

Ep 221. A Spiritual Journey with Thomas McConkie



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Jody Moore

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I'm Jody Moore and this is *Better Than Happy*, episode 221, A Spiritual Journey with Thomas McConkie.

This podcast is for people who know that living an extraordinary life is not easy or comfortable. It's so much better than that. This is *Better Than Happy*, and I'm your host, Jody Moore.

Hey, everyone, episode 221, I'm pretty sure, is going to be one of my highest downloads because I have Thomas McConkie to share with you today, the conversation that I had with him a little while ago. So, for those of you who aren't familiar with him or his story, that's okay because we're going to break it all down for you in this conversation.

I just want to thank Thomas for the time that he took. You're going to hear just how thoughtful and still he gets as he speaks to the questions I ask him here, and he has such a fascinating and powerful story about his own journey towards spirituality. I also want to thank his sister Claire for reaching out to me, who is a listener and follower, for connecting us and making this conversation happen.

I know this is going to be really powerful for all of you listening. Please enjoy my conversation with Thomas McConkie. Here we go.

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Jody: Thank you so much for taking the time to come on my podcast, I really appreciate it.

Thomas: Oh yeah, I'm happy to, thanks for the invite, Jody.

Jody: So, I thought, to begin with, if you wouldn't mind just telling people a little bit about you, especially you have a very interesting heritage. A lot of my listeners are members of the church. So just tell us a little bit about you, Thomas, if you wouldn't mind.

Thomas: Well, I do come from Latter-Day Saint stock. I almost said Mormon. I'm trying to work that word out of my lexicon.

[Better Than Happy](#) with Jody Moore

Ep 221. A Spiritual Journey with Thomas McConkie

Jody: Are we allowed to say Latter-Day Saint? That's appropriate? I can't keep up.

Thomas: Oh man, yeah, do you have a style guide handy? How are we going to have this conversation?

Jody: I've looked it up and I think Latter-Day Saint is an appropriate way to describe us, but who knows?

Thomas: Did you say is an appropriate way?

Jody: Yes, it is. That's what we found is that if you're talking about members of the church, to call us Latter-Day Saints is appropriate.

Thomas: Okay. If I don't have Latter-Day Saint, I don't know what I have left to call myself. I come from Mormon stock. My father's side of the family, McConkie, that's my last name, that's the visible one, that's the one you hear. But my mom's father was Joseph B Wirthlin and her mother Elisa, and they were beautiful people, highly influential in my life. And for most of my adulthood, at least, what was it, age six to about age 23 for me my granddad Wirthlin was in the Quorum of the Twelve. So he was a big influence and it was interesting for me to grow up in a family with such different personalities and related into the gospel in very different ways.

I think there's a tendency, sometimes, in different parts of the church, to feel like we need to fit in and look and feel and talk and act and think a certain way. But I just learned in my own home, growing up, that Bruce R and Joseph B were kind of as different as you could be on the general authority spectrum.

Jody: I thought that was so fascinating, when I heard you talk about that. Could you tell people a little bit about what was so different about them?

Thomas: Well, yeah, I mean, Bruce, for example, Elder Bruce R McConkie, he had a really brilliant mind, encyclopedic, and he had an approach to the gospel that was highly detail-oriented. And he was trained as a lawyer, so you could even say there was a kind of legalistic flair to it, like these are the

Ep 221. A Spiritual Journey with Thomas McConkie

laws, principles of the gospel, and we can know them and we should know them and understand them.

And that was a particular approach, whereas my granddad Wirthlin was, as the saying goes, an ordinary Joe. He ran a little company in Salt Lake City. It was a meat purveyor, so they provided local restaurants with meat. It was Wirthlin's Meats. And he was just a really ordinary guy and had a big heart. Even more than had a big heart, he had a profound gift of kindness in my opinion. So he wasn't the guy you went to to clarify highly nuanced gospel questions. Not that he didn't have vast knowledge that way, but to just be in the presence of like a powerful field of kindness, that was a lot of what I experienced with my granddad Wirthlin. So on one hand, I really valued the learning side of the gospel, and through my Wirthlin parents, I valued just the transmission of love and the heart of Christ and it was a beautiful experience to live with them, yeah.

Jody: That's beautiful. It's interesting, I wonder what the dynamic was like for your parents when they got together with two sets of different Backgrounds.

