

Ep 441: At-One-Ment with Thomas McConkie



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Jody Moore

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I'm Jody Moore and this is *Better Than Happy*, episode 441, At-One-Ment with Thomas McConkie.

This is *Better Than Happy*, the podcast where we study what the healthiest, most successful people in today's world think, feel and do. And we leverage this knowledge to create our best lives. Are you ready, little bird? Let's fly.

Hey there everybody. Welcome to the podcast today. I have had Thomas McConkie on before. Whether you've heard him on my podcast or somewhere else in the world, in my mind, everybody knows Thomas McConkie, but maybe you don't know Thomas McConkie. So let me just briefly explain to you, he's going to introduce himself in a minute here, but he is one of my favorite people to learn from. He is an expert in all things meditation and mindfulness. He has led a really interesting life and been on an interesting path which he'll speak to a little bit in this interview.

And he has a beautiful new book out called *At-One-Ment*. And I just love hearing his insight. He is a deep thinker and a philosopher and a thought leader and a teacher and author and just all amazing things. And I think you're going to love what he has to share here. I love anybody that gives me some alternative ways to think about what are the traditional principles of our religion or just values that we try to live by in general.

And when I say alternative ways, I mean ways that expand me, that make me think deeper about how I'm living my life and why I'm living my life according to these principles. And Thomas is able to bring that out every time I have a conversation with him. So I know you're going to love this conversation with Thomas McConkie. Here we go.

Jody: Thomas McConkie, thank you for joining us. You have been a friend of the podcast. I'm always happy to have you. That's what they say, friend of the show.

Thomas: I love that title. I'm so happy to be a friend of the show, yeah.

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Jody: I consider you a friend here. Okay, so you have a new book out that is of course just beautifully written. You're such an amazing writer and really good with words. I want to just begin with the title of this book because it's not called *Atonement*, it's called *At-One-Ment*. So tell us what this book is about.

Thomas: Sure. Well, I like to be very inclusive in my spirituality and that word can be read any number of ways. The two most popular being atonement and at-one-ment. People or the reader is free to read it however they choose. But I tend to say at-one-ment. And the layout, the lockup on the cover tends to push you into that reading. Because I've found in my spiritual life that the experience of total intimacy with the divine, the experience of becoming one with our spiritual creator, our spiritual source is incredibly meaningful.

And for people who know anything about my background, they know that I got a start as a teenager in Buddhist practice, which for our purposes just means I learned to meditate from a young age. And they really focus on that experience of oneness in Buddhism. Sometime later I kind of turned my gaze back towards the Latter Day Saint tradition that I was raised in. And I was totally blown away, this tradition that I grew up in and love also has a deep reverence for the experience of becoming one with.

We have language all over the place for it in ancient and modern scripture. And my sense that a big reason I wrote the book is because I think had I not accidentally wandered into a Buddhist community from a young age, the experience of oneness, I might have missed it. There's not a blaring neon sign that I'm aware of that tells us, your spiritual life is about learning to become one with all that is, all of creation, all of divine life. It's a little bit hidden. It's a little bit implicit in the tradition.

So the book is all about bringing that forth and just the joy of the fullness of one. It's a concept in our tradition that we read right past the one in it. It's another example, it's right there, but most modern English speaking minds don't see the word and think at one with. So it's one of those little plays.

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Jody: I like it. It's reminding me as you speak about this experience of realizing our connectedness with all that is. Did you ever hear Jill Bolte Taylor's TED talk?

Thomas: It's amazing. It's one of the greats. I get chills just when you say her name.

Jody: I know. And when you talk about that's what we're seeking, but without having the trauma that she experienced that created that experience for her. She has that, it was a stroke, I believe she had. She was able to see that she was one with even she describes being at one with the walls in her house and pure bliss that that feeling was.

