

DR. KEESHA EWERS: Welcome to the Women's Vitality Summit. Once again, this is Dr. Keesha Ewers and you are joining me for a wonderful interview with Susan B. Mead, who is the author of *Dance With Jesus: From Grief To Grace*. Welcome to the Women's Vitality Summit, Susan.

SUSAN B. MEAD: Oh Keesha, thank you for inviting me and including me to take part in the Women's Vitality Summit, I'm honored.

DR. KEESHA: It is such a pleasure for me to have you on. I always ask for the speakers who have been part of the Summit what they see as one of the primary vitality suckers out there for women today. And without even asking that, I invited you on because I see grief and loss as a big one.

So I just really am so happy to have you on this Summit because it becomes a shared experience by all humans. I'd love to have you tell a little bit about your story, and why I even decided to have brought you on, so I'll start you there.

SUSAN B. MEAD: That works. In 2004, I got a phone call from my mother, on a Tuesday morning. She said words that changed my life forever. She said my sister, Betty, a brilliant PhD nurse, had done the unthinkable. She had bought a gun and used it on herself. In that moment, you know that things have changed, they can never be the same again.

She looked just like me, sounded just like me, except she was two years younger. I heard words that said, "I've got her, she's mine". And the piece that the Bible says is understanding enveloped me.

I went from being catastrophically devastated to being peaceful and hopeful in that tragic, tragic situation, Keesha.

DR. KEESHA: I just went through this with a friend, in February. You're going along in your day, with all the things in your life that you consider oh so important. In my case, I was at a hair salon getting my hair cut. I was called by a very dear friend of mine whose partner had hung himself.

So that changes in that moment. All the priorities that you held as vital, the most important things you had to get done that day, all of a sudden those are gone, aren't they?

SUSAN B. MEAD: Yes. And you know what I've come to realize? Stuff doesn't matter, people do. I've got to get stuff off my to-do list and put people on my calendar, my agenda.

DR. KEESHA: That's a really, really good lesson from this. You've had more, in terms of grief and loss. In 2008 you also had another loss?

SUSAN B. MEAD: Yes, my husband and I were out shopping for some garden stuff to put up a new trellis when my older son Matt called wailing. He said that Kyle had died last night. Keesha, Kyle was my youngest son, my baby.

So eight years ago, when he was 20, I got that call that changed my life forever. Not something anybody ever wants to experience, and I pray nobody joins this club that I'm in. But the reality is that our children are succumbing to so many things, whether to tragic accidents, cancer, drugs and alcohol, whatever it may be.

The reality is our kids are dying, and as parents we're bearing them in numbers we've never done before, historically. And they may have even had a child who was lost in war, an honorable thing protecting our country. But loss is loss.

DR. KEESHA: There's a story that's told where a woman comes wailing, grief stricken, with her baby in her arms that has died. She comes to the Buddha, who's visiting her village and teaching. She says "I know you can bring him back to life, please bring him back to life".

The Buddha looks back to her with compassion and says "Leave here, go to the villagers. Go to each house and bring me a mustard seed from every house that has not experienced death and loss." So she goes from house to house to house, and she finally comes back. She picks up her baby and says "I finally understand, thank you." So she goes and they have a funeral.

So it's such a common, shared human experience and it's so awful. Like you said, it's not something, when you have a child born to you, that you think you'll be grieving them. It seems out of order in so many different fundamental ways and yet, we're not promised anything, are we?

SUSAN B. MEAD: No, we're certainly not.

DR. KEESHA: So how did you get through this?

SUSAN B. MEAD: I learned three things, Keesha, in that moment. I realized that I had to look up, because when I was looking at my feet, and I'll use a pun on words here, I felt "de-feet-ed" (defeated). All I was doing was looking within and seeing the dark, black hole, and the void.

If you believe, like I do, if I'm looking at my feet, the enemy is under my feet so who am I talking to? Who am I listening to? As opposed to hearing words that build up and lift up. So I had to look up.

If I saw someone else who was doing, living, and experiencing life through loss, that was the second thing I learned. If they could, I could. And if a little bitty pinpoint of light shined on my path, it gave me the first step to take so that I could start the healing journey.

So my prayer every day was to remind myself to look up, see others who had lived and were loving together. See others who had lived and were loving again because they had lost first, but they were living and loving. And look to that light and follow it. Each one of us has our own light, that's just the reality, even though our faiths might differ.

