



Women's Vitality Summit - September 2016 – Dr. Keesha Ewers interviews Thomas McConkie 1

DR. KEESHA EWERS: This is Dr. Keesha Ewers, your host for the Woman's Vitality Summit: Caring for Yourself, Body and Soul.

I'm quite delighted and honored for the blessing today of being able to interview one of my very favorite authors on the scene right now. His name is Thomas McConkie. He wrote a book called *Navigating Mormon Faith Crisis: A Simple Developmental Map*.

Thomas is an author, a public speaker, and a teacher. He currently serves as faculty at Pacific Integral where researches adult development and helps individuals in organizations grow through embodied practice. He's been practicing mindfulness and other meditative techniques for over 17 years and studying their effects on human potential.

The topic of this talk today is your developmental level and your ability to love with full vitality. Welcome to the Summit, Thomas.

THOMAS MCCONKIE: Thanks so much, Dr. Keesha.

DR. KEESHA: It's really a delight to have you here. I always start these conversations with returning to the word vitality and reminding everybody - they've now listened to over 50 interviews probably, and they're pretty clear on the word vitality, but it's mainly for you and me - that the word vitality really means your life essence, joy, your passion, really the juice that you lead into your life purpose with.

There are so many women, and men too, but I see this a lot in women in my clinical practice - and this is what drove me to do this Summit - that are really lacking vitality and their passion and joy for their life. I always pose this question to every expert I bring into the Summit: what do you see as one of the primary drainers of women's vitality in this era?

THOMAS MCCONKIE: Before speaking specifically to what drains vitality in women, I would start with what drains vitality in human beings, and maybe we could double click down into the specific topic of women here.

When we talk about vitality, the first thing I think about - this might be counterintuitive with people listening - but I think about relaxation. The reason I think about relaxation is if you look at the world's wisdom traditions, I'm most familiar with Buddhism, but if you look at all of them, my experience is that you'll see similar patterning.

These meditative traditions, they start novitiate students, beginner students, with the basic practice of rest and relaxation. In the Buddhist practice, it's called calm abiding meditation, or



Women's Vitality Summit - September 2016 – Dr. Keesha Ewers interviews Thomas McConkie 2

Shamatha bhāvanā. The idea is that if we're able to just relax really deeply in the body, that creates a path and a gateway to experiencing our own life source and our vitality directly.

We often don't feel our life force directly because we have a subtle, almost imperceptible, tension in the body. We're not relaxing so we lose touch with this life source, and when we lose touch with that, a lot of problems can spring from there. We lose touch with creativity and we lose touch with our passion in the world, like you pointed to.

Really, it stems from starting with a soft body, a present mind, and from there we can really enter the stream of vitality and create in all the unique ways that only we can create.

DR. KEESHA: We're not taught this as a culture story, normally, in the United States. But this has been something that I've found in my life to be incredibly helpful; learning meditative practices that can bring me back into my core and ground me, and drop me in and down.

As we start talking about loving somebody with full vitality, which is what we're going to be discussing, what does this have to do with that?

THOMAS MCCONKIE: That's a great question. I would say it has everything to do with it.

When we're not relaxed in the body, when we're tense, we often have an inner dialogue going, our inner commentary - that voice in our head is chatting away - and we're often defended against what's happening in the present moment, so this really impacts our relationships.

When we're not able to be present, when we're not able to receive people fully, then we're not able to experience the flow of love and intimacy with other people.

So like I started off by saying, it's counterintuitive when we're talking about vitality and loving people from a fullness of vitality. We don't often jump to the conclusion "Oh, I need to be more relaxed." But really, in my experience, this is where really good connection starts. We connect deeply to our own in-the-moment experience and from there, we can reach out and connect with others.

DR. KEESHA: If I extrapolate this properly, then, one of the biggest drainers of women's vitality is not having the opportunities in their day to fully relax.

