Being Yourself*, “Self-transformation is always preceded by self-acceptance.” that was a really important quote for me as I was writing the book, kind of a key idea.

**JR:** Could you say that again?

**CB:** Yeah. Self-transformation is always preceded by self-acceptance. So… rather than comparing myself to others who seem to do better than I do, I can say kind things to myself, like “Thank you God for allowing me to see this. Forgive me. Help me to grow more in this area.” And then when I’m kind, I’m actually more likely to let it go and to move on into maturity instead of just getting stuck in that negative loop and being a sinful person who’s angry with herself. That doesn’t really help anybody.

**JR:** Yeah, and I’m reminded of the verse that it’s the kindness of God that leads us to repentance.

**CB:** Mmmhmm… yeah.

**JR:** And I love this idea of breaking out of loops, right? A really helpful way of thinking about what you’re talking about, and repentance as a way of saying I’m in this loop, and now I’m gonna break this loop and move. And a loop, by definition, is you can’t change directions if you’re in a loop. You’re just gonna… (laughs)

**CB:** Yeah.

**JR:** Or all you’re doing is changing directions, or something. But you can’t… you know, until you stop looping and start moving toward something again that’s outside yourself, something that you didn’t invent, that isn’t coming from your brain, but rather something outside yourself. Really really helpful. I love it.

And now, I do want to ask this other question though. Because self-flagellation and fear as a motivator… actually can work…

**CB:** (laughs)

**JR:** Right? I wrote more than one book just straight out of fear.

**CB:** Hmm!

**JR:** Waking up in the morning and saying, you know… I mean, getting up in the morning and writing because I couldn’t sleep, because I was so afraid of having to give the advance back, or…

**CB:** Mmmm…

**JR:** I have definitely dealt with that. Have found it motivating until one day it wasn’t anymore. Until one day, no amount of self-flagellation could get me to do the work. I would just rather, you know… I guess I used to think in terms of I would write when the pain of not writing got greater than the pain of writing.

**CB:** Mmhm.

**JR:** Because writing is painful. For me anyway, and for a lot of people. And… I went for years, that was kind of the way I thought about it. There’s some pain in not writing, and there’s some pain in writing, so which one is greater today? (laughs) I will avoid the one that’s greater today. And man, that is just not sustainable. Although it carried me along for — or I carried it — for a long time. So I don’t know. Do you have any thoughts on this idea of self-flagellation as a motivator? Maybe you’re so emotionally healthy that it’s not something you’ve ever experienced, I don’t know.

**CB:** Well, I appreciate that story! It’s very powerful. And interesting that you ran out of steam eventually.

**JR:** Yeah.

**CB:** It only takes you so far is kind of what I’m hearing. Umm… so I’m more of an editor than I am a writer. That’s my main focus. And as an editor I find that people write best when they write what they want to write. Which is also I think part of the narrative that you just offered. When it builds up so much that you just have to write, that you’re writing out of the desire. Um… the tricky part is what you just described, is for the people who make a living off of their writing. That is a very different position than I find myself. Or really, a lot of our writers are people in ministry, or they have other things that are bringing in income. So, I’m sure that it’s tricky. Even the thing when you’re writing what you wanna write isn’t always true when you have to take assignments, perhaps. But as far as possible, I encourage writers to follow their calling, follow the string, follow the muse. Um, and that’s what’s gonna succeed.

One thing that I find odd actually as an editor is when I go to writers conferences, and writers say to me, “What book topics are you looking for?” And I think, writing a book is an enormous undertaking! It’s not assignment writing!

**JR:** (chuckles)

**CB:** It needs to be the thing that only you can write, and the thing that flows naturally out of everything you’re doing. Again, thinking largely about people that are in other kinds of ministry as well. If it’s the thing that flows out of the whole of your life and work is the thing that you should write. Because you’re gonna have to keep talking about it for a looooong time. Especially if you’re writing non-fiction. You’re gonna be doing conferences and speaking and teaching and writing more about it, so it needs to be really interesting to you.

**JR:** Yeah. I always say, what do you have to give to the writer that the writer can’t get for himself. And um… that very question of what are you looking for? That’s a person that’s not asking that question, “What do I have to give?” When you’re asking that question, you’re saying, “What can you give me?” Give me a topic that’s gonna benefit me, rather than something that I’ve got that I can give.

**CB:** Yeah. That’s right. It can work for certain journalism or certain areas, perhaps, to just like putting words on a page and playing with that, but it doesn’t work very well for a non-fiction book.

**JR:** Mmhm. I’ve done a lot of copywriting for advertising. And… I say advertising. Some advertising. Various marketing type things, just to keep food on the table. And then — now I don’t remember why I bought that up, except that anytime we talk about assignments, it does de-glamorize writing a little bit, I can tell ya. To have that many deadlines in one day, and to speak in that many voices in one day… it’s good training. But it also helps you long… one of the things it’s done for me is make me long for the kind of writing that you’re talking about.

The truth is, I don’t have that much, that many strong feelings about which bank somebody should bank at. You know? Writing brochures for banks. And that work has A) built some very important skills as a writer, not the least of which is discipline, hitting deadlines, sometimes multiple deadlines. And um… but then also, reinvigorating me to do work that does feel like it’s coming from inside rather than outside.

**CB:** Mmhm. Mmhm. Yeah, you probably can’t be in that mode of… writing the profound stories of your life or… I don't’ know. I suppose we’re not always in the mode of our highest creativity. But that kind of discipline writing… I’ve done a lot of back cover copy in my years, and that’s sort of like assignment writing, but it’s good. It helps you hone the craft.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah. I want to talk to you a minute about… you have an adjusted version of St. Ignatius’ Examen.

**CB:** Mmhm.

**JR:** I don’t know if I’m saying that word right. How do you pronounce that?

**CB:** “Examine.”

**JR:** And so his idea is at the end of the day, review your day and think, “Where are the places where I was closer to God?” And that’s the consolation. And then where was I more distant— am I saying that right?

**CB:** That’s right! Yep.

**JR:** And where you were more distant than God, and that was the desolation.

**CB:** Yep. Yep.

**JR:** Close and distant, is that the right category?

**CB:** That’s… yep. That’s how I understand it.

**JR:** And that wasn’t working, because it was generating shame.

**CB:** That’s right. So it started with reading a manuscript by a couple of my authors, Gem and Alan Fadling, and they were writing a book called *What Does Your Soul Love?* And it was this sentence where they were describing how we open ourselves to God, and they write, “Notice where you’re bugged.” And I was reading— I was editing, I was writing a developmental report, but that just stopped me short, and I felt caught by God in that moment. And I thought okay, there is something here for me that’s beyond the work. So I made a note of that and started working with it later, and I decided to take that phrase and make it part of a personal examen. And so I would ask myself each day two questions: “What’s bugging you?” And the second question was, “What is bringing you joy?” And that was my way of translating the desolation — what’s bugging me, what’s making me far from God — and what’s bringing me joy, what’s bringing me near to God.

The examen as I had been taught it by Ignatius was typically practiced at night. So you review your day, and it tended to draw me into all the things that went wrong, all the things that I did wrong, and that doesn’t make me sleepy. So one twist for me was putting that in the morning. So every morning in my journal I think back over the past day and put that in those notes. And it kind of clears my head for the day to come, and it helps me too realize what are the things that are hooking me that I’m gonna need to let go.

And the “What’s bringing me joy,” of course, is a gratitude practice. But it’s also, again, this thing of God drawing near. Birds have been really important to me in this — particularly during these recent months — just noticing birds, and seeing those as a gift from God, as God’s creation. So just these kinds of little things that remind me that God is near, that the Creator has made a beautiful creation. Kindnesses from people, things that bring you hope and joy. So those are things that cause me to notice God and notice that God is near.

**JR:** So your two questions — “What’s bugging me?” and “What brings me joy?” — you’re still doing St. Ignatius’ examen. It’s not that you’ve come up with two new questions. It’s just you’ve come up with questions that are getting at the same thing as St. Ignatius.

**CB:** I think so.

**JR:** Yeah. Okay. Alright. We don’t have time to talk about how important gratitude is for the writing process but… it is so important.

**CB:** Mmhm.

**JR:** Being awake to what is going on in the world around you. It’s great. So you are… we haven’t even talked about this yet. You’re trained as a spiritual director.

**CB:** Mmhmm!

**JR:** And how is… what’s the overlap you see between being — or do you see any overlap, I guess I should say that — between being a spiritual director and being an editor.

**CB:** Yeah, so I decided to do spiritual direction training because I thought it would help my editing. It helps a bit in the content area, because I work on spiritual formation in particular. But also, because I do see this tie between spiritual direction and editing. For me, it’s first of all those moments where aI meet with an author or talk with an author, and kind of try to draw out of them, what do they want to do? What is this book about? What’s the structure? What’s the calling of this book? And then also, as I read, again trying to connect with what does the reader need?

And in a way, maybe that could also be thought of as what do I see emerging in the book itself? Which can be the Holy Spirit! There’s this thought of the muse, but I think for Christians, the Spirit is guiding and can surprise you with what comes out if we work in collaboration with the Spirit. And I think I’m, like a spiritual director, I’m trying to listen to the Spirit and listen to the author as you might listen to a directee and listen to the Holy Spirit when you’re doing spiritual direction.

Um… now the part that I don’t always love is there’s a third piece, which is the market. And the sort of more pleasant way to think about it is the reader, the audience, and we do want to serve those, but there’s also some realities of what we think will or won’t work for the publishing house that comes into it. So it’s not really as pure as spiritual direction…

**JR:** (laughs)

**CB:** But I do like bringing those things I’ve learned into it.

**JR:** And to what extent does your work with writers, um… how do I ask this question? I mean, there are so many… I always say writing issues are never just writing issues. There’s always this swirl going around… alright, sometimes. If we’re talking about passive voice, that’s just a writing issue. But there’s so many things swirling around the writer that are keeping them from getting the work done. To what extent is your work as an editor… I don’t know, counseling? (chuckles) Obviously, it’s way beyond — it seems to me that you’re a conscientious editor — that work ends up going beyond just, as you said, matching up the manuscript with the market and the reader and all that kind of stuff. There’s some spiritual work going on.

**CB:** That’s right. It surprised me. That was one of the first things that surprised me. I thought being an editor was sitting around reading manuscripts all day, and it’s so much more people time than I ever would have imagined. Encouraging people through the hard places, through the doubts… yeah, writing can plunge you into things that you didn’t know, you know, places that you didn’t know you were going. Particularly if you’re using personal narrative as part of it. Um… I definitely have seen spiritual warfare around writing, particularly in areas of race, of justice. We’ve done some books with International Justice Mission, IJM, around slavery that continues worldwide. I think there’s real warfare. So I’ve seen that kind of thing happen as well.

But it’s a joy! I love that part of the work, that I get to be with people through this journey. And it’s so satisfying. I know there’s not a lot of jobs where you go from this little root idea that people have, um, all the way through this process to the end, and you get this product, this beautiful book. And on a regular basis, that happens! (laughs) And I think that’s a real grace of the job, to have these shelves lined with these things that you did and worked on and collaborated with.

**JR:** I can imagine. I always thought it would be a really great job, great work, to be an editor.

**CB:** Yeah.

**JR:** And I so appreciate the work that people like you do. I mean… for my own work, yes, but more to the point, for all these, you know… my rooms are full of books that people like you helped to bring into the world. So thank you.