Thomas: That's the really interesting question.

Jody: That's where my mind goes. That must have been messy.

Thomas: Of course. I think it was pretty wild. I think they were very different family cultures. And I think there was some static, you know.

Jody: Which I think we all experience, to a certain extent, when we get married.

Thomas: Exactly. It's interesting, to this day, to hear my parents talk about how their family related to the other family. And it's an eye-opener for how different we are, how much diversity there is within the unity of our body of membership.

Jody: Well I really appreciate just seeing the humanness of our leaders and our apostles and our prophets who we hold in such high esteem and we're

[Better Than Happy](#) with Jody Moore

Ep 221. A Spiritual Journey with Thomas McConkie

told over and over again that they are human and imperfect. But it's hard to wrap your head around that. And I heard one of our church leaders recently talk about he and his wife visiting a stake out of town and how they'd gotten into an argument in the car and they had to go into this church meeting and be nice and smile and they were just thinking, it felt a little bit disingenuous or something and that they're human just like us.

Thomas: Yeah, for sure. And, I mean, I grew up with that perspective, just having my grandparents at the dinner table and seeing their flaws day in and day out. So I feel fortunate for that too.

Jody: And so, at one point, as you grew up, you started to feel kind of, if you could describe for us what your experience was as you felt that there was something lacking in the church? I don't know if that's how you would describe it, but...

Thomas: Yeah, I get asked this question a lot so it's always an exercise for me to make it new. Like, this is the first time anyone's ever...

Jody: Some of these people listening have never heard it, so...

Thomas: Yeah, for sure. Well, let me sense into what feels the most true right now. It certainly wasn't this kind of mature spiritual vision of something slacking in the church. I was a kid. I was 13 years old and we were in a new neighborhood and my parents had just stretched, like, spent every penny they could to get into a new house in a new neighborhood. And it's a little teeny bit more uppity than the neighborhood I grew up in, so the cultural shift of being in a new church – and I think, at that age, I felt a little bit kind of excluded and peers my age weren't always nice to me at church.

And it was as simple as, like, I don't feel super great going to church on Sundays. And I did it day in and day out for years, but I think it was finally at a tipping point where – I wrote about this experience in my book, I think, but it just felt like the most unthinkable thought I'd ever had to realize, like I don't have to go to church today. I could just not go. And I kind of looked around, like, is that possible?

Ep 221. A Spiritual Journey with Thomas McConkie

Jody: Did anyone hear me?

Thomas: It was innocent. I'm grateful for that moment because it became very formative for me because it initiated a struggle. And we all go through this in our own way, I think. But for me, it initiated a struggle of having to get real about what I care about and what do I love and where do I put my heart?

Jody: Yeah, and when you talk about being 13, I have two children right now who are right around that age, you know, that's middle school age, it's such a challenging age, I feel like, where you are starting to think some thoughts like that, that you haven't thought before, and yet you're still navigating who am I and what do I believe, and so is everyone around you. It's a big mess, and yet a beautiful experience that we all need to have, but kind of a messy one.

Thomas: Yeah, for sure. It was particularly messy for me. I think it was in our family, the other kids seemed to like – their mess was a little bit more contained. My mess tended to be kind of spewing into 10 directions.

Jody: Yeah, okay, and what happened at that point? You stopped going to church?

Thomas: It was a little bit of a battle of wills. And I look back on this and my heart just kind of opens up and softens every time I talk about this now because, at the time, it was just this bitter conflict in the house. And I look back on it now and I think, okay, from my perspective, I was just really trying to exercise my convictions and agency.

From my parent's point of view, I'm a 13-year-old kid, I don't know anything and they want me to be safe and they want me to grow up with correct principles that are going to make for a happy life. So we just struggled against each other. The more they tried to make a case for going to church, the more I felt kind of coerced to go to church, the less I wanted to have anything to do with it. It was a standoff. It was a protracted long drawn out standoff.

Ep 221. A Spiritual Journey with Thomas McConkie

Jody: And you're so glad you get to keep retelling this story over and over, right?

Thomas: Well, I'm grateful now that I am on the other side of it. At some point, my parents and I, I think they would agree with this if they were right here talking with us right now, that we kind of exhausted each other. We wore each other out and we just said there's got to be a better way. We'd lost our relationship as parents and son. And what's the gospel for if it's not helping us deepen our bonds with family?

We were battle-weary, and I'm grateful for that exhaustion. It's become a really powerful principle and spiritual lesson for me in life that when God has a plan for us, God is willing to let us exhaust ourselves doing what we think we need. Because eventually, we'll wear ourselves out and when we collapse in exhaustion, something deeper in us that's more willing to go the way that we're meant to go actually goes that way.

And I feel that way in the gospel. Like, when I had exhausted myself thoroughly and I was just totally relaxed, I could feel something again. I could actually feel how much I cared about the church, which was shocking to me. And it was so obvious to me how much I loved Christ and how much that power and love had been present in my life all along. So I feel pretty lucky.

Jody: How long was it before you got to that point of exhaustion and felt that?

Thomas: My parents and I, it was about 15 years. Like, I remember my late 20s, my parents and I went out to dinner, which we never do, so I knew this was like peace talks between nations. We're meeting in Doha or something. We go a restaurant and we just talk about, like, let's pick up the pieces here. And I knew, at that point, when I was engaging my parents that personally, that I was also simultaneously engaging church again and had to open myself up to those questions that were difficult to ask, even in my late 20s. Like oh no, what kind of relationship so I have with the church

Ep 221. A Spiritual Journey with Thomas McConkie

and do I have with Christ? And it was still several years after that before I was ready to kind of dip my toe back in, actually attending.

Jody: Okay, so during that time when you left the church, I know you sort of explored a lot of other belief systems and gained a bunch of knowledge and experience. Can you talk a little bit about that and how that's impacted you?

Thomas: Yeah, for sure. I explored a lot of belief systems, but it was the Buddhist tradition particularly that, from the day, literally from the day I encountered it, it just became an aspect of devotion in my life. And I'm going to tell this a little bit anachronistically, meaning I'm going to tell this story to you from the point of view of right now, as opposed to maybe how I was thinking about it when I was 18 years old.

But as I look back on that experience of being outside of the church for – I'd been out of the church for five years at that point. I'm a teenager. I'm a mess. I don't know what's what, but I knew enough that when I moved out to go to college, it's just like something is missing profoundly in my life. It felt like I just had a hole in my heart.

And I happened to move into a neighborhood where there was this really vibrant order of Zen Buddhism and really kind teachers who were more than willing to teach me how to meditate.

Jody: What city were you living in at the time?

Thomas: This was Salt Lake City.

Jody: Salt Lake City, Zen Buddhism, who knew?

Thomas: This was the capital of Zen Buddhism outside of Japan in the late 90s.

Jody: Wow, I didn't know that.

Thomas: Yeah, no one knows that. I didn't know that.

Ep 221. A Spiritual Journey with Thomas McConkie

Jody: I missed it. I was in Salt Lake then. Darn it.

Thomas: How did you miss it?

Jody: How did I miss it?

Thomas: It was still a well-kept secret, I mean, but it was a big presence. And the teachers really took me under their wing and taught me how to meditate. And this is where – I remember the first time I consciously sat in meditation, kind of like, okay, I'm going to sit on the floor and I'm not going to go anywhere or do anything or read anything for the next 30 minutes. And I remember being so struck, closing my eyes, and just feeling this sense of spaciousness open up.

But it wasn't an empty spaciousness, it was like a field of spiritual presence. Like when we read in the D&C about the light that's in and through all things, it was this experience, like, okay there's this buzzing tingling aliveness and divine light all in us and through us. And just sitting still and closing my eyes, I was plugged into it, you know, like a light into a socket.

And like you know, it was years before I was ready to reengage the church formally at that point. But from the first day I practiced sitting still, I've never missed a day, practically. It's been over 20 years. And that was really – I look back on that with so much gratitude because that stillness was a spiritual lifeline for me and it kept this portal of spiritual receptivity open between, I would say, me and God. And it's paved the way for good things. And I'm relatively young still. I hope there are better things to come of that.

Jody: That's a beautiful experience. So when you say that you, prior to this, felt that something missing, that hole in your heart that you described, do you think it was spirituality that was missing? Was it a connection with God? What was it?