We take comfort in learning how do we renew our mind? How do we change the conversation that's going on in our head, instead of burying that grief even deeper? How do we find joy? How do we find hope? How do we find peace in a moment that's chaotic? How do we find comfort? Where do we turn? How do we look? Those were the critical things that I learned.

DR. KEESHA: So those were critical things that you learned that can be extrapolated into larger society and what's going on now out there today. You mention in 2013 that you were at the Boston Marathon, so talk about that a little bit

SUSAN B. MEAD: My cousin is a legend in running, Amby Burfoot. He won the Boston Marathon in 1968, has been on the editorial staff for Runner's World for 37-38 years, something like that. And he was running the 45th anniversary and I said "I'll be there." He said "I'll be running as long as my knees are good." So we were there.

It was one of those bucket list weeks; we went to see the Red Sox play in Fenway Park and we got to go to the opening of the Boston Marathon at the Cheers bar, from the TV show Cheers. Then at the mayor's breakfast, the runners were absolutely honored by my cousin being there 45 years on. Then at the Runner's World party, I sat between my cousin, the senior executive editor, and the publisher. We were off to Lexington, and off to all the fun stuff around historical Boston. We just had this amazing, amazing week.

But on that morning, we were sitting in the grandstand. Amby got us these fabulous seats, up in the grandstand at the finish line. He wasn't running in wave 1, he was running in wave 3 because it was a celebration and he had friends and family running with him; they can't run that five minute mile. He can, but he could slow it down to 10 minutes to run with family and friends, which he did because it was a celebration.

So he's about five minutes out from the finish line when – BOOM! Literally, across the street, a fire went up five stories high. And heat – we felt it – literally across the street! Eight seconds later – BOOM! A second bomb went off. My response was immediately to go into prayer and the one thing I thought of was Psalm 91:11 "For He orders his angels to protect you wherever you go." I call that my 911 prayer now.

DR. KEESHA: Oh that's great

SUSAN B. MEAD: Oh and that's just the reality. I was able to call his wife who was in a van and let her know that a bomb had just gone off and she's like "Where? Madrid?" I said "No, the finish line."

Amby's never run with a cellphone and this was the first time he'd done that. So she was able to call him and say "Meet us at the hotel, there have been two bombs at the finish line". So at least that piece was done. But the reality is, how many of us sit in the face of terror and experience it first hand? I never had before.

DR. KEESHA: Yeah. I'll never forget when the two towers came down. I wasn't alive when JFK was killed, but for me it was the planes taking down the two towers in New York City. It's one of those moments: where were you in that moment?

I heard it on NPR. I had gone running that morning after I dropped my kids off at their schools. I got back in the car, went back to the schools and picked them all back up. I just sat and talked to them about the world and what's going on and what's happening and humanity and all of those things.

I think that when you bring up being present at the Boston Marathon like that, and really witnessing an act of terror in that way or some kind of thing that's so terrorizing to other people, your instant 911 prayer, that's a really great tip. And for people to remember: look up, right?

SUSAN B. MEAD: Right.

DR. KEESHA: That's really good. Your book *Dance With Jesus: From Grief To Grace*, I would love to have you talk a little bit about that and how that book came to be, because it's one of those acts of intense speed that that book got written. So I'd like for you to tell a little bit about the story around that.

SUSAN B. MEAD: Okay. I didn't know I was writing a book, I just started that way. I had no idea. I was doing a bible study of Henry Blackaby's *Experiencing God*, and one of the questions was what does God want you to do right now? And I heard "Sing my love song" and I kind of laughed out loud, kind of laughed at God. I said "I can't carry a tune, you're going to have to send me a bucket and you know it." The next little nudge was "What's in your hand, use it!"

Keesha, I literally just looked in my hand and there was a pen there! I swept the workbook away, got out a journal and just started writing. Literally, I just wrote and wrote until 5:30 in the morning then I crawled into bed.

That afternoon, the first email I saw was entitled Proverbs 31 She Speaks Speakers' and Writers' Conference. Writers' Conference? Ha! Okay, I guess I'm going to do a little more than I thought! It was just two lines that were in that workbook, and I took a bit more space.

DR. KEESHA: So you tell the story from grief to grace and what was your process to get there?

SUSAN B. MEAD: You know what? Honestly that three step process of having to look up outside of myself because I didn't have the answers. I had never experienced that deep grief. I didn't know the answers and if I let my head spin, I'd tell myself how dark and dismal and broken everything was.

