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Can You Hear Me? | Dr. Curt Thompson & Dr. Kathryn Lofton

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The Veritas Forum

Dr. Curt Thompson, Author, and Dr. Kathryn Lofton, Yale University, discuss the shifting connectivity of modern university students. Please like, share subscribe to and review this podcast.

Transcript

Welcome to the Veritas Forum. This is the Veritas Forum Podcast. A place where ideas and beliefs converge.

What I'm really going to be watching is which one has the resources in their worldview to be tolerant, respectful, and humble toward the people they disagree with. How do we know whether the lives that we're living are meaningful? If energy, light, gravity, and consciousness are a mystery, don't be surprised if you're going to get an element of this in God. In today's episode, we are from author and psychiatrist Kurt Thompson in conversation with religious studies professor, Kathryn Lofton, of Yale University.

In a conversation title, Can You Hear Me? Connecting on campus in the midst of isolation. How would you define the health of connection among college students today? And I guess I would add something to that, which is in that context, what does real mean? When you think about connection, what's this real mean? You're the college professor. No, but I want the objective you to begin.

You're the researcher. This is what's going to happen for the next three minutes. I'm interested in the circulation of the idea of the college students to begin.

I be curious partially because I'm very nervous about diagnosing and speaking about the college students. I experience them as an obsessed object in the popular media right now. Obsessed because they represent this climactic act of parental success.

College student, as opposed to the student that's in the basement that's no longer a

student than just eating Cheetos and playing video games. This is the student that's continuing the formation that the parents hope for. But also we're so nervous about them.

We're nervous about their futures. We're nervous about their activism. We're nervous about their time on their devices.

We're nervous with their swipe-lifting. We're nervous about them. It's funny though because as a parent of a 28 and 25-year-old, I'm still nervous about my kids.

They're out of college. They're out of graduate school. I don't know because I don't work in a university setting.

You don't work with college-age students. I do. I don't see like 10 a day.

I don't feel like I have the same degree of immersion in that setting that you do. But I would say that we see a fair amount of high school students and college students in our practice being in Northern Virginia. I would say that, again, to your point, the college student, I don't even know what, even if we're talking about real college students, I don't know what that means if there is one prototypical college student.

In general, I find that the notion of being connected in the way that I imagine it to be and what that means. Like what do we mean to be seen, be known, be heard. There are ways in which I find that not just college students, but even people who are beyond that developmental stage.

If you were to ask them, "Well, how well known are you?" Most people would say, "I think I'm pretty well known." And then they start talking about their vital statistics. People know where they were born and they know how many kids they have, where they know what subject they take and so forth and so on. And they can write off a lot of information that in my world we would say is pretty left-brain in terms of how I'm paying attention to the you that I'm trying to know.

That's a different question I think then if we were to ask someone, "Could you give me, if I asked for them, could you give me the names of three people, who if I asked them, they could tell me everything there is to know about you?" They could tell me what your greatest fear is. They could tell me what your list of shames are. They could tell me what your, the things are that you most long for in life, but that you're even afraid to name.

In addition to all the stuff that we're more than happy to, like tell people or put on display because I want you to know those things about me that are effective and successful and closer and closer to perfectionism. I think we don't have a lot of, my experience is that we don't have a lot of community places where people can be deeply known in the ways that I think about it when we ask that question. No, it's what's really interesting why I was thinking about what I was talking about is why do we charge so

much for tuition? That's the thought I was having as you were speaking.

Of course, that's the thought I was also having while I was talking about. And the reason I was, because I always am wondering what am I doing by working at this institution as opposed to others and I've taught at other places and there's different ways of understanding what the undergrad, the college student experience is. I think one of the reasons that students are very excited about this institution, the reality of which I'm still a bracket, is that there are so many ways that this place tries to structure and organize intimacy.

How it designs the colleges and the college system, the way that extracurricular activities develop strong social cultures. The manifestation of your identity as a form of social culture you can join and participate in. I think dangerous but intriguing secret societies, the way in which they organize other contexts in which the entire purpose of a secret society is for me to give that to another set of people will know my secret, know my shame.