THOMAS MCCONKIE: I would say absolutely. I don't know if that's specific to women. I think that's a different subtopic if we get into the ways that men tend to disconnect compared to the ways that women tend to disconnect.

That's an interesting topic, but just as an entry point in the conversation, I find that the simple practice of bringing awareness back to the body and just really immersing ourselves in sensate experience in the moment, just being alive and in the body, is really a powerful move towards intimacy with ourselves and others.

DR. KEESHA: As we start talking about developmental level, I introduced your book as I was introducing you, because I really enjoyed this book a great deal. It's called *Navigating Mormon Faith Crisis: A Simple Developmental Map*. One of the things that has been true for me in my own life, since I was about 18, I started studying Ken Wilber's work with Integral Theory and it really informed me and put me on my path for what I do and how I am in the world, and in my relationships.

I write a lot about development and I teach my students and my patients about what's appropriate for human growth and developmental stages: "Don't beat yourself up about this, this is where you are supposed to be" and trying to help people accept where they're at as perfection. This has been part of what I do in my own practice.

So when I read your subtitle *A Simple Developmental Map*, I got really excited and couldn't wait to read it. It is a fantastic book as a really lovely way of traversing developmental growth. In fact, I just finished a book recently, and I talk about this when I teach too, about us being Babushka dolls. You talk about Babushka dolls too and I thought this is so cool!

THOMAS MCCONKIE: A stockpile metaphor in the world of development.

DR. KEESHA: I didn't realize that. I thought I'd come with it all by myself. So as we talk about that, and I work with my students, sometimes they get frustrated because they think that when you start talking about developmental growth - and we'll circle back and talk about what this even is - but they'll get confused and frustrated and say "I thought I'd already worked on this. I thought I was done with that."

THOMAS MCCONKIE: Yeah, yeah.

DR. KEESHA: I hear that a lot from people: "Oh yeah, that sexual abuse from my childhood, I've already worked on that," or that divorce, or whatever it was that caused so much stress that it became a very pivotal moment which affected their developmental growth. They'll say "Yeah, I've already worked on that" and they'll get really frustrated when I want to help them bring it together and integrate.

So let's talk about development and what role this plays on our health, our ability to love - as we're talking about here - and our vitality.

THOMAS MCCONKIE: Yeah, absolutely. Well, if we're going to talk about development, probably the first thing we should address is that adult development happens, and to some people that's just common knowledge, but to most people, that comes as kind of a revelation.

For most of human history, we've just noticed - on a very concrete level - that babies are born and they grow into these infants, toddlers, pre-adolescents, adolescents, then into adulthood. We thought that adult development basically stopped by the time someone was physically full-grown.

It's been really just in the last 50 years that we've learned a lot about how adults continue to develop, primarily the way that we experience ourselves, the way we interpret and make meaning of our experience, and how we respond to the world as a result. Before, we had multiple stages for child development, and in the last 50 years, we've discovered as many adult stages of development as child stages existed.

It's really a revelation in what the human journey means and to just learn a little bit about the territory, and notice what descriptions of adult development fire you up, resonate with you, it can be a really powerful tool in really participating in your own development.

DR. KEESHA: Can you take us on a very short journey through some of these stages so people get an idea about what we're talking about? A lot of people have heard of the oral stage of childhood development, but when we start talking about adult development, as you said, this can be new territory for people.

THOMAS MCCONKIE: Yeah, absolutely. An abbreviated tour looks something like: as very young adults - and this tends to be pre-adolescent, just coming into adolescence - we tend to be really identified with a group, with our family of origin, with our culture of origin.

There's an individuating process that takes place after that and brings us into a later stage of adulthood, where we're really coming into our own and starting to tune into our own values.

Let me stop the tour here and just point out that I work at Pacific Integral where I teach an ongoing developmental program called GTC. I work with adults all the time who are developed quite beyond this individuated phase, but that doesn't mean they don't still have some work to do, to your point, Keesha.