Granted, your world is broken, and it is dark and there is an abyss there where grief is all you feel and taste. Everything is black you don't feel and taste color, but your world turns black.

I had to look up outside of myself, and look to others who were marching to a different drum and they were living again and loving again and laughing again. And I wanted that. Again, the book that I read says to renew your mind daily. So I chose to look towards it for sources of joy, comfort, peace, hope, mourning, grief. What does it say? What am I supposed to do? How am I supposed to respond?

I also looked at that husband and other son of mine and realized I didn't know what I needed, how dare I tell them what they needed. So I had to respect their need to grieve differently and uniquely and be there if they needed me. Guys don't talk, girls do, for the most part. That was a generalization that might not be totally accurate.

DR. KEESHA: That's pretty accurate. I think it is a very feminine brain thing to process verbally.

SUSAN B. MEAD: Well, I had 15,000 words all stored up and ready to use when he walked in the door, and he had five.

DR. KEESHA: So have they moved through it too?

SUSAN B. MEAD: Yes. Holt was on a very different pace and very different trajectory than I. But he found a group that he could share with, and talk to, and live life with. I think that's the reality; we can't become isolated.

Wherever we are, and whatever it is that we're doing, isolation is an enemy to healing. Whether it's healthy healing or grief healing or loss healing, isolation is not typically where the best things are for healing for the long term. I don't mean getting away for a short term just to decompress. I mean isolation where you're totally alone and out of touch.

My older son, he has met the woman of his heart and that's just a blessing to see him being happy.

DR. KEESHA: That's wonderful. You know, the Summit's first airing is going from September 5th to September 11th and I did that on purpose. I wanted to have your talk on September 11th for obvious reasons that I already mentioned. And I'm glad you mentioned the community aspect.

SUSAN B. MEAD: Yes.

DR. KEESHA: My son lives in New York City and every time we go I see people moving through their grief. It's been many years now, but the hole is still there in a lot of people's hearts.

Those that join together for rebuilding are moving through faster than those who isolate. I think that's definitely a time when we need each other more than any other time in life, when we're experiencing something that's too great for us to bear by ourselves. I think community becomes essential in that case.

SUSAN B. MEAD: I agree with you. If you look at the work community: C-O-M-M and unity. You've got to communicate. You've got to talk to people.

That unity, when you're of one accord and one mind and you're walking a similar path, the load's not as heavy when many are bearing it. It's just a big burden lifting when we come together in one accord and we share and we cry and we laugh and we commune in unity.

But that community and gathering is so critical, across everything we do in life.

DR. KEESHA: That's the thing about something as great as a world catastrophe. People can distance themselves a bit from that, but when it's your own and it's hitting you at home where you have personally lost somebody, I think the tendency is to isolate because the belief is that nobody knows what it's like.

I remember losing my nephew. I was pregnant with my now 19 year old daughter. I just felt so terrible for my sister-in-law who had just lost her child. Driving down the street and seeing people laughing and singing in their cars, I just remember feeling like "How can the world keep on singing in a time of darkness like this?" You know? It was the day that I had just found out.

Then I put my hand down on my belly, and felt my little girl's heart beating and I thought "Thank God!" And that's what I started to do, to thank God, for life going on, for hearts beating together in unity, for song, for laughter, and knowing that all of these co-exist together on this planet.

Not only do we feel the deepest, the deepest of despair, but also the heights of joy and love and it's all together, like a symphony. If you only hear the kettle drums, it's kind of a boring symphony. If you only hear the twinkly little flutes it's a boring symphony, but all together, it makes the music of life.

So I think the tendency is to isolate and think that nobody else understands your pain. What do you say to people out there who are listening who have that as their reality: "Nobody else can possibly understand my pain"?

SUSAN B. MEAD: Keesha, one of the things that I have learned is that there's healing for somebody in each one of our stories. If we share what's going on; good, bad, or indifferent, tragedy or triumph, others need to hear it because then we'll find that we're not alone.

We'll find that common ground and we'll find those people who can help us carry the load. Lighten the load. Walk a different path. Lift our head. See the light. Live again. Have hope. "Oh my goodness, I'm running a race now! I'm not just in this black pit that I can't even crawl out of, I can't even see out of. But now I'm living and loving. I've got a life again." So share. Tell. Look up. Find others.