So those are all ways that the institution seeks to institutionalize a deep social connection to the people who go here. And you can have a cynical reading of that. Well, they do that so that you develop a strong tattooed institution that then you're like, "Yay, here are my dollars." But the other reason is that there was an idea, a fantasy that if you make a society of "once upon brothers," now kindred, that will make a better set of leaders for the future world.

That is people who feel into my realm. I can be very cynical about that. My bad days, on my good days, I think there's something that we're doing here.

But notice what's the relationship between that in the classroom, what's the relationship between that and the anxiety of success, the anxiety of representing your excellence. I think we would probably get into those kinds of questions. Do you think vulnerabilities changing? Do you think people are creating this kind of faith community versus social media or other ways of letting the world know you versus risking who you really are? I'm so wary of sounding like a person who's nervous about that because I find that if you're over 35, your relationship to that question and diagnosing it can sound very quickly like you don't understand that there is a deep sense of social importance to the forms of connection that I could get really frightened by.

What is screen time? Is screen time social time? The entire parental obsession with screen time and controlling it, we don't treat that same way about friends time or socializing time. And maybe the screen is a new incarnation of that form of social expression that we use to think of, "What am I doing when I hang out all day in the summertime with my friends?" Is the screen also manifesting some of that? That question is coming from a place, the calling conversations with students feel frustrated that they're not sure they're building friendships and relationships in the ways that they

hope. These are supposed to be the best news of my life for people.

But I don't know what's going on. I think in that moment is that both that we've overbranded the idea of this time, we've overvalued it with a price tag that makes it all of a sudden seem like, "I better walk away with all the good relationship." What is the stake of this? Or is this just a perennial sense that we're always, I mean there's such beautiful documents in the history of religions that people have always wondered, "Am I enough? Am I doing enough? Am I making enough of what I have been given?" I have a hard time deciding if we're in a historical particularity with that or if it is perennial. Do you have strong feelings? I'm sure I do.

I'm a psychiatrist. I mean how can I not have strong feelings? And you know it's funny, I'm not working with college students but I work in Washington DC, which is nice because as a psychiatrist I'll never be out of a job. And I think that what I, who we take care of are the Yale graduates, right? They come to DC.

Well okay, wait, to be fair, we take care of UVA graduates too, okay? And I like, you know, as a person of Christian faith, like we were talking about earlier, like I have these, a couple of streams that are informing my experience in the consultation room where we're meeting with people. And one has to do with an anthropology that looks at, you know, the opening chapters of Genesis where we, for whatever reason, the Hebrews thought it was really important to name how it was that the man, the woman that God creates, or naked and unashamed, right? They don't say, the Hebrews had other words, they could have said they were naked and happy, they were naked and, you know, unafraid, they were naked or ranged different things. The notion that shame actually shows up, I'm introducing this topic, but the notion that it shows up in the documents early, and the idea that shame actually shows up neurobiologically very early in development, 15 to 18 months of age, right? Toddlers are already starting to sense it in their neurobiological interactions with others.

I think that we, we're finding ways to manage that all the time, and we long to be seen to be known as a built-in part of our neurobiological architecture, and we do a lot of things to try to promote that. I think the experience of most people is that shame interferes with that, we find ways to cope with that, and we're really good at finding ways to cope with that, such that we're not even aware that we're doing that anywhere. We're so automatic at that.

And so by the time we come even to structures like college where people are doing things to try to create and promote social connection, that's a lovely thing to do, we try to do that in church, right? But even in church, we have a hard time being vulnerable in the way that you're talking about. We're having a hard time, like look, we say look, human beings don't actually have to try to be vulnerable, like we are vulnerable, like look, we're the only animals that on purpose put clothes on, right? Like people put, now

people put clothes on their dogs, I don't know why, right? The dogs aren't asking for this, right? But we do these kinds of things. But we are vulnerable, but the question is to what degree am I able to get back to the person? Who are the people who know absolutely collectively everything there is to know about me? To the degree that I can tell you the thing I'm most afraid of, the thing that I most desire, and the thing that I feel most ashamed that I do desire, and those kinds of things actually create what we would call integrating, potentially integrating neurobiological changes, changes that actually lead to human flourishing, when we're actually able to be vulnerable in a space in which, as we were saying earlier, you can see me and hear me, and then you leave the room and you come back, right? And so the question for us, from where I sit in the consultation room, is who are the people with whom I can be this vulnerable, by whom I can be this deeply known, and by that not just as facts, but a thought.