**CB:** Yes! Well, thank you! It’s really a joy and a privilege. So I’ve been on the show twice before, and you didn’t know it. but both Tish Warren and Jen Michel quoted things their editor said, which was me. (laughs)

**JR:** Ahhhh! I didn’t know we were talking about you!

**CB:** (laughs) Yep! So I like that background space.

**JR:** Yeah. Good. I’ll ask you the question we always end these discussions with. And that is, “Who are the writers who make you want to write?”

**CB:** Yes! So, I looooove that question. That’s a great question. Kathleen Norris is a great touchpoint for me. I’ve read *Cloister Walk* many times. I don’t always read books over, but I’ve read that one, and that actually drew me to liturgy as well.

My authors, of course. I repeat, all of them are wonderful. I asked Ruth Barton to write the foreward, because I love her writing. And what I’m looking for in formational writing is writing that draws me into God’s presence. It makes me wanna go and sit and be with God or to try out a spiritual practice, and I think that Ruth does that.

While I was writing the book, I was reading two books by Mason Currey about artists and writing, and those are called *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work* and *Daily Rituals: Women at Work*. And they’re just like these little snippets of painters and writers and musicians doing their art, and they’re fun to read in tidbits.

Similarly, a touchpoint author to me is Madeleine L’Engle. *A Wrinkle in Time* was really important to me as a kid, and she has a book, *Madeleine L’Engle Herself: Reflections on Writing Life*, and again it’s these little nuggets of wisdom and it’s really fun to read about writing.

And then my last — I think it’s great. I’m mostly a non-fiction editor, reader, but fiction is great for non-fiction writers as well. And I’ve been loving Louise Penny’s Inspector Gamache series? I’m late to the game just finding them…

**JR:** Well, I’m later than you are, because I haven’t…

**CB:** Okay. Well, yeah, yeah. Louise Penny. And the audio book are great. I’ve been listening to the audio books. They’re… they’re murder mysteries set in a cute town in Quebec. They’re full of… really full of spiritual formation I believe. Full of wise thinking about art and life and people.

**JR:** Yeah. Well, great.

(THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

**JR:** Well, Cindy, this has been a delight. Thank you for being here on The Habit. I look forward to seeing what other books you bring into the world.

**CB:** Thank you! I’ve enjoyed it very much.

**JR:** Alright, bye.

**CB:** Bye bye.

**DREW MILLER:** The Rabbit Room is partnered with Lipscomb University to make this podcast possible. Lipscomb has graciously given us access to their recording studio in the Center for Entertainment and Arts Building. We’re so grateful for their sponsorship, their encouragement, and the good work they do in Nashville.

Special shout-out as well to Jess Ray for letting us use her song “Too Good” as part of this podcast. Visit jessraymusic.com to hear more of her beautiful songs.

**JR:** The Habit Membership is a library of resources for writers by me, Jonathan Rogers. More importantly, The Habit is a hub of community where like-minded writers gather to discuss their work and give each other a little more courage. Find out more at TheHabit.co.

**DM:** This podcast was produced by The Rabbit Room, where art nourishes community and community nourishes art. All our podcasts are made possible by the generous support of our members. To learn more about us, visit rabbitroom.com, and to become a member, rabbitroom.com/donate.

(THEME MUSIC OUT)

(ACOUSTIC GUITAR MUSIC)

**DM:** This episode is brought to you by the Christian Standard Bible. Here’s Russ Ramsey on what draws him to the CSB as a pastor and a writer.

**RUSS RAMSEY:** This is a translation where, as they were putting this together, really had a desire to affirm the authority of Scripture and champion its absolute truth. It does a beautiful job of welcoming a reader to the language by not being difficult. Also, it does a good job of walking the reader through a text that is solid and reliable and accurate. I love the CSB translation of the Bible. I think it’s so beautiful to read and so easy to work with.

(MUSIC FADES OUT)

**DM:** To learn more about the Christian Standard Bible, visit csbible.com.