

19. Understanding the Power of...al Adoptees with Angela Tucker

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SPEAKERS

Lauren Pinkston, Angela Tucker

Lauren Pinkston 07:55

If there is one person that I would say has impacted my thoughts and my own mothering within the space of transracial adoption, it's Angela Tucker. I was unknown to her before today but she is not unknown to me because I have followed her work for a long time. I have her book from last year here on my desk, *You Should Be Grateful*. We'll dive into some of that. But Angela, your voice and the way that you speak to your own experience within the transracial adoption space is so incredibly powerful and gives those of us who have adopted transracially and transnationally such a great insight into the hearts and the minds of our children. So thank you for your years and years of work in this space. I am beyond grateful for you. Thank you for joining us today. How else would you like to introduce yourself to everyone?

Angela Tucker 08:46

Thank you very much. That means a lot. Yeah, I'm glad to be here talking with you. I'm excited to have just these open conversations about fairly complex human interactions. So I'm grateful already for the space that you're created to further have the dialogue especially for you being an adoptive mother. I think it's really powerful when adoptive parents and adoptees and if possible birth parents can all be in the same conversation just to further our all of our understanding and empathy for the different positions in this kind of complexity of adoption. So thank you.

Lauren Pinkston 09:30

Absolutely. It is, you know, it is a very complex space and when you adopt outside of... when you adopt and build your family through adoption. I think parents are often not prepared for the host of emotions that are going to come up when their children's worldviews and the feelings of identity that are swirling within their kids hearts and minds are kind of pushing on that parental expectation. I'm thinking about my own my own daughter when she was in third grade and I

would come to pick her up at school she would tell everyone that I was her aunt's best friend that was coming to pick her up. And she was so hesitant but tell me that and I just like, "Hope, I don't care what you tell people that I am. That is not a problem. Like, you don't have to worry about my feelings. Everything's fine." And that really opened up the door to a lot of honest conversations. For her to be able to say... I will dive into this later and I want to honor her and protect her privacy on this podcast too. But, you know, I'm curious what you would say are some of the really big blind spots that specifically for white parents, what are those blind spots that they would have as they adopt children from different racial heritages?

A

Angela Tucker 10:52

Well, I think your example is is great. I talk about this in my book a little bit but there's so many adoptees who I've spoken with who say things, you know, like, maybe I want to find my birth parents but I'm gonna wait until my adoptive parents die to do that because there's this sense of split loyalty or something deep down like the title of my book that perhaps we really are grateful for being in your proximity as our parents but not grateful to have been adopted. And communicating that without hurting our parents feelings is like a jungle gym. And so I love that that you were able to notice what she was doing and not... it's often us trying to avoid having to explain who we are, our migration narrative to total strangers, not having to do with our love for our adoptive parents or anything. And I think that gets so conflated and stays with adoptees for decades and decades. Like adoptees that I'm mentoring right now who are in their 50s and 60s and 70s are dealing with some of that stuff that you kind of nipped for her in third grade. So that's one of the things that I think could be construed as a blind spot just the conflation for parents of being loving caregivers. And for us adoptees, our behaviors, our thoughts, our worldviews oftentimes don't have anything to do with that.

L

Lauren Pinkston 12:53

Yeah, that's, that's so powerful. And just especially in transracial adoption, I found that so many people feel that they have a right to my daughter's story and share her history, like you said, her migration narrative and I have had to really input myself in places that I didn't anticipate whether that's the first week of school, me sitting down with their teachers and saying, "If you have a question about her or her history, come to me and don't go to her because, you know, for years there, she would come home with with experiences." And I'm I'm already, you know, sharing more than I wanted to about her story, but just the expectation that people had a right to her story, and that they could ask that in a public setting for her to disclose some of the hardest parts of her reality and in a group of peers that that was really that was really hard for me to see.

A

Angela Tucker 13:54

And I think a lot of it comes with white supremacy culture. It's a lot of times, white people who feel, it could be well intentioned, but living in our country, I think for white folks, most things come easily. And I say that like for example, in a science class, you might see a mannequin and that mannequin has peach tones skinned and so that is like an example of how being white is the status quo. And if there is something that goes against that. For example, recently, there was a medical textbook that showed a black fetus in the womb and everyone went crazy, like,

"What?! I've never seen that before. Wow." And so in that sense, where whiteness is really the status quo that comes with this sense of like, make it make sense. So I see you there with your white parents, like doesn't make sense. So tell me about where you came from. And it's like a well intentioned, but micro-aggressive comment One way that manifests is by pushing back and I think that too can feel frustrating, like, just because I was adopted into this other family, I have to learn these skills, which in the long run can be really helpful for us. But navigating, you know, this society but it is unfortunate that some of us have to learn that lesson a lot sooner than others.