A felt sense of I, like I'm seen by a real person, and know that that person really wants to come back and see me, even though they've seen the parts about me that I hate the most. Okay, so I'm going to follow up then. How you started there, how do you know when you're there? I think you have to start with that one, because you just staged the question that I think, I'm actually, as you ask that question, I feel deeply known in the world.

Does that mean people know my shame? I don't know if that is the same, I'm interested in that as the term of knowing. It wouldn't be the one I would say, so that I feel known by a lot of people. I don't feel as if I am in isolation, I feel like intimacy is a critical part of my survival.

But I wonder if this isn't a culturally specific concept of knowing that there's an element of confession, of the part of the self. I'm curious if people across all cultures would agree that that is the thing to know in order to know you. Well, I don't know that that's the thing to know.

I'm simply speaking from the experience of what happens in consultation rooms, where the road in marriages that are falling apart, or whether it's in groups of men and women who are trying to do this kind of work. And it's interesting to me, even again, reading the Christian texts, reading both the Old Testament and New Testament, how frequently human brokenness is associated with the use of that particular word. We talk an awful lot about shame when we talk about sin.

And for me, it's a curiosity, like how it is at this separation from relationship that we talk about when we talk about sin. How frequently it is related to the neurobiological, affective experience of shame. How much that is, how they work in concert with each other.

So I think that there are lots of ways in which we can be deeply known and we say, well, how do we know that? In some respects, I would say we don't know that in the way that

we, at least in psychiatry, we don't know it in the way that we know or do experiments to figure out what the chemical reaction is going to be, or what the one plus one is, those kinds of things. I think it's as much when we have the experience of being known, like I have the felt sense of this, I mean, we would say it's the same felt sense that an infant or toddler feels, and we as the adults know when they feel it, when the toddler looks at us like they know that they're being loved. And we can't know this in some kind of like logical linear way apart from having like an embodied experiential sense of that, in which I feel a sense of deep relief literally in my physicality as I see you seeing me quite literally.

And as I tell you about the thing that I'm most excited about, or also as I tell you about the thing about which I'm most afraid of or most ashamed of or whatever. I don't know if that is helpful. You want to weigh in? If you don't want to have a number.

Yeah, I will follow up. Yeah, I have a lot of, yes, please follow up. So in today's, in the daily, in the daily today, there was an op-ed, not going to do justice to it, but there was a piece in the op-ed, it was about how we can be isolated from each other and how students need to work on communicating, forming relationships.

And the writer talked about the earbuds as the new "do not disturb" signal. And so a little while ago, you know, when you were talking about, "Oh, you know, anyone over the age of 35 is a different, you know, their theme is differently." I copped to a gray hair and all to be well past 30 times, but there was something to that. What I would put off that is isolating us in a crowd, in a dining hall, where there is an invitation to be a union with each other, you know, around the table.

Yes. So I'd love to know what you think about that. Yeah.

Yeah. My life's not working. Yeah, there's no doubt, I thought that was a beautiful op-ed, and there's others like it.

The Whitey, and it has published a not insignificant number, a paper of students speaking to. A sense of, I would say, on we localized around particular practices in the campus and technological relationships to each other. And my instinct with scholars is always to go to justify why that is not just self-removal, but self-protection.

And what are the ways in which, by the time you've arrived to this campus, you've already made yourself into an object? And how do you de-commodify yourself? And I asked myself that question. You asked a lot, because I too have done that, that is, you don't make it in the matrix of capitalism that estimates ideas of spiritual, intellectual excellence, which is what these institutions valorize. If you haven't in some sense flattened that very spiritual thing that led me to drag a wagon from my library home every single day of the summer as a child, but I don't drag that wagon anymore.

Now I do papers and I write emails and I figure reports and I meet with 19 students a day. I have now become the articulation of a thing that was once a wandering meandering game on the street for any convo passion. And now I've become the sequestered manifestation of it as excellent and survivable in an economy where I can't drag a wagon without being arrested for being crazy.

So I always want to be empathetic because I put on the earbuds, yes, to get away from the noise of my manifestation of productivity. That is the very connotation of a thing I truly love, including relationship, which was so tied into that reading and that life. So this is just me rendering a kind of, I want to be in sympathy.

I also want to see what would it be to try to, and this is where you do all the time, how do you get them to take out that and then be willing. But there's a reason for it. And I want to think about that reason.

Yeah, I think that's true. There's definitely a reason for it. And I think it's something that could even be argued as a spiritual discipline, a transitioning between what they just were encountering in class, processing, or whatever that may be.

There's a question that, it's phrased very interestingly, do we chase or consume stories to find meaning? Do we binge on ideas to build identity? I would add curating ones, self, into the world, certainly with the social media profiles and stuff like that. But the idea of chasing things, I wonder if both of you would talk about that a little bit. I think I would say that in some respects, like from the moment toddlers can toddle, they're chasing things.

We're actually chasing our stories, like even if the story is the begonias that I'm going for, in some sense, like I'm on the move, chasing things in some way. And I would say, I think I wouldn't just demonize chasing things in and of itself. I would say there's a certain element of that that's part of creativity and part of curiosity and part of searching and discovery and so forth and so on.

But I think too that we would say that human beings, if nothing, if we're not rhythmic biological creatures, and by rhythmic, everything we do is rhythmic. We have a pulmonary system that's rhythmic, we have a cardiovascular system that's rhythmic, we walk with a certain rhythm. And we also tend to flourish, and the brain is like this, it has its different parts.

We tend to flourish when we are rhythmically moving back and forth between deeply connected community and what we might call solitude. So to your point about where the earbuds are coming in, there's a practice of solitude after being deeply connected with someone else. And so when we're chasing things, I think part of the challenge is we find ourselves way out of rhythm when I haven't had the opportunity growing up to be deeply connected.

So part of that rhythm of moving out into the world and then coming back and being deeply known by someone else, again emphasizing on how I'm being deeply known in all of me, enables me to tell that whole part of my story that's part of it, the part of us that's going to be known by each other, while we're each going out and chasing things, as it were. But I think that at some point, we end up chasing things as ways to cope with this increasing sense of anxiety that I typically have, that I think is a direct result of the degree to which I'm actually not known very well. And I'm not neurobiologically, I'm actually not very stabilized.

We need, if you're going to cross a canyon and you're going to cross on a net, you'd like to have the net have lots and lots and lots of fibers, not just like four fibers. The more fibers I have, the greater confidence I have in crossing. That's not unlike what we mean by human connection.

I'm actually, for me to be courageous, for me to chase things appropriately requires me to be deeply connected to others that allows me to take them with me into whatever the space is that I have to encounter. I don't know if that will answer your question very well. It's really, it's positive, I appreciate it because it's trying to render positively a thing that can look really neurotic and the two images that come to mind, I just thought that was a beautiful question.

So, whoever wrote it was beautiful. So there's two images that came to mind. One is when you're watching someone just scrolling on their phone, there's something about that very gesture that always makes my stomach a little sick.

What are you going through quickly, whether it's Instagram pictures or news headlines, and that kind of feeling, am I watching someone bingeing? Bingeing is a complicated word, it doesn't usually mean something good, but it does mean something intense. So the image of both chasing stories in the positive sense is, I'm looking to just keep knowing what happens. I need new data, I need new information, but we live in a time where that is not only a so ready twist, but it's also made so horizontal.

So if I open up my news feed right now, there's going to be an update about Chloe Kardashian's baby next to the Florida recount next to a murder and Denver. So what is it to try to, I'm constantly opening up and then I get new stories. So am I losing something by both the flattening and my relationship to needing more of it? And what it to silence my phone, to silence my device, is to silence my relationship to those updates.

Do I lose myself or do I gain myself by doing that? Well, at least you become anxious, which is good for business for me. I like that. It's always good for business.

I'm going to change, I think change this a little bit, change the course a little bit. Oftentimes in conversations with students, I'm searching to try to find the right question to kind of help them open up, to get to the heart of the matter of why we're sitting

together in a particular day. And sometimes it's around the idea of what is it you think you're meant to be.

And what about the moment we're living in now, invites that to a deeper richer thing through news feeds or not? Or gets in the way of that real hard work of just going deep into yourself and asking what is it you want? And what do you think you're meant to be in the world? You know, it's so powerful. First of all, Sharon, I think, wow, no one ever asked me that question. So no one ever posed that.

That's interesting. What a gift it is to give someone that question. Also how I can imagine imposing at the students, they often must get plastered.

That it's not a question that doesn't immediately create, or doesn't create ease in my own imagined response and thinking about when I ask students about what's next for them, what they imagine. Because the question of what the social world imagines I should be doing and actually being able to hear my own voice, I think that feels really hard. I think that feels really hard now.

I think it feels really hard in this place. And I often encounter students in the study of religion who know they should be trying to find a voice inside of them that speaks to them, but they're like, I can barely hear it. I can't hear it.

Well, do you think because there's so much clamoring for their attention and the value of that kind of stuff is it's not in the simple, you know, what am I meant to be? Down inside. It's what the plan was for them. They're at Yale.

Big things are expected. Big obligations. Big feedback.

And to admit desire is maybe to admit, and this is a great, for my mind, it's meant uselessness. And not everything I desire is going to be a positive good for the world. It might just be my desire.

And what would be dangerous about that from someone who's been taught, everything I do must count towards utility, towards a maximization of their choice. And when you say what do you meant to be, that might focus it down. It raises a question for me about the difference between, we talked about this question a lot.

The difference between what it means for us to know things. So someone asks me the question, or you ask a student, what are you meant to be, or what do you want to be when you grow up, which I'm 56 and still, you know, trying to figure that out, right? There is a way of knowing that that question asks for, right? What do you want to be? I'm going to answer that question with something that I know. And that is a very different kind of question than what happens when we encounter this question, what does it mean for us to be known? So St. Paul in his letter to the Church of Corinth says they're those who think they know things, who do not know as they ought, but the person who loves

God is known by God.

And as he's talking about that, he's not writing that as if he's known by God like God knows you as a fact, that God knows about you. But it's a very different kind of experience to be known by someone. So when you ask the student not just what do you want to be, but when you ask the student, what are you feeling? That's a different, you're asking the student to actually turn on a part of their brain that's very different than when you ask them what do you want to be? What are you meant to be doing? For me to reflect inwardly about what I feel, and if I were to tell you about my story, we may come to find out that there are lots of things about my story that I know, that I've packaged and wrapped, and I know my story because this is the story that I've had to tell for me.

The story that I've had to tell from the beginning in order for me to be here at Yale, be wherever, and these are things that I know. It reminds me of a guy that I've been, is a patient of mine who you ask in the question as part of a normal psychiatric evaluation. Tell me what it was like growing up in your house.

He says, well, I grew up with two loving parents. And then you ask, well, who was in charge of discipline in your house? Like another obvious follow-on question that you ask at any cocktail party, right? You ask a person to be in charge of discipline in your house. If you're ever like running out of questions, you can try that.

And of course, before you know it, what he's telling you is that gosh, as it turns out, my father was brutal. Well, how is it that a 45-year-old guy who is extraordinarily effective and successful and would have been a standout student here is telling a story that he knows, but to give him the opportunity of being known, because someone else is asking a different kind of question, tell me what your experience is like. Tell me what it's like for you to be in your mind, in your heart, what you feel sense image right now.

Gives them the experience of being known, which is a completely different neural activity. It's a completely different way of paying attention to the world, either outside the world or inside the world. And the other thing that it does is that it reveals just how much energy we burn managing our anxiety about our worry that we're not actually not enough, which is actually not a new thing.

This is as old as, like, you know, Cain and Abel. And what's so striking, I find, is what happens when people are connected to folks in such a way that they are deeply known, and they are no longer than having to carry the burden of their managing all of this distressing neural affect. And when you no longer have to burn that energy, this energy is now literally available to you to imagine things that you want to be here and now.

As opposed to the pressure that you have to come up with so that you can answer it the right way, like, what is it that I want to be. I think what we find in our practice is that the

degree to which people are actually able to reveal those parts of them, that they feel the least certain about, actually gives them a lot more flexibility and freedom to actually live into the things that they didn't know they didn't know that they really want. It's really powerful.