It's not as though once we outgrow our identity as a child of our parents and from our culture of origin, it doesn't mean we never revisit those topics. That's what's fascinating about development; we grow, we continually revisit and reinterpret all of the experiences of our lives, and those get translated into a later stage. We're always growing up, we're growing down, we're growing sideways, we're just growing and expanding.

That's just a quick detour, but as I move on beyond the individuated phase of development, then we start to get into what you can think of as a more world-centric awareness, where we realize that we're part of a human family. We were raised in a particular family in a cultural context, we grew up speaking a certain language and believing certain things. We realize that every human being comes from their own set of contexts, so we wake up further, we grow further into an identity where we genuinely start to appreciate the variety, the array, of human experience.

Beyond that, I'll just say a quick word about it, this might sound maybe a little bit unusual to people listening, but what we've found in recent research - and this is just in the last 20 years - that as adults continue to develop, they can even outgrow their habit, their tendency to identify as just a human being.

This is called different names from construct aware to cosmic-centric consciousness, but what it amounts to is we realize that deeper than our physical body, deeper than our thinking minds, we actually are just awareness. We're just these aware, sentient beings, and we have a capacity to be intimate with, and relate to, all experience and all beings.

It's an incredible journey, it's an exciting journey that we're all on, and I like to be cautious when I introduce the developmental framework, because we can quickly run into the pitfall of pigeonholing ourselves and pigeonholing other people in thinking that "Oh, I know where this person's stage is, that's why I don't like them. This explains everything." We can be tempted to pick it up that way.

But really, when we're using development as it's intended, I think when it's doing its job well, it's a mirror. We hold it up to ourselves and it sheds light on who we are and who we're becoming. As we understand ourselves better, and see ourselves more clearly, we see other people more clearly, and we just naturally have a compassionate response to them.

DR. KEESHA: Right, because if that response happens in the way you just said it, then if it's coming out in a judgmental way and their mind's in that way of "Oh yeah, I'm so much further ahead" or "I'm so much better, that's where they're at and that explains everything" then you've just, by default, shown yourself, your shadow space, that's still sitting in that very same place. That compassionate response of "Oh, I've been exactly there, I know where this person is at, I know where they're coming from" that may mean that you have to set a good, healthy boundary right in that moment in a compassionate way.

But either way, it's done with this compassionate awareness of unity, as this aware person and spirit of awareness, that you hold all of those parts within you, also. And I think that's really important.



THOMAS MCCONKIE: Beautiful. I'd love to dive into that just a little bit more, Keesha, because it gets back to your introductory question: what prevents women from really loving from their full vitality?

One of the themes that we see coming up in development in men and women is a relationship that is like two sides of a coin. On one side it's agency; our ability to act as an individual, exercise our own personal will, and on the other side of the equation, you have communion; our ability to relate, be relational and to connect.

What we tend to see, as a generalization, is that women who are working out this theme - it's a very developmental theme - women will tend to identify with the communion side of the equation.

So if they're in relationship with a romantic partner, if they're in relationship with children, if they're raising children, or in community, or with their colleagues, the default, on average for a woman, will be to yield her autonomy, her sense of agency, to serve the collective: "In service of relationship, I will sacrifice my own needs in order to preserve the relationship or the collective."

This is a beautiful capacity; it's what generates intimacy, our ability to connect, and subordinate our own needs in relationship. But if that goes too far, if we have too much communion, then the vitality of the unique self - that women have, that men have, that we all have - that actually starts to wilt.

When I work with female clients and I tune into this polarity, or this set of opposites that play together to conform our development, I do a lot of work with this polarity, and I help people see in their awareness that if they're feeling a little bit suffocated in a relationship, if their relationships don't feel vibrant and vital, then sometimes, that can be pointing to our not having owned our agency and our true unique voice, and to speak out from that voice and claim our own sense of person. If that makes sense.

DR. KEESHA: Perfect sense. Of course, we know the gender that we are is simply the gender that we took to come here to represent the half of the whole, and that it's inside. We have both of them inside of us, just like we have the sun and a moon, and we have the light and the dark. So, this representation is within each of us, and if one of them is weighted a little too heavily, then we can be imbalanced towards it, and we'll have more of these kinds of things that you're talking about.

THOMAS MCCONKIE: Absolutely. Yeah.

DR. KEESHA: It's a wonderful journey, life.



Women's Vitality Summit - September 2016 – Dr. Keesha Ewers interviews Thomas McConkie 7

THOMAS MCCONKIE: Yeah, absolutely.

DR. KEESHA: All right. Should we continue on through our developmental progression map?

THOMAS MCCONKIE: Or, we can dive in deeper at any point. I tried to give a brief overview from infancy to Buddha consciousness, but we can stop anywhere along the way and kind of consider what that looks like.

DR. KEESHA: Well, it's kind of fun, with the current political thing that's happening in our country, to really take a look at it from the space of people who can get very frustrated with how one person behaves and what their rhetoric is, and what their values and beliefs are that they're stating. They say "I just really hate this person, I don't want to vote for this person." I learned many years ago there is something that's been dubbed post-electoral depression where people say "I want to move out of the country."

I find it in Seattle, a lot of people are very passionate about the Seahawks right now, and you can see the football team paraphernalia everywhere. Houses even, are being painted blue and green, toenails and fingernails are blue and green on women. It's this really interesting collective excitement.

When I see men come into my practice after the Seahawks lose a game, it's post-game depression, right? They just really get sunk underneath. One of the things that I started seeing is this idea that - kind of like the Babushka dolls - some people really require this very cocooned way of being in the world.

They want rules, they want things to be very rigid, because then it feels safe, and if everyone is following those same set of rules, and has the same exact values, then this feels like it's a safe world to be in. They can go ahead and progress through their day and relate with people that relate in this same way and understand them, and they feel understood, and they're okay.

Then others have gone out of that cocoon a bit, and they're starting to flap their wings, and they've found "Oh, there's a boundary to this box, and I'd like to climb out and get in this next one" and they think "Oh, I'm free. I've learned everything." Eventually they'll go on and then they'll see there's a boundary on that box too. It just keeps going this way.

So you can see on a political spectrum, and a spiritual spectrum, and a sports spectrum, where people fall inside of this. If you can look at it in a way that it's fascinating, and it's wonderful, and it's beautiful, and it's chaos, and messiness, then you're okay. But a lot of people get very put off by this, taken out of their center and disrupted, in even a physical health way.

I think that this developmental map, and this understanding that there are these different developmental stages, is essential for people to understand about themselves, and about the people they share the planet with, yes?

THOMAS MCCONKIE: Absolutely. There's so much you said in there that's still valuable, Keesha.

One thing that comes up for me that I think is worth repeating and moving into a little more deeply is one of the primary markers we use when we're looking at human development. We can use this when we're assessing development with our tools, or we can just do a self-assessment. We can ask ourselves the question: how well do I tolerate ambiguity? I'll put this in context.

Let me relate this back to your question about being in relationship and loving with full vitality. If we're really honest with ourselves, often when we experience a loss of intimacy, when we're not able to love something fully, it's because they did something to us that upset our expectations.

To your point, we had a set of rules. They might have been written and explicit, but more often, they're implicit. We have come to expect a certain kind of relationship with a certain person, and when that doesn't happen, we're disappointed and we withdraw ourselves a little bit.

It's a really interesting practice for me, personally, to just - how can I say this - the practice of not being disappointed. To let human beings be as unpredictable as they actually are; to let life be as unpredictable as it actually is, and to hold my stories about how people ought to be and how life ought to be, to hold those a little bit lighter.

As we do that, what we find is that some relationships, and sometimes life, will challenge us. It will bring up a lot of intensity of emotion in our bodies, and we can actually just let that happen, too. We don't have to fight it. We don't have to struggle against it. We can just stay with it.