Thomas: Yes, all I want to say is that I want to be slow to name it. I almost can't even name what was missing, you know what I mean? But what we

Ep 221. A Spiritual Journey with Thomas McConkie

get through spiritual practice and religious devotion and worship, all of that was missing. And maybe more than anything, what was missing was my own willingness and intention to completely free up the bandwidth of my awareness for a set time every day and just welcome God into my life more deeply, so just a conscious practice of making a relationship with the divine. And I felt hungry. I was starving at that age.

Jody: A moment of quiet to allow for that even?

Thomas: Right.

Jody: So many of us are missing that.

Thomas: It's tough, I mean, this was over 20 years ago, and now, this has become my fulltime work, helping people really learn to get their legs in this new territory of darkness and stillness and silence where this divine light reveals itself to us. But I think it's harder than ever. I mean, I'm amazed at what the world's becoming and acknowledging it can be just to find stillness.

Jody: And I want to have you share in a minute what it is you do and help people with, but first, I'm wondering if you could kind of share – I mean, I know that you did, like you said, more formally engage with the church again. What is your view at this point in terms of your understanding of the doctrine we practice and what you've learned and what you practice in your meditation?

Sometimes even in my work of helping people understand their brains – and what I do is much more in the head and it's a more logical linear process than what I hear you describe. But sometimes, I have people saying to me, "Why didn't I learn this at church?" Or, "Why isn't this in the scriptures?" And I always think, well it is, it's just in different wording and a different way. But do you feel like there are things that you've gained and things that you understand now that – I don't want to say missing from the doctrine. But how do you sort of not feel like, well these are the

Ep 221. A Spiritual Journey with Thomas McConkie

philosophies of men, or other types of things that – I get those questions a lot.

Thomas: No, I'm really glad you're asking that question. It's one that I get a lot as well because we don't teach meditation class yet in a church setting, although that's even changing. I've been doing professor training at Brigham Young University for two years on mindfulness and these kinds of approaches. So it's not as though the institution is holding it at arm's length.

But I would say I'm particularly grateful to Elder Bednar in his last general conference address in April, he named something that I think people have been thinking about for a long time. And he said we should not expect the church, as an organization, to teach or tell us everything we need to know and do to become devoted disciples and endure valiantly to the end and expect the church to teach and tell us how to do everything.

In other words, it's time to stand on our own two feet. And if we know correct principles, you know, through our participation in the gospel, then we should know the taste of the fruits. And if the fruits of a particular practice or, you know, if it's a person that we feel called to engage with or a book or anything, we know by the taste of it if this is in line with our principles, if it can help us. So I am really appreciative that a general authority has really proactively named that and said, go out there and you're unique and your path of salvation will be unique as well. And none of us have the exact same path.

Jody: Yes, that's exactly what – I did a podcast episode called Good Fruit, but you said it a little more eloquently than myself.

Thomas: That was Elder Bednar.

Jody: Okay, well Elder Bednar said it very well. But I do think that there's so many resources and people with amazing experiences and tools that, if the fruit is of God, and we know that all things that are good are of God – and those are individual decisions that we all have to make. It's not to say that my work is for everyone or that your work is for everyone. But what is

Ep 221. A Spiritual Journey with Thomas McConkie

the fruit that it's producing in your life and is it Christ-like. And if so, it's of God.

Thomas: That's what I'm saying. So will you indulge me in a brief story here?

Jody: Yes, please.

Thomas: I have a flair for storytelling but I joke – when people ask me about my path back to the church – I joke that, like, there was a missionary who converted me back. And this missionary was a 103-year-old Zen Master. And I was practicing with him...

Jody: Was he in, like, a 20-year-old body or this is just...

Thomas: He was literally a 103-year-old Zen Master. So the story has got a hook. I had been practicing with him for a couple of years and there was just something about him. I met him, like, there's something here. And a couple of years into our relationship with him, I had this experience that I can't even put words to until today, but those moments where something changes in you, something shifts and you're just aware of what you're for, what this life is all about.

And I remember – this was in California – and that night, I had met with this teacher, I came home and was kind of in a daze. And a few days later, Sunday rolled around, and for the first time in 20 years, I just kind of suited up, put on a shirt and tie and said, "I'm going to see what's happening at church this morning."

And I was totally confused, totally confused. Probably five years after that, I learned that this Zen teacher had been studying Christianity with Father Thomas Keating for 10 years. They had a deep relationship. And this Zen Master was so interested in Jesus. And in his talks, he would pepper in these bits of talk about Christ, which is very unusual for a Zen teacher. And I didn't make too much of it at the time. And in hindsight, I look back and

Ep 221. A Spiritual Journey with Thomas McConkie

that relationship with a really old Japanese guy was my direct path back into a relationship with Christ.

Jody: Wow.

Thomas: And it's to say, like, none of us know. None of us know how our conversion is going to unfold, but we know when something just feels good right down to our bones. My experience is when it feels good down to our bones, if we take steps in that direction, way leads to way and God is good and God is grand and the path is assured if we're faithful.

Jody: That's beautiful. Wow, that's a very cool story. I wanted to ask you a couple of things. So, first of all, a lot of my listeners, or I should say some of my listeners, have children or other loved ones who are questioning the church. And some of them are on a journey and may return, and some of them may not. And I'm just wondering if you have any advice, being kind of in the position you're at now, for anyone who loves someone who is seeming like they're taking their own path?

Thomas: Yeah, this is a tender question because I am not yet a parent. I hope to be soon. But I've been on the other end of this where I'm the child and the parents and the siblings and the community is worried about me. I have a sense of how painful it was to be on that side of the relationship. And talking to my parents, I have a sense of how painful it is for them. So I just want to acknowledge how high the stakes are in these situations.

And because the stakes are high, I think there's a tendency to be fearful about the outcome. What I'm about to say, to the extent that it's helpful, I hope it is, and of course, people can fully ignore it if it doesn't connect to them, but one of the most powerful experiences I've had in this area is that when people, like my parents for example, when they just fully commit to the goodness of their own religious devotion and trust that they're attending their meetings and serving in their callings and attending the temple, whatever their particular practice is, to just trust that the goodness that comes from that activity will influence me, influence us, influence the whole body of the church, that good things happen.

Ep 221. A Spiritual Journey with Thomas McConkie

And what I find gets us into trouble is the tendency to want to really steer someone's path, particularly the timeline. I think my parents would have strongly preferred 20 days over 20 years. But it turned out to be 20 years. And what about the parents who are raising a kid who that particular person won't come around in 20 years. What if it's more like 2000 years?

2000 years in the scope of the eternities is the blink of an eye. But I think we're so accustomed to thinking in terms of human years that we justify getting really impatient. So I say play the long game. Earthly life is short, human life is long, as I understand it, and to really trust the fruits of your own love and devotion and that that will trickle down and trickle up and bless everybody in your life. That's some of my experience with it.

Jody: Excellent, well said. So your book, which you briefly mentioned, is it still available?

Thomas: Yeah, it's out.

Jody: Where can we get a copy of it?

Thomas: For all intents and purposes, I assume most of your audience is around the country and perhaps around the world. So we have a website that we created about five years ago called Mormon Stages. You can look at mormonstages.com and order the book. Or I have to say this secondly, amazon.com, you can find it there, that's an easy place to pick it up.

Jody: Okay, and it's called Navigating a Mormon Faith Crisis?

Thomas: Navigating Mormon Faith Crisis. And one thing, I don't know how much we need to talk about the book, but I will say, my wife and I did this book as a passion project because we had so many friends who felt estranged and alienated from the church. So we chose this title as emergency medicine for the people who needed it the most. But one of the most common responses to the book is this isn't a book about faith crisis. This is a book about development and the transformations of faith and what spiritual growth looks like throughout a lifetime.

Ep 221. A Spiritual Journey with Thomas McConkie

So I would emphatically say that it's not just for people in faith crisis. It's to get some insight into how does spiritual growth unfold in different phases of our life.

Jody: Because to me, it's exciting to think that, whether or not I'm going through a faith crisis, I have the opportunity to have these powerful experiences that you've had and that there is, like you said, further development available and that is maybe even part of our purpose here on Earth.

Thomas: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, when I was in my mid-20s, a meditation teacher of mine introduced me to the study of development. And the moment I learned about developmental psychology, I realized this is the doctrine of ongoing progression. This is the psychological description of how we become more and more sanctified, more and more selfless, more and more service-oriented.

I was just so taken by this area of knowledge that I thought – I mean, this was way back a long time ago, I thought this could help so many people if we realize that we're just in process, every one of us is in process.

Jody: For some reason, I feel like maybe it's just me, but there's this mindset that, of course, children are developing and teenagers and adolescents are developing. But then we hit that mid-20s or 30s and suddenly we think we should be good at everything and we should know everything and we should stop making mistakes. And that makes no sense at all.

Thomas: No, and it's not just you. I mean, most of popular understanding is along those lines because we see kids grow. From one month to the next they put on pounds and height, you know, inches...

Jody: Some of us adults too, but...

Thomas: That's another episode, I think.

Jody: That's right.

[Better Than Happy](#) with Jody Moore

Ep 221. A Spiritual Journey with Thomas McConkie

Thomas: To put it into perspective, since developmental psychology got more interested in the adult phases of growth, they've discovered as many stages of growth within adulthood as were previously thought to exist in childhood.

Jody: Oh, that's awesome.

Thomas: It's a whole world here. And for people with eyes to see who recognize the gospel principles, they're really profound and it was a blessing for me to discover it and realize just how exciting spiritual growth can be.

Jody: Yeah, that's awesome. Would you share with people the work that you do at Lower Lights and how people can just learn meditation and all the tools that you teach?

Thomas: Sure, I'd love to. I mean, Lower Lights, again, to kind of help you understand the flow of things, about eight years ago when I moved – I was living in China and I moved home. And people, out of nowhere, just started asking me how to meditate. I was like, okay, we'll meditate. I started meeting people in my living room once a week and we'd just meditate together.

And after a few years of that, a very astute woman in our group, who ended up becoming my wife, she pointed out – you've got to lock that down...

Jody: I love it.

Thomas: But after a few years she's like, do you notice the people showing up for this meditation, they're from the church. They have Latter-Day Saints backgrounds and there's a lot of turmoil in their life and faith and they're looking for answers. And when she said that, it was so obvious and had been staring me in the face for years but I hadn't just been able to say it. And anyway, that's what inspired the book. That was our first kind of gesture. Let's write a book that describes this.

Ep 221. A Spiritual Journey with Thomas McConkie

She illustrated it really beautifully. She's a beautiful artist. And then, after the book came out, people were like, these ideas are so powerful. Is there a way we can gather? Can we get together and practice together? That's where Lower Lights grew from, right?

So Lower Lights is a community. It's not restricted to an LDS audience, but a lot of the people who show up have LDS backgrounds. I think about half of our community is active card-carrying. And the other half, they have a background but they describe themselves as I don't know what's going on kind of thing. But the spirit of it is being anxiously engaged in a good cause and it's looking at new tools and new resources we have for a new upcoming generation of Latter-Day Saints what will it take to really deepen in our faith in this generation.

We know it's going to look different than the former generations. And in my personal life, stillness, just the practice of really getting comfortable sitting still and inviting God's presence into my life, that was a game-changer. And understanding the discreet stages of development, spiritual growth we go through in this life, that was a game-changer. So those are two of the main tools I use to teach and design experiences for the practices for the community. And we meet here Salt Lake and we have meetings online and we get together for retreats and workshops and trainings all over the country, and that's the long and short of it. I've been going on too long about Lower Lights.

Jody: Awesome, where can people go?

Thomas: You can check it out. It's lowerlightswisdom.org.

Jody: Awesome, we'll put that in the show notes for people.

Thomas: Yeah, that would be awesome.

Jody: Okay, well I can't thank you enough for your time, Thomas. I'd love to have you back somewhere down the road.

Thomas: Yeah, I hope you got what you need. I hope it will be a useful...

[Better Than Happy](#) with Jody Moore

Ep 221. A Spiritual Journey with Thomas McConkie

Jody: Oh, I think people will love it, seriously. It's a topic relevant for a lot of my listeners for a lot of different reasons and I appreciate your insight and your experience. So thank you, Thomas. Have a good one.

Thomas: Cool, thanks, Jody. See you.

If you have a question about something you've heard me talk about on this podcast or anything else going on in your life, I want to invite you to a free public call, Ask Jody Anything. I will teach you the main coaching tool I use with all of my clients and the way to solve any problem in your life, and we will plug in real life examples.

Come to the call and ask me a question anonymously or just listen in. Go to jodymoore.com/askjody and register before you miss it. I'll see you there.