We have a group of moms who've lost kids who have dinner once a month. I've moved away from that community, but you can rest assured that when I go back to the area, if I'm there on the first Tuesday of the month, you know where I'm going to be – with my girlfriends!

DR. KEESHA: Yeah, with the fellow women who process verbally, right?

SUSAN B. MEAD: Absolutely. We don't always commiserate, most of the time we don't. Most of the time we're talking about what's going on in our lives now.

DR. KEESHA: Right.

SUSAN B. MEAD: So it's beautiful. When new people come in we're going to commiserate. You never know what the needs are with individuals at different points in their life. One day might be the most beautiful thing you've seen, and then the next day, oh, your knees get knocked out from underneath you and you didn't expect to be side-swiped because it's been 8-10 years. You never know when grief is going to hit or when loss is going to rear its ugly head or something, because it happens, it happens.

DR. KEESHA: I think that's such an important statement that you just made, and I'm so glad you brought it up, because I tell this to my patients all the time; that grief is not linear.

SUSAN B. MEAD: No. Not by any stretch of the imagination.

DR. KEESHA: Yes, and to be prepared that it's not linear, don't expect it to be linear. I hear from people who have had trauma in their past "Oh well, I already did my work around that" and I'm seeing that this is coming up and biting them again. So I say "Well, this actually becomes a place that you mine for the rest of your life. This becomes a place that you might return to several times and have further growth from."

I think all of these moments, when I think about life, as the tides of the sea. Sometimes the tide is in and everything's floating along in the serene and beautiful. Sometimes the tide goes out and we feel alone. That's where our growth is, where we really have our challenges, and those challenges are important. Obviously, would you have written a book and published it if this wasn't your experience?

SUSAN B. MEAD: No. Nor would I be working on a second one.

DR. KEESHA: Yes, we're going to get to that one in a moment. There's a children's story called That's Good! That's Bad! I just loved reading that to my children when they were little, because something that's so terrible then turns into something that's a positive. What they call the silver lining, right? Some kind of growth that you go through as a result of it. It helps to create a bigger, better, more sparkly version of yourself as you reach out with more compassion to help others, which is definitely what you did.

I love that you've shared your story. Any story has so much power. Healing, and self-healing for others, as you said.

SUSAN B. MEAD: Absolutely. The reality is each of us has a song that needs to be sung. And I can't guarantee it, but I love that saying. I love that saying.

DR. KEESHA: Well I think you're carrying a tune, okay. It's just in the written word, not in the sung word, right?

So what do you recommend to women in terms of caring for themselves body and soul? Self-care activities, what do you do?

SUSAN B. MEAD: Find a community of people who make you feel alive, and plug in, whatever that looks like. Whether you're a tennis player, golf player, runner, beach bum, skydiver – I don't care what it is – find a group and play.

Put 'play' down on your agenda and play. Turn that silly rectangle that we live in off and unplug from the Internet, the news, everything else that brings us down and distracts us from the good. It's going on in ourselves by seeing the catastrophes everywhere else. I think unplugging and plugging into ourselves and our personal needs is critical.

Then truly loving the ones who we're sharing our life with. Letting them know how loved they are and treasured they are.

DR. KEESHA: There's a saying that says God doesn't deduct from the years of living, the time spent loving. I love that saying.

Alright, so loving is an amazing self-care activity, and having fun. So who inspires you, do you have some female role models?

SUSAN B. MEAD: I love Lysa TerKeurst. She is the president of Proverbs 31 Ministries and she's just a genuine soul. She makes me happy. I loved Audrey Hepburn, loved that woman. Her philosophy was 'be nice.' I forget the saying that she had, something like 'You don't know what's going on looking at the outside, on the inside be compassionate, be considerate because they might have had a bad day.' I loved her, that dates me but it's okay! Those are the ones I think of off the top of my head.

DR. KEESHA: Those are lovely. So you've just pulled up roots and put some down closer to your family now. Your mom and dad, who are still alive, and you're working on a new book. Tell us about that.

SUSAN B. MEAD: I literally moved out to the backside of nowhere, on the back of a lake where the Internet might come up at snail's pace instead of fiber-optics speed. I had to change cellphone provider because the other one didn't work at all. And that's a very different scenario to a girl who's plugged in on fiber-optics in Dallas and where the airport was 15 minutes from the house.

But my sister and her husband live around the corner, and my parents, who are in their early 90s and still walking a mile a day even though dad's got cancer. We moved to be close to him in his final days.