As we practice just letting things be what they are, and letting them inform us, we learn to tolerate ambiguity much better. As we tolerate ambiguity better, we find we're a lot less disappointed in people we love and just joyful when they're present in our lives.

DR. KEESHA: This is so important. I think it's been the greatest teaching that my four children have given me - it's the pearl of parenthood in my head - the ability to release from expectations, because I really believe that all unhappiness, no matter what, is from unmet expectations.

People don't behave the way you expected them to. You didn't perform in the way that you expected yourself to. Mother Nature didn't behave in the way you expected - it's raining instead of sunny. Whatever is going on, you had an expectation that didn't get met. It's interesting.

I realized this with my parents, looking back at them as I was becoming a parent and saying "Oh my goodness, how do I make sure that I can keep my kids from having certain kinds of expectations of me, to be a perfect parent, the way that I did to my parents?"

I realized I held my parents into this Norman Rockwell painting. They did not match it, therefore, they were not very good parents in certain ways for me. They were too authoritarian. I was the first child, yada, yada, yada, I had a whole story around it.

When I became a parent, I started realizing my expectations were unrealistic. I hadn't accepted what was real and in front of me. I had this fantasy thing that I held up and I wanted everyone to follow the fantasy, to live up to the fantasy rather than what was actually real in front of me. I was the common denominator in every ounce of unhappiness I ever experienced. I was there every time.

THOMAS MCCONKIE: Yeah, there you go. Beautiful. As you say that, I'm just brought back to this very basic quality of acceptance. By acceptance I mean our ability at a very deep level - this is deeper than even the personality, where we do all of our thinking, and all of our hoping, and what we like and don't like - there's a quality of acceptance in our awareness where we can actually just let life be what it is.

That doesn't mean we're passive about life. That doesn't mean we're not deeply engaged and pursuing our dreams. It means we're not living in denial. It means we're really just eyes wide open, heart wide open, present to what's happening in life, letting life inform us, and responding to it in that way. To the extent that we can really embody this quality of acceptance, as you're pointing to, we're not disappointed anymore, we're just informed by life, and we can respond with wise, compassionate action, you might say.

DR. KEESHA: When you hear someone complaining about somebody that's on a stage, or an armchair quarterback - now that's an interesting dynamic that happens! - one of the things that I'll usually remark to myself, or to my students, is "Okay, that person has taken a step to be on that stage, or to be on that football field, or that basketball court, or whatever it is. They're full-out playing. You as the spectator get to witness whatever it is about this person that maybe you would not want to emulate in your own life because they're being teacher for you. They're being a mirror for you. Take that and say "Okay, how do I play 110% the way this person is playing?" Be actively engaged instead of just complaining about the way other people are doing it."

THOMAS MCCONKIE: Yeah, absolutely. It's a beautiful reminder to me, to all of us, I think.

DR. KEESHA: I just think a lot of disease and discontent and distress comes from observing people doing something that you don't like, and you want to complain about it instead of actively learning from it. Having them be a really wonderful role model for you, in one direction or the other, and then going and playing your game. Getting on the court and doing it.

THOMAS MCCONKIE: Beautiful. That is exactly what I mean by this quality of acceptance. Just letting life inform us and teach us, and then getting out there and giving it our all. I love it.

DR. KEESHA: When I talk about radical acceptance and detaching from expectations, I have women say to me "So I'm supposed to just sit around and accept that my husband swears at me, or is abusive?"

You already addressed this by saying you don't just passively live your life, but I want to make the point again. Anything that falls in that abusive behavior bucket - no. You don't just accept that, right? That's where I said you compassionately have a boundary.

THOMAS MCCONKIE: Yeah.

DR. KEESHA: I just want to bring that point up, because we're not saying that.