Thomas: I'm feeling so much love right now, Jody, and I'm so happy you brought her up because I think that's it. I mean, so right now I'm really looking into these questions in an academic setting. And neuroscientists are some of my favorite people to talk to, not because they have all the answers, but because they understand that our brains, you know this better than most everybody. Our brains dictate so much what our moment to moment experience is like.

And if we pay attention in new ways, for example, you do a lot of work at the level of just what are the thoughts that are dominating people's awareness? If we pay attention to that, we can change our moment to moment perception and experience of who we are. Jill Bolte Taylor gets into the inside well, she has a stroke, but I think the implication of what she's saying is that there is a way in which we can be present.

There's a way in which we can be embodied and be human and have this experience of, I use the word 'intimacy' often. We're one with. We're closer than close. The world is our very body. Our neighbor is our very own being. And even as I say that it should start to ring a bell, yeah, love your neighbor as yourself. When we take that to the next radical level, it's not, love your neighbor a lot, just like you should love yourself a lot. Your neighbor is yourself.

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And in that sense I take the gospel to be this radical invitation to stepping outside of our ordinary everyday identity into something so big and so loving that it would blow the minds of our smaller everyday self. And it's such an adventure and Jill Bolte Taylor nails that in that particular talk. It's so moving to hear her speak about it.

Jody: Yeah. And I do think that the more we can try to understand that, at least in moments, it is moment to moment for me. I remember it then I forget it. But knowing that shifts, I think, for me anyway, the way I think about working on my own self and my own spirituality or health or my even achieving goals, takes it from being a selfish pursuit to almost the way I can best contribute to the common good.

I heard somebody reference recently an experiment that was done where it was sea lions or something that were taking their food down and washing it off in the ocean before they would eat it and it tasted better and it got saltier.

Thomas: I'm starting to salivate as you tell the story, if that's helpful, if that counts for anything. I'm like, "Do I have anything salty in the cupboards right now?"

Jody: I should have looked this up before I started referencing this, but it just came to my mind, it was so cool. So however animals communicate, pretty soon the others started catching on. And eventually they found that these same animals on different continents even began the same practice.

Thomas: That's really wild.

Jody: And it's just this idea that we are even a collective conscience, that as we become more knowledgeable, more gracious and forgiving and confident that it, yes, it impacts us. But it impacts the collective good on a greater scale than I think any of us can understand.

Thomas: Yes, I love that. That rings true to me. I think of again, language from my home tradition, I like to call it. We talk about being a Zion, people of one heart and one mind. And if we're just reading fast and don't slow

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down for that, one mind means we kind of agree with each other. We've got consensus, there's no contention, that's fine. But I think you're pointing to the more radical implication. What if all of humanity is comprised of one mind, and that is God's mind? That changes the stakes a lot.

Jody: Yeah, that's fascinating. I also want to dive into the word 'embodiment'. And I just want to say that it's become quite a popular word for good reason. And sometimes I want to interrupt people and go, "What do you mean by that exactly?" And you really do a beautiful job of addressing it in this book but in the sense of like the book says, our full human divinity. What do you mean by embodiment?

Thomas: I mean something specific. When I talk about embodiment, I mean absolutely everything, that is all things in creation, the entire spectrum of creation. But what that means I make that very concrete in the book. At a human level, we can be embodied at many levels simultaneously or we can be thinly embodied, which most of us would kind of call disembodied, and here's what I mean by that.

In a given moment, like right now, we're two human beings with physical bodies. And if we pay attention to the physical bodies in this moment, we'll see that they're very alive with processes and sensations, information. They're not only communicating with us, but they're expressing their nature. If we're not paying attention to the body, then it just kind of drops off into unconsciousness and it doesn't really have any impact in the moment.

On another level of embodiment that I tend to call the heart in the book. We think of a heart, that's where I feel things, emotions. But the more we go into that subtle level of embodiment in the heart we realize there's this whole world of intelligence and capacity in the heart that's right here, right now. Me and you and everyone listening, the heart is present and available to be used.