He's one tenacious guy. The doctor is just amazed that he's not on a pain patch and stuff, but if he takes anything, it's an occasional Tylenol. I'm getting good genes, I'll keep them.

DR. KEESHA: So tell me about the book you're writing. I'm assuming it's as a result of this experience you're having right now.

SUSAN B. MEAD: It is. The title is Lessons I Learned at My Father's Feet. He's 91 years old, and just absolutely brilliant. He's lived and seen so much more than we possibly can imagine.

He literally just went up to Virginia Tech for his granddaughter's graduation, and he graduated from there 69 years ago as an electrical engineer. It's so cool that he gets to do that stuff. Someone who's terminal, gets on the plane and goes. Hello!

He's an inspiration. He teaches me to laugh and live and love and find joy in the little stuff.

He did say, the other day "When my shadow gets ahead of me" and I said "Oh, that's a chapter topic!"

DR. KEESHA: Oh, that's a very good one.

SUSAN B. MEAD: "Ooh I gotta write about that."

DR. KEESHA: What are some of these lessons, besides the one you just mentioned, from your father's feet?

SUSAN B. MEAD: Duck.

DR. KEESHA: Duck?

SUSAN B. MEAD: Duck. Trouble flies over your head, duck! The biblical spin on it is "Bow before my Lord". It's just so interesting, the way my fathers – both my earthly father and my heavenly father – say that. Duck and Cover will probably be the first chapter.

DR. KEESHA: I love that. So, what wisdom would you like to tell young women of today?

SUSAN B. MEAD: Find joy. If you're finding stuff that's cleverly hidden with negative stuff; look up, find a light, and find joy. Be intentional about creating time with people in their lives.

Don't try to accrue stuff and amass stuff because stuff can burn up, be lost, whatever. But make time with people. Develop a relationship and pour time into that, into loving people, loving well, love yourself well. That matters.

DR. KEESHA: That's good advice: love yourself well. From that well you can love others well.

SUSAN B. MEAD: Yes.

DR. KEESHA: Lovely. So what's your dream for young women? Think back. I have older children, they have left my home, and I think back to young women as they're just starting careers.

You worked for 20 years in corporate America too with Johnson & Johnson. So go back to those early days, is there anything that you would do differently?

SUSAN B. MEAD: Keesha, you know what? There are always things I like to think I could or would do differently, but if I were back there I'd still know the same stuff. I'm not sure I could do it differently. So give yourself grace for what you haven't done and look to others who have what you want and learn from them.

I didn't know how to be a mama. I didn't know how to be a professional woman. But I saw others model how I wanted to be and what I wanted to do. I knew that I had a passion to help others and a desire to follow my passions, but let your passions also guide you to people that need to be involved in that.

DR. KEESHA: I've asked everybody that's come on this Summit, and of course, before I ask questions like this, I answer them for myself. All of us have said no, we wouldn't change anything. That's what I love to hear from people because we all know now where we are at in our lives, that every experience we have had in life has shaped who we are today.

It's the refiner's fire. You put a bunch of unpolished stones in the rock polisher and they bounce around all together, and they rub each other's rough edges off, and that process is loud and it's painful, but you come out polished. So I don't think knocking the rough edges off is an easy process. But I too would not change anything.

SUSAN B. MEAD: We all need an emery board in our lives from time to time. Just think what your fingernails would look like if you didn't have one. What would our personality be like if we didn't have those rough edges knocked off of it too?

DR. KEESHA: That's right. So Susan, how do people find your book? How do they find you? You have a blog.

SUSAN B. MEAD: The easiest place is susanbmead.com. From there you can click on the picture of my book and get it. Or my blog is there. I blog every Friday. And dancewithjesus.com is a little bit more about the book. It's an easy place to remember too.

DR. KEESHA: I look forward to the release of your next book, it sounds lovely.

SUSAN B. MEAD: Thank you, ma'am.

DR. KEESHA: Thank you so much for joining us and sharing some of your wisdom today, Susan, it was a pleasure to have you on the Summit.



SUSAN B. MEAD: Keesha, it's been an honor, and I just pray that the people who are supposed to hear the wisdom that you give here, and the words that you've allowed me to share, I thank you.

DR. KEESHA: Thank you, and remember everybody, look up in your times of darkness and find the light and follow it, as Susan says. Have a fantastic time.