 Lauren Pinkston 15:33

Yeah, you talk about that in your in your book and I'd like to invite you to kind of speak to that challenge that you you mentioned, of being honest, as honest as you can about your story while also maintaining the status quo that so many people expect of you and that language of should and how you even titled your book, You Should Be Grateful, and it's saying that, you know, you finally discovered that the reason you didn't love that word is because it prompted and suggested two things: your own failure along with the other person's judgment. I found that incredibly compelling and clear - the best way that I've ever heard that word describe. Talk about talk about the language of "should" and "gratefulness" and how you've navigated that space,

 16:30

Yeah, I hate the "shoulds". I mean, yeah, it's that combination of you're doing it wrong and you haven't even started yet. I think about that, not just in terms of adoption and the "shoulds" that people put on me, but in my own language, you know, when I'm like, gosh, I should go to the gym right now. That too, is like that sense of you're failing and you haven't even started instead of an invitation. Like, perhaps I'd like to work out and get my heart rate up, or perhaps, you know, instead, it's this admonishments kind of thing. So yeah, I was excited to finally figure out that was the title I wanted to go with. And it's been really awesome in how it's promoted conversations, just with the title alone amongst adoptive families and given permission for adoptees to explore this. So I'm really happy about that.

 Lauren Pinkston 17:28

That's great. I'm gonna use that language at 6am for myself, "Perhaps you would like to go downstairs and lift a kettlebell?" I'll pull that into my language. Thank you. You have a blog, I mean, you've you've been able to speak into so many incredible spaces. From consulting to I believe the writers of This Is Us, if I remember correctly, to mentoring directly adoptees, adult adoptees. But I on your blog, I was so struck by an article that you shared recently and that you wrote about expansive families. And this is a picture that I think we have not grasped a hold of yet but is so very needed. And I think that it's needed because in the United States, our culture is so individualistic, it's so individualistic that we depend... I think parents put so much pressure on themselves to be everything that their children need. And as a mom, I cannot hold that. And especially as a transracial adoptive mom, it would be incredibly arrogant for me to assume that I would be everything that my daughter needs. What do you mean by expensive and inclusive families? And can you share a little bit about how that might benefit children?

A

Angela Tucker 18:53

Oh man, it's so exciting for me to think about re-envisioning the nuclear family model, because I absolutely, this isn't just for adoptees, but I just don't think it's realistic for two parents or a single parent to be everything a child needs nor do I think that's healthy. You know, I think it's really healthy for us, for children, to have exposure to lots of different adults who care for them. And I know in many collectivist cultures, they do this and this works. You think about the black culture, one reason why the black community uses the words cousin, brother, you're my brother, you're my sister and says that outside of genetic ties, is because of the history we've had of being cared for by each other, by community, by grandmothers. And so this hope I have goes beyond the openness concept that we've had in adoption for a long time, which typically is kind of contractual, you know, like agencies will talk about "send this many pictures or letters to bio parents" and I absolutely don't think you can legislate relationships. And the thing that your question about why it's healthy, is because what we need more than anything is to be able to make sense of our story. And we can only make sense of the true aspects with genuine relationships. So that's what I mean by having an expansive and inclusive definition of family.

L

Lauren Pinkston 20:48

I love that and especially for transnational families and transnational adoption as well as you know, if a child has been brought into your family from a country in the Global South, you know, regardless, we can debate all day long about international adoption, and if that's even ethical, and I say that as a mom with a daughter from East Africa, but you know, how important it would be to use that familial, community-based model of care because that is what is what is natural to her history, to her DNA. And I do think that we miss out on that so much in our culture. You you talked about "treehouse communities". This grabbed my attention so much that I texted the link to my city mayor and I was like I think we need to talk about this. And I'm curious, you know, about what motivated that community experience experiment. Maybe paint a picture for everyone of what that treehouse community looked like and why that might be a really neat, important step towards inclusive support for kids, especially kids in care.

A

Angela Tucker 22:03

There's a there's a few different models that are really lovely to point to. So yes, the treehouse intergenerational community in Boston, the SOS Children's Villages in Chicago and in other places, the mockingbird hub home in Seattle. And now it's actually global, but each of these... let me describe the mockingbird hub home for example. It is essentially a community of licensed foster homes so maybe there's like five homes that are licensed and they all live perhaps in like a five or 10 mile radius of each other. And then at the nucleus, at the center is a home that is licensed but they call it "grandma's home". And essentially there's no full time foster kids in that home, but each of those homes that surround grandma's home in the middle can use that as respite anytime. So all of those five other foster homes nearby. If they need respite or the kids want to go somewhere else, they can just go to grandma's house they can stay the night there with somebody who knows them really well and already lives there. So that's like the model, which I absolutely think is brilliant. The intergenerational living communities and treehouses is different in the sense that they have senior citizens that are just intermingling in this literal street where they own all over the homes, intermingling with foster

youth so they're providing tutoring or different services that aren't related to the nuclear family experience but are absolutely supportive people and that's kind of what their model looks like. I think this is related to, we can relate this to transracial adoption in the sense that for me, one area that I could see so clearly that my white parents couldn't give me everything I needed, even though they're lovely, wonderful human beings is that my mom would say something like, "Hey, I think you'd love this book." Like, I love reading. So hey, and I think you'd love this book. I found it and want to get it for you. I'd be like, "Cool, mom. Whatever. Sounds good." You know? And then a black woman would say the same thing, "Hey, Angela, I know you love reading and I found this book you might like." I would run home to my mom and act like I've never heard that before. And be like, "Mom, I gotta get this book. Like get it for me ASAP." And that example just highlights the need for racial representation. And that can happen when you have a more expansive and inclusive definition of family. