

Michael Roesslein:

We're live with another episode of Rebel Health Spotlight. I'm your host, Michael. I am excited about this one. I'm here with my friend and one of my teachers, Prema McKeever. Prema, thank you for being here.

Prema McKeever:

Thanks for having me, Michael.

Michael Roesslein:

Yeah, this is going to be fun. I've been excited, in this series of interviews that we're doing, I have brought on a number of my teachers from the various trainings that I've completed in the last four or five years, because this audience has heard me talking about these trainings and what I've been through and what I've gone through. But I hadn't actually brought anybody front and center to speak about it from the other side, to share what the work is like and what people can really expect if they take the dive and start working on this side of healing, as I often call the two sides, which we're now trying to blur the lines between. We usually start these where I just ask somebody who you are and what you're currently doing in the world. You can start with what your work currently is, and then I'm going to backtrack a little bit and figure out how we got there.

Prema McKeever:

Sure. So yes, my name is Prema, obviously. I'm a somatic therapist. I live in Vancouver, Canada. What I do, I'm part of the faculty for the Biodynamic Breathwork and Trauma Release Institute. That's how we got to meet. And then I'm also a facilitator of a process called Path of Love, which is a seven-day full-on transformational process that does a lot of work around trauma healing. I'm also heavily involved in the somatic experience in community here in Vancouver.

Michael Roesslein:

Great. Somatic experiencing, for those who don't know, is another modality. It's probably the biggest or most well-known modality for trauma healing, founded by Peter Levine, who's one of the, I don't know, I don't even need to use the Mount Rushmore equivalent because of the history there, but he's on the board for most well-known trauma authors and experts and pioneers. But that's not how you started. And so I'm curious, where'd you get started in overall wellness?

Prema McKeever:

Sure. Yeah, it actually started when I was quite young. I was 19 or 20 when I started actually as a bodyworker. I started training in Shiatsu and loved it and studied Shiatsu and ortho-biotomy and a few other bodywork modalities. But then I quickly realized that my own body's not going to be able to handle this when I'm 50 years old or something, and so I went on to acupuncture school. I finished that and graduated as an acupuncturist when I was in my mid-twenties in San Francisco. And then I had a practice in San Francisco for a long time, and then Dallas, Texas where I used to live. And then from there I got exposed to a lot of other different modalities, including somatic experiencing and Hakomi, which is something else I've trained in, a beautiful body oriented way of psychotherapy. And things just kept evolving from there based on what I was finding out for myself. I would explore something and notice the difference in me and then get very curious about it and decide to follow that path.

Michael Roesslein:

Interesting. Hakomi is beautiful. Gabor, during my Compassionate Inquiry training, he had a couple workshops with... I don't remember who, but somebody from Hakomi came on and did workshops for the Compassionate Inquiry like students. And then they asked for volunteers to do film sessions for some of their trainees, so I volunteered to get some free sessions to have them filmed to be used as part of the training. It was one of the trainers that did the sessions. It's like a mindfulness based form of therapy was my experience of it, but it was really sweet and it unfolded in a very gentle, natural way, the sessions. It was very unforced is my experience of it.

But I'm curious, acupuncture, bodywork, those are hands-on. I know that there are trauma related, emotional related, mental related benefits of having bodywork and doing acupuncture, but most people, at least in the States, go see a bodyworker or an acupuncturist because something physically hurts usually. They have some kind of pain or they have some kind of physical health problem. Whereas, somatic experiencing and Hakomi, those are trauma therapies that use speaking and body awareness and somatic therapy. So I'm curious, did you make that jump because you were doing that work and found it super transformational and then you were like, "Well, I want to do this. I want to teach this."? Because that's what happened to me.

Prema McKeever:

Yeah, it's similar to that. What's interesting is that I was working with trauma the whole time as an acupuncturist but I didn't know it, because I was working with chronic health conditions, syndromal conditions, things like that. At that time, it wasn't understood the link between particularly early childhood experiences that left a dysregulation in the nervous system and how that then impacts as we grow up and influences our health later on in life. And so I was working with all of these type of conditions, chronic pain, all of it, not knowing that there was a trauma component to it. It wasn't until probably, gosh, a good 10 years into my practice. Because in my training in my master's program, the word trauma I don't think was ever mentioned except for whiplash. This is what you do when somebody walks in with whiplash.

Michael Roesslein:

I have a master's in physiology and it was only mentioned as far as you get hit by a car.

Prema McKeever:

Exactly. Exactly. And then about 10 years into my practice, I started learning about SE and Hakomi and got introduced to trauma. And then I was like, "Okay, what is this exactly?" But I still didn't quite know because the connection wasn't really explained because then it was seen as this mental thing, it's when you have depression or anxiety. So still the link wasn't completely understood at that time. And then it got connected into breathwork with BBTRS, and that's when the link started to become more obvious. Started diving more into it, and then in the SE training really made it clear.

What really made the difference was my own body. I'm covering the layers of freeze, the layers of disconnection that was in my own system that I had never even really been aware of because it was just the way I thought I was. And so with that work and then with the work of Path of Love, which brought it much more into the emotional component for me, I really started to see what was happening in myself. And that dramatically changed then how I work with people.

Michael Roesslein:

Beautiful. My experience has been quite similar. While you came from acupuncture and bodywork, mine was in exercise physiology. I was an over-educated fitness trainer. I worked with athletes, but then I left to work with deconditioned people to help them be able to recover after surgery and get back to being able to walk

upstairs and things. But I also was never trained about trauma at all. And then I got into functional medicine and nutrition and all of this, and I still didn't understand at all. I started to go through the work like you myself, but I also didn't piece it together right away. I started to believe that my anxiety, that one that I had anxiety, that's a strange realization when you figure that out at 35, that, oh, not everybody's like this. This isn't my normal state of this isn't normal. I don't know why I use the word normal, but that this is a thing and I've been doing this, this, this and this to make it so I'm not nervous all the time. Realizing that at thirty-five is cool.

And then I started to believe that trauma could play a role in that, but it never occurred to me that some of the clients I was working with who have autoimmune diseases, who have chronic pain conditions, who have fibromyalgia, who have all of these health problems that don't report anxiety, that don't report to me depression, or at least they're not seeing me for that, they're seeing me for the other things because we compartmentalize these two separate things, I didn't put it together either until my wife got really sick. She has multiple autoimmune conditions, and we went down the we're trying everything and it's not working. And then I found Gabor's books, Dr. Gabor Mate. The Body Says No I read. I was like-

Prema McKeever:

Yes, that's a great book.

Michael Roesslein:

"Oh, shit, this also does this." And so you mentioned earlier dysregulated nervous system from childhood trauma, so I'm curious, that's something this audience knows about, dysregulation of the nervous system, and understands how that can keep the immune system in a activated state or whatever. So when that started to overlap for you and you started to realize like, "Oh, wow, this is all related and there's no two sides of this." What we would consider emotional trauma is absolutely linked to physiological dysfunctions and problems, which in acupuncture probably shows up like blocked energy channels.

Prema McKeever:

Heart blood, heart chi, heart disturbances, yes. [inaudible 00:09:47] stagnation.

Michael Roesslein:

When you started to mix all these together, when you started to work with people more with the trauma side of things, what kind of physical differences have you seen in yourself or in other people as you've been doing this work or teaching this work that someone who's not down the rabbit hole yet might not think about? Like, "Oh, if I go do trauma work or somatic therapy or I go to an emotion-based retreat or I find a place where I'm able to express grief that I've held my whole life or these kind of things..." Aside from the mental side, just the physical differences in their body or in their way their body works or functions, what have you seen?

Prema McKeever:

Yeah, so I'll use myself as an example. I appreciate you saying in your mid-30s discovering you have anxiety and not knowing that was a thing. I remember in my late 20s, I was already an acupuncturist and I was on a walk with a good friend of mine who was a 30-year-plus PhD psychotherapist. I remember describing to him like, "Yeah, I kind of always feel like I'm a little disconnected from my body, that I'm about a foot or two behind me or floating." I was describing classic dissociation. I lived in a functional free state. His response was to eat more carbs so I could be more grounded. This was somebody with 30 years of experience.

Now granted, this was also in the late '90s, so before a lot of this information came about. And obviously as somebody who went to acupuncture school, was an acupuncturist, I was getting acupuncture regularly, it was

a big part of my life. But still, a lot of times chronic headaches would persist at times in my life and my very low tolerance for stress, a little bit of stress, I had a very narrow, what we call, window of tolerance. A little bit of stress could either send me into anxiety or put me into periods of depression or further freeze, feelings of not feeling really alive or present like I felt was possible, just feeling like something was always off. And then when I started to discover breathwork and BBTRS, it's I started to really come into my body in a way I had never experienced.

A lot of the tension, the chronic feelings of tension in my back and neck and shoulders finally went away. Acupuncture had never been able to get it to... It would go away for periods of time and come back, go away and come back, that little dance. When I got heavily involved with Path of Love and got more into the emotional components that are there, really working with a lot of the inner child work, younger issues around what happened in my family of origin, the emotional impact of all that, so much more expansion starts to come in, more aliveness, more ability to meet life, an ability to feel not like I have to keep part of my heart closed, that I can be open and also feel safe, things like this.