But if we're not paying attention and intentionally drawing from that intelligence, just like the body, it'll drop off the map and it will be of no use to us and so on and so forth. So the idea is, the more we can practice not

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only paying attention to the physical body, to the intelligence of the heart, but paying attention from the intelligence of the body, paying attention from the heart, from the mind, from the light of our own awareness, our consciousness.

And when we do that, when we pay attention from more of ourselves, we have the experience of fullness. We have the experience of full embodiment and again, oneness, because the more embodied we are, the more one we are with all that we are. So I have a dog, my dog constantly reminds me, my dog is just her body, that's what she is. She's this living, breathing organism that's not lost in her thoughts all day like me and many of us. So there's this call back into a fuller embodiment in my body.

So the practice of embodiment is really, it's not only a practice of embodying more of our own fullness. But as we embody our own fullness, we start to resonate with the fullness of everything, the animal kingdom, the plants, the mountains, the rivers and all that mystical stuff.

Jody: And that's really the true experience of being alive. That's why I call this podcast *Better Than Happy* because it's happy, feels like such a simple, temporary, fleeting moment. But that kind of what you're describing feels more like joy, that it's not about any particular circumstance even. It for me, sneaks up on me unexpectedly, those moments of this is what it's like to be alive in a beautiful way. And then it is also fleeting but I think that's the goal. I think that's what we're seeking more of those kind of experiences.

Thomas: I think so. And I mean if the listeners haven't noticed by now, book *At-One-Ment*, there's a heavy emphasis of the gospel. And one of my favorite kind of, it sounds almost sacrilege to call it a one liner, but when Jesus says, "I am come that they would have life and that they would have it more abundantly." The gospel's about life abundant, it's about better than happiness, it's this invitation to become more.

Jody: One of the things I love that you addressed and I'm wondering if, I have a couple of questions. Let me see if they fit together. I'm curious as to

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your thoughts about why, I don't know if it's more prevalent today than it was in my grandparents' generation. But it feels like we've distanced ourselves, we remove ourselves from our body more frequently. I feel we have more escapes, more easy buttons, more distractions, more buffers.

But also you talk about vulnerability in this book, really inhabiting your vulnerability and embracing vulnerability. And I also love that you said, though, that being aware of the knowledge that we get in our hearts is not just about experiencing negative emotions and pain. It's not the same as processing pain. So that was five questions at once, but what are your thoughts about where we're at emotionally in our mental health and how that's impacting our ability to experience this at-one-ment?

Thomas: That is a good series and set of questions. I'm trying to find the mid.

Jody: Sorry, you just take whatever you want.

Thomas: No, it's good. It's intuitive. I'm just sensing into that cluster there. Vulnerability feels like a really important way to understand embodiment, because if we just, what you just said, I agree with. We're a digitized, overstimulated generation. We're disembodied in that we don't just spend as much time luxuriating in the physical body as I think former generations have. But if we just talk about it like that and get down on ourselves for being disembodied, where's the hope in that? Show me the path. I know I'm disembodied.

I know I'm looking at my social feed all day but show me the way forward. And for me it was really helpful in my own embodiment practice, if you will, to start to really identify the reasons that I disembody. If I'm not inhabiting my body more of the day, why not? There's probably a good reason for it. And I think one of the reasons in my own experience is that to be fully present in and through the body is a really vulnerable act. I can't control, a lot of what's happening I can't control.

Sensations coming up, emotions coming up, interactions with them through the body that leave me feeling exposed and naked and vulnerable. And the

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first thing I tend to do when I feel vulnerable is to kind of go up and out. I tell a story about it. If this person would just start to be this way then I wouldn't have to feel this way. I start to tell stories about why I shouldn't have to have this embodied experience right now. And you are the subject matter expert in this particular domain.

But in the book I point out this vulnerability has a redemptive quality to it. The more intimate we become with our own vulnerability the more able we are to be kind and present and resonant with others' vulnerability. And once again we're back to the same theme of oneness. If I'm one with my own vulnerability, I can stay in my body when I'm very anxious, very disturbed, feeling very exposed. And I develop a kind of confidence that, well, I can stay embodied all the time and look at all these other people who are struggling to stay embodied.