I was thinking about how so many episodes of the Oprah Winfrey Show include the climax where she says you are enough, and people would cry, and I cried. And what's interesting, though, when I think about that, I like to really believe you are enough, and I couldn't agree more, that if you could realize that and stop thinking all the thoughts that prohibit you from believing that, all the power you'd have. But it's interesting for me how gendered and raced that is because what was so moving about the Oprah Winfrey Show is that she said that to people for whom their life was in service to others and self-abusive to themselves.

So it was to a world of women, white women, brown women, and disabled persons and LGBT persons. She was just speaking to the world who came to her and said, "You are enough." It's interesting when I imagine other figures of power or figures of her, my colleagues. And I don't know if I quite-- it's interesting the ethical obligation to know you are enough as a human soul, I suppose.

I also think we have-- and vulnerability has to be-- there has to be a conversation today about vulnerability also being responsive to recognizing that there are different privileges in enoughness. And who is ready to make themselves vulnerable, who needs to do more work to make themselves vulnerable? Because some people by walking into a room are vulnerable. And I'm interested in thinking about what kind of vulnerability we can stage given the very fraught space we're in on those questions right now in this country.

Because we're beginning to actually talk about real things. I want to leave time for question and answer, but I think that this, Katie, you've given us an invitation to ask, are we able to hear each other? What's next? What does connection mean when we have all these other things in our life that buy for our attention? But what does human connection mean? I don't know if this makes sense. I kind of went off script.

The closing question was, what does a well-connected life look like 10 years from now? How could you imagine it? But I'm thinking about what you just said and getting to the core of things. Yeah. Yeah, I'm so interested in the number of religious traditions that have tried it.

Why have I tried to figure out how to develop cultures of mutual criticism and some of what you were talking about in the group work that you do as a context where eventually the group members started speaking to each other. And you can speak to that. So when I think about a life of vulnerability and recognition, it must be a situation in which I am in a set of intimacies in which I can be called to account and I can also repair.

And I do think we live in a time where that is not entirely clear what that looks like. A lot of my work is speaking to members of the faculty and staff and students who of all shades and hues all feel alienated from the scene of contemporary politics. All feel like they have a story to tell that has not been heard.

Everyone believes that. But they can't quite see that everyone else also has that feeling. So how to teach and think about that I think is really important.

Yeah, I think that in some way, shape or form, we can have these conversations at 10,000 feet and I think we need to because we need to have people who are thinking about it in order to allow that to rain onto the ground where this is going to actually take place. It's really striking to me how easily and quickly, just taking people who are supposed to, like at least on paper, look like they really want to be with each other. That would be like a married couple, right, you would think.

And how quickly, I mean in a heartbeat, they can turn into the worst of enemies. And very quickly they become a microcosm for everything that you read about, that you see, so forth and so on. And you would think, Mike, how is it that these people aren't like just able to work this out? Because they ostensibly want to like do the next right beautiful thing.

But again, I find it to be, it's instructive for me to watch how easy it is for each of them to develop and maintain and nurture narratives in their head about themselves and about what their spouse thinks about them. And they can live in the same house and talk to each other and still be spinning these narratives that have nothing to do with what the other person actually is thinking because they're not actually yet ready or able to say what I really think you're thinking about me. Because I'm afraid to say this because I'm afraid that when I do, you're going to leave the room and you're not going to come back.

Does that make sense? That is the prepared of our exact, I mean, it would that we could structure that in so many of these institutions of white supremacy where we could actually encounter it. Tell me the worst thing that you could possibly, that would be powerful. Right.

And I think that we talk about these groups that we run. Like I think that these things are, you have to get people who have at least a minimum level of willingness to risk. But who are also minimally willing to hope that at the other side of this conversation, you're not going to leave the room.

That's it. I have to have at least a minimum number of neurons that will believe this. Right.

And if we can get, like each of us get one foot in the door, and this is like literally embodied, like not writing editorials to editorials. Like it has to be like I'm looking at you

looking at me. It can't be through a text.

It can't be through a phone call. Like it needs to be in these embodied places where we actually allow the brain to do the work it was made to do. If you like this and you want to hear more, like, share, subscribe and review this podcast.

And from all of us here at the Veritas Forum, thank you.

[Music] [Silence]