So definitely improvements in physical health, particularly from the chronic conditions I used to deal with all the time. Haven't had an episode of depression in years. Haven't felt anxious without reason in years. So my window of tolerance has greatly expanded. What I'm able to have the energy to meet life and its demands has greatly expanded. And then on the emotional level, just feeling like I'm connected and that I belong, which is huge. I think that is one of the big antidotes to trauma, is to feel connected and that I belong in life and that we're here together, we're really here together, and this love of people and love of myself.

Michael Roesslein:

Thank you for sharing all of that. That last bit, I bet that that is not coincidence that you do so much work in community and group settings too, that you carry that feeling of connection. We were talking before we went on air about how... I was talking about it in reference to a training I'm currently in with Francis Weller about grief work and that grief rituals and containers have always been part of culture and that that's how grief has been held. But it goes further than that. The trauma healing and just healing in general, which can be being seen by a group of people for who you are and accepted, we're not talking about really elaborate... It can get elaborate, but just being in a group of people and being seen and accepted in and of itself has a healing component to it. These communities, these groups have always been part of the human experience. Would you say that the absence of that in our lives as a whole is having a lot more effect than people would realize?

Prema McKeever:

I believe so. If we think about it, in trauma, we weren't hurt by trees, we were hurt by other people. I think a fundamental part of our healing has to come through other people. Walks in nature are wonderful, they're beautiful, they can help us calm down and self-regulate, but they don't get to a core piece of the wound, which is a sense that somehow I'm not safe with other people or people aren't safe.

In psychotherapy we talk about the missing experience. What is it that wasn't there that needs to be there? And so, particularly when we're looking at childhood trauma, things that happened when we were younger, what was missing? What attunement wasn't there? What sense of being seen, what sense of being heard, valued, loved, understood, all of that? We need other people for that. And so with group work, that's the magic of group work. I work one-on-one with people, but what we can accomplish in a group setting in one week far out-strengths of what will happen over months and months and months of therapy. Because there's a special power in when groups of people come together to heal. One person's breakthrough then becomes your breakthrough. And this learning and new experiences and this opening up, and you get to have those missing experiences that deeply... It's not a mental thing those missing experiences, it's not like, oh, okay, this is what we're doing, and I understand it on a mental level. Our bodies and our nervous systems resonate. And

when we're able to have that deep sense of safety and connection with other people, that imprints itself in us and creates patterns then for new types of relationships we can go out and create outside of the group room. Like you're saying when you're talking about grief rituals and the community coming together, I think we are meant to heal in communities. We're meant to heal in circle. To do it alone I think is a very western idea. You can do it some part. I mean, yeah, we have individual psychotherapy, of course it can help, but I think that really the missing piece is group work.

Michael Roesslein:

Thank you. You speak on it much more eloquently than I can right now, but my experience with those settings has changed my life profoundly. Some of the trainings I've been through in the last five years are taught in retreat settings for a week. The things that are capable or possible there aren't. Gabor always says in CI that damage that was done in relation needs to be healed in relation.

Prema McKeever:

Exactly.

Michael Roesslein:

You can do a lot of work on yourself. I danced around the outside of this work for a long time before I really dove into it. I read all the books. I listened to podcasts. I would listen to whatever. I could map it all out. I understood the concepts. I would try this practice, I'd dabble in that practice. I never sat down with someone directly. I never went to a group thing. I didn't go to a retreat. And then I only made it this far. I mentally started to understand a lot more things about [inaudible 00:18:33].

Prema McKeever:

Which has its benefits.

Michael Roesslein:

... what happened. Which does.

Prema McKeever:

Yeah, it does.

Michael Roesslein:

But there's a line, it only goes so far. That only goes so far. And then the next step would be working one-on-one with someone where you can repair some of that relational damage. But yeah, nothing compares to those groups. Even the one with BBTRS in Poland, halfway through the week, I saw the people there, most of them were completely different people by Wednesday. The light was different and the way they carried themselves was different. So this is something that we're trying to describe that isn't like, oh, they understood themselves better or they felt... It's this way of my body was different when I came home from there. So for people that are looking to solve these complex chronic illnesses that we're seeing so much more of today, would you say that exploring this side of work is not only a good addition to whatever they're doing with diet, supplements, all those kinds of things, but an essential component of it?

Prema McKeever:

Whether that's an intensive retreat somewhere or being part of some ongoing weekly support group, I mean, there's so many different forms that this can take. But being in an environment with other people, having shared experiences, feeling that support, feeling that you're part of something is so important. Yeah, absolutely. I'm not the first person to say this. We have an epidemic of disconnection that impacts us not only on our mental level, but obviously very much on a physical level, on a nervous system level too. We're not built for isolation. We're not really built for disconnection. We flourish when we can have safe connection.