I can be embodied while they're struggling and remind them that they can be this way too. So it's another call to at-one-ment through the portal of the body, if you will. It's been a very meaningful practice for me, not just because it feels better, I think I'm a much happier, more realized human being for that practice. But my sense is it probably has some really significant spiritual implications.

Back to the sea lions, if I embodied somehow that radical activist staying in my vulnerability, it's making all human beings everywhere a little more able to have the courage to stay in their own vulnerability. I believe it really changes the planet when we do it. I can't prove that yet.

Jody: No, I think that's beautiful. Sometimes I'll be coaching a client and it is often, like you said, this chatter in the head. One woman comes to mind and she was hurt by some friends going on a vacation and she didn't get invited and there was hurt feelings, text messages, whatever, and just the back and forth. Because the way I coach is, we're not trying to identify who's right and who's wrong or even what's the right thing to say or do next.

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What I'm trying to get them to understand is in the end we're just a bunch of human beings and we're all a mess at times. And we all have some core fears that sometimes we act from. And when I was able to finally get her to calm down and I said, "It seems to me, clearly you love this friend." And when she acknowledged, "Yes, I do." And I said, "And it seems like your friend is struggling and it seems like you're struggling and it seems like we just have a couple of women here who love each other and are struggling."

And she stopped all the drama and she just started crying. And that's what I feel what you described to us in this book is getting out of the drama of the head and into just, yeah, it's painful at times, but it's also lovable as well.

Thomas: That's right. I love this example. It hits it right on the head for me that I often have this belief that what I'm experiencing right now is too intense, it's too vulnerable, it's too much to experience all of it. And even though I don't know this consciously, I know somewhere in me that if I just think about it a lot and run a story, that that will blunt the intensity of it a little bit for a moment. But the problem with that strategy is that if I'm engaged in that strategy all the time, I'm blunting the intensity of my entire life. It dims the lights on my entire life.

And what I love about the example you just gave is, we all need this. We all need a coach, a mentor, a friend, just someone who loves us and can stay fully present and embodied with us. And it's in a way, the only message that a teacher, a mentor or anyone, gives to us, you can live this fully. You can feel everything you're feeling and it won't destroy you, it will give you life if you trust it. So I felt that shift with you, I love it.

Jody: And that is where, I tell my kids this all the time, I'm like, "I wish this weren't the case." But it's through the really challenging times of life, it's when I'm struggling. It's when life feels hard that I actually feel the spirit the most in my life. I wish I could feel God's love, maybe, I believe it's always there. I just think I don't pay attention to it until I'm really suffering and struggling and that's when I am able to feel it.

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Thomas: And that is a mystery worth stomping on for some, what you just said. Yeah, I feel that, too, why is that? Why do we feel the spirit more in our enhanced vulnerability? There's a correlation here, vulnerability is this incredible opportunity. And we tend to experience most vulnerability in the body. And we tend to have a lot of ingenious avoidance strategies for not feeling more vulnerability in the body. So a big part of the book is kind of laying this out and inviting people through story, through practice to what if you really became more intimate with your own vulnerability, who would you be then?

Jody: And I love the practices you offer. And Thomas has even added some meditations, some QR codes you can scan and get his meditations because it is another way of sort of getting into your body and getting out of the head and into the body. And I love too when you've shared just some of your own experience with learning to meditate and redefining what meditation even is. And I find it all to make it really accessible.

Thomas: I hope so. It's a difficult path. I mean, you know this in your line of work, it's difficult to articulate the territory in general and then to a specific person, people come into the work in different ways. Some things work for some people sometimes. So the book is an attempt to articulate this kind of subtle territory. I think I'll be trying to articulate it the rest of my life in this way or that.