THOMAS MCCONKIE: Right. Let the record show, Keesha. You'd better start saying that. No, I mean, it's a paradox. You love with words when you try to point to this, but clearly, this deep acceptance is the most active thing we can possibly do. It vitalizes our every action and our response to life.

To take your scenario, let's say we're in an abusive relationship. To accept that doesn't mean to lie down and be the doormat and get walked all over. It means to not live in denial, to really allow the pain of this situation to inform us, which will drive us to right action, which will drive us to a deeply intelligent response.

DR. KEESHA: Right.

THOMAS MCCONKIE: And packed into that formula there's a requirement that we'd be willing to experience pain. I find that's a hard practice, when we're working on cultivating this quality of radical acceptance. A lot of life really hurts. So to just be able to be present to the pain, and to allow the pain to inform our behavior, rather than distort our behavior, is another really key distinction.

DR. KEESHA: Not numbing out in the presence of it, as you're saying, being willing to feel it. If you're going shopping, or you're addicted to porn, or you're using drugs or alcohol or television to numb out, or any number of things that can distract you, then you're not going to stay present to galvanize yourself to take right action in the scenario.

One of the things I was saying earlier is you have to know what people are really good for. Where they are in their own developmental level, and their willingness - this word, to me, is the most important word in the English language, beyond integration - is just your willingness to be okay with taking a great, hard look at what's going on in front of you instead of avoiding.

THOMAS MCCONKIE: Yeah, absolutely. I love what you're saying, Keesha.

DR. KEESHA: Alright. We went off on one direction of loving with full vitality, but what are some of the things that cause relationship dissatisfaction between two people? It can be some big things. John Gottman would say 69% of things inside of a relationship are unsolvable, but I would say a lot of them are the daily, little things too.

Like, in my own case, my husband leaves his coat on the dining room table, doesn't push his chair in, doesn't take his dishes away from where the computer is. There'll be three meals worth of dishes - if I've been at work and he's been working from home - all of them will be by the computer when I get home. He just really doesn't notice his environment. He can just work in anything; he's sort of like an absent-minded professor.

One day, I noticed my irritation every day about this, and I thought "Wow, this isn't really good for you." This causes inflammation and it's actually not a great barometer for a life well lived. So I looked at that coat on the dining room table and I thought "The day that his coat is gone, is the day my husband is dead. The day that I'm not looking at the sesame seeds and coconut oil on my kitchen counter means he hasn't prepared a meal in that day. And I will miss him so desperately when that happens." So I thought these are signs of life around me and that was the shift of radical acceptance.

THOMAS MCCONKIE: Exactly. Absolutely. That's just beautiful and inspiring, Keesha. I love it.

DR. KEESHA: Or following my children around, when they were toddlers, with Windex as they would smear the mirrors. I would look at the Windex and say "What am I doing? I could spend all day doing this!"

So we're coming to the end of our time, Thomas. What is the last piece of wisdom you would like to leave with our listeners?



THOMAS MCCONKIE: Boy, that time flew by. It's been so pleasant getting to visit with you Keesha. I'd just reiterate this theme that's come up in our conversation: that deep in our being, at the level of true self, where we are alive, we are awake, we are spirit, that part of us can just be. It can be present to what's coming up in life, and we can have the trust to just be present to life, and trust ourselves to respond to it, especially when life is painful and we have a tendency to numb out and to hide from the pain. That's especially when we can be present, when we can accept the current painful circumstances in our lives, and allow something deeper to inform us, and to motivate our next step.

DR. KEESHA: Beautiful. On the Woman's Vitality Summit website, on the speaker's area for Thomas McConkie, we have his URL and how to reach him, and if you'd like to study with him in the program that he teaches at Pacific Integral. Thank you so much Thomas for taking this really short period of time to share a tiny amount of wisdom that you hold. It's been such a pleasure.

THOMAS MCCONKIE: Likewise, Keesha. Thank you so much.

DR. KEESHA: Remember, everybody, to live, love, laugh, keep on learning, and have a fantastic day, until next time.