Michael Roesslein:

Yeah, it's very true. I was part of a film series that we went all over the world and recorded in places where people have the least chronic disease, the longest lifespans. We don't own the copyright to the word that's usually used for those places, so we couldn't use the word. But we came to Italy and to Sardinia... I didn't, but the filmmakers went to Sardinia. They went to Sardinia, they went to a couple of Greek Islands, they went to Okinawa. A lot of people in the US and North America wanted to know what do these people eat? What kind of workouts do they do? What other health practices do they do? What kind of biohacking do they do? All that bullshit.

The only main themes that crossed all the different places... They all ate different food from each other, so there was no same food. None of them did structured formal exercise. There was no fitness culture in any of those places, which even-

Prema McKeever:

I love it. I love it.

Michael Roesslein:

... explaining it to some of the older folks in Italy... This guy, he showed up for the interview 104 years old on a bicycle in Sardinia. And then they tried to ask him if he's ever been to a gym, and he was like, "What is that? I go to a place specifically with the intention of exercising? Like no, just my life." There are two common themes that came up all the time were the community and connection aspect. Like in Greece, our filmmakers got invited to little community block parties that were going on to 02:00 in the morning four nights a week in this one town. And there'd be 90-year-old people and 7-year-old people dancing at midnight and drinking wine. Now, all of your health gurus in the US would tell you that you're up at midnight drinking wine that's a terrible thing, and you're going to be [inaudible 00:22:25]-

Prema McKeever:

It's going to wreck your sleep.

Michael Roesslein:

... terrible. Your circadian rhythms will be off and your health will go to shit. These people are living to be 105. And not just living to be that age, now I live in Italy and I see people in the streets that are 95 going up and down hills, that are walking, that are self-sufficient. People here smoke more than Americans smoke. They stay up later. They drink more wine. But there's a level of community and connection that exists still in these cultures more. It's going away, but it is-

Prema McKeever:

It is, sadly.

Michael Roesslein:

... a lot more than... Especially in the more rural, traditional places, it still exists a ton. That was the only thing that unified all the places, was that there still was a very strong aspect of community and connection amongst neighbors, amongst villages. They all supported each other. They all helped each other. And that was something that people being interviewed, the older folks, they would talk about like, "Lean on your neighbors. Don't hold grudges. Don't be angry about things that don't matter." Those were the things that came up. The health industry people wanted to know the diet, the supplements. They don't even know what supplements are.

Prema McKeever:

How can I pop it into a bottle? Mm-hmm.

Michael Roesslein:

Yeah, how can I take it in a pill-

Prema McKeever:

And sell it.

Michael Roesslein:

... so I can get to work faster so I can work 17 hours a day and not know my neighbor's names? So yes, the community aspect is massive for all forms of healing. So if people would like to find you and your work and everything you just named, can you just share with them where they might be able to find some of these things?

Prema McKeever:

Sure. Yeah. My website is-

Michael Roesslein:

We will link them up too.

Prema McKeever:

Okay. Yeah, my website is my name Prema McKeever. There's some blogs on there. And then I have a YouTube channel as well that has some videos, some guided breathwork sessions, videos about resilience, different things like that. And so on my website you can also see schedule of events, trainings that are coming up and Path of Loves that are coming up as well.

Michael Roesslein:

Perfect. So we'll link that down below. I'm actually taking a train to Rome in the morning tomorrow, and I'll be watching some of your training videos on the train. I'll see you again in about nine hours. I think I'm watching your writing and character style videos tomorrow.

Prema McKeever:

Oh, great. Great. Enjoy.

Michael Roesslein:

Just one last thing before we go. If you can I share... I usually give guests a heads-up on this, and I didn't give you a heads-up, so I'm putting you on the spot... one little either needle-moving practice or something somebody could be more mindful of or a practice they could start trying or something they could do from any aspect of the work that you do or things that you share with clients or anything, what would you say would be one thing that somebody could start to try to do to incorporate into their life that would move a needle for them possibly?

Prema McKeever:

I would say even something like five minutes of breathwork a day, meaning five minutes of intentionally paying attention to your body, dropping down to the level of body sensation, and working with your breath. I have short breathwork practices on my YouTube channel that people can go to check out. But even those can start to work with increasing our vagal tone, helping improve our connection to our body, bring more ventral vagal on board, lower levels of stress. Which when we talk about community, what is all the benefits we get from community? If we have this word community that we've talked about, what happens physiologically with that? We're in more ventral vagal, we're increasing vagal tone, we're decreasing levels of stress, all these sort of things. And so you can do this in small practices in your home by working with your physiology. So that's what I would say, five to 10 minutes of breathwork a day.

Michael Roesslein:

Perfect. Yeah, go check out the videos. We'll link it down below this one so you guys can find it really easy. Thank you so much, Prema. I very much enjoy any time that we're able to chat or connect. It's been a gift to learn from you, and I appreciate your time.

Prema McKeever:

Thank you, Michael. It was great talking to you too and being here.