Jody: I wanted to have you also speak to the way you in this book sort of reframed the story of the prodigal son. I want to just preface it before you dive into it. I coach a lot of parents who are worried about their children or just people with loved ones who have chosen to step away from the church. I remember one client in particular, we were talking through what was going on with a couple of her kids. And then she said, "But it's all my kids." She was making it about her, that she had failed as a mother. And I think she had, I want to say she had four kids.

All four of them have left the church. I had this thought for a moment, what if that's actually maybe in coming generations, maybe even with my own kids, maybe that's actually the norm is that most of them will at least

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temporarily leave the church and go on this journey that is not necessarily a bad thing.

Thomas: Yes. I mean, this is a really touching story to me. It's one of those favorites I have in the Canon and the gospel. I grew up hearing the version of the story, which many people will have heard that there are these two sons, their father is infinitely wealthy. The younger son kind of draws down his savings early in life, lives recklessly, comes to regret it, begs for repentance, comes home. And there's this detail at the end where the older brother who did everything right was kind of chapped about it, rightly so and from a certain point of view.

Like, hey, why so much fuss over this kid, he's been a problem child his whole life, and now you're awarding him. That doesn't make sense. And it's true. It doesn't make sense but I love that about the gospel. I think Jesus teaches in stories and parables that kind of jamb our normal circuits, what we think about fairness. When he talks about the laborers in the vineyard and everybody gets paid the same, even though some people worked a fraction of the time, that's not fair.

We kill the fatted calf for the young kid, but the older brother has been obedient his whole life. That's not fair either. But from a different point of view, it's more than fair. It's both just and merciful. That was my windup - I'm just kind of creating the context there. Just the meaning I take from it is I look at both of these sons as human beings like myself, who have walked some path of excess.

The one son, the younger one, walks the path of disobedience. The other son walks the path of, we could say something like hyper obedience. And in the end, I can't help but notice the detail that the younger son comes to himself, he has a realization. And at the end of the story, he's in the banquet hall, whatever that means, it's something like he is in the embrace of the divine, receiving all the gifts the kingdom has for him. And the older brother's outside kind of bitter, working it out.

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And the story I see there is that whether we're chronically disobedient or chronically obedient, there's actually a lack of faith in both of those paths. We think that we're not subject to any such thing as a rule. And if we act as though there are no laws in this cosmos, we'll end up eating corn husks with the pigs. And if we act like obeying every single commandment to the nth degree, will save us and make us safe. That's its own kind of pride and it's still refusing to let something deeper convert, really, truly change our hearts.

I point to that story in the book because I'm reasonably young yet. And I've found in my life that one of the most difficult aspects of the gospel or just spirituality in general is that I'm constantly tempted to tell a story about myself. I'm doing a great job, even better than other people are doing. It's that pride. It's that sense of comparison that creeps in.

And of course, there's room, we need to have a positive sense of self-image, self-esteem. It's not saying we shouldn't speak kindly to ourselves like, "Hey, Thomas, you're doing a great job, keep it up." But at a certain point in spiritual maturity, I've found it to be very helpful for myself to recognize, I don't actually know that I'm doing a better job than anyone else. I'm not actually fit to judge if my life is more pleasing to God than anybody else. All I can do is have faith that I'm doing everything I can.

And I love that about the story of the prodigal son that he comes to himself, and he realizes whatever my ideas were about the good life, they were wrong. And it's my reading in the book that the brother, the story stopped short, but in my world, if that story just went a little farther, the older brother would come to himself as well. And he'd say, "I'm just like you, younger brother, I thought I was going to make my way this way. I thought I would have all the happiness in the world if I controlled the situation through perfect performance."

And in the end, speaking of better than happy, God has much grander plans for us than to just be happy, than to just follow the rules and be unimpeachable on the last day. You have to let go of those small

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judgments about who you are and other people are. So that's a little bit of what I do.

Jody: Yeah, I love that so much. There's external behaviors, but there's an internal motivation which we don't know in other people and our motivations certainly go up and down. And sometimes the performative external may not be as powerful of a spiritual experience for someone as a journey that is an internal transformation. And how we all end up on that journey is different. It reminds me also of Joseph Campbell's work around *The Hero's Journey*, that's amazing, but it's an external conquering of demons and overcoming challenges and winning in the end.

But there's a woman named Maureen Murdock who wrote a book called *The Heroine's Journey*, that is meant to be a complement to *The Hero's Journey*. And neither one is about male or female. It's about an external versus internal experience. And in *The Heroine's Journey*, at one point, the heroine realizes that she goes out there and slays the dragon and does the things and realizes that she still has an emptiness inside and then goes on an internal journey and experience.

And I just think that to your point, that internal transformation can be available by being obedient. I'm not saying disobedience is the only way there.

Thomas: Of course, of course.

Jody: But it's a messy, complicated process. I look at my own kids and of course I only want them to make good choices and be happy. That would be my first choice but I also know that's not why they're here on Earth. That their true transformation is going to come sometimes by choices they make that are going to pain me to watch and yet it shouldn't be any other way. It is, it's so touching in the prodigal son. I'm always touched by the father going out to the son, seeing him come home.

It says that he saw him from afar and he runs out to him as though he's watching out of the window, waiting. And I like to think he was just as

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attentive to his son that was there, but that he either way, he embraces both sons.

Thomas: Yeah. I agree, that detail is beautiful in his own way. In the story itself I think there's evidence that the father is ministering to each son in the way that is needed. He's speaking and interacting with each son in the way that they need for their heart to break open. I'm so glad you brought up the prodigal son and I'm just feeling the parents in this conversation.

And what I would say about the prodigal son and my sense of it and what it attempts to express in the book, is that we're held in God's love and that love is never coercive, but gravitationally pulling on us, persuading us gently. God plays a long game and that gravity pulls on our hearts over the eons. And my sense, this is my story but I believe we're all doing better on the path than we often believe.

Jody: I think so too, yeah.

Thomas: No thanks to us.

Jody: No thanks to us. Are there any other final thoughts you want to leave with anyone? I highly recommend this book, you can get it on Amazon, anywhere books are sold, I presume?

Thomas: I don't know where it's on. It's on Amazon, I know that.

Jody: It's on Amazon, we know it's there. Any other final thoughts you want to leave with us today, Thomas?

Thomas: One of the themes in the book, one of the themes of my life is that what we call myself, ourself, what we call the self is immense. It's a mystery. And we all seem to be in this process of growth and maturation. And the fullness of the self is fuller than we can imagine. And the invitation of the book is to risk stepping into even more of that fullness, even as it's very unfamiliar territory, even if it feels vulnerable and intense and uncertain. There's a goodness in it. There's a goodness to life itself.

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There's a goodness in ourself that we can trust and it's a great adventure to trust that.

Jody: Yeah, I've been thinking about that concept a lot lately of, I kind of simplify it into my own language of, if I were to just be the Jodiest Jody like me and not like Jody-lite. Could people handle it? Would I really be rejected or would it be as bad as my brain thinks it would be? And then it begs the question, who is that? What is that? And that I don't even know and that it's dynamic and it's changing and evolving.

Thomas: Yeah, I love it. I love it because you're already so Jody, but I'm imagining Jody or Jody. And I'm back to the sea lions now. If you're a Jody or Jody, then that will naturally bring out the Tommy or Thomas [crosstalk]. There's something really good about that and I want to live in that world where there's a Jody or Jody and I can be [crosstalk].

Jody: Yeah, that's the goal and to figure out who that is. So we'll keep working on that. Everyone go get Thomas' new book and thank you so much for all the amazing work you're doing in the world, Thomas.

Thomas: Thanks for having me on, Jody. It was really fun to talk with you.

Coaching changed my life and I've watched it change the lives of thousands of men and women since, but is it right for you? You'll only know by giving it a try. Try it out today at jodymoore.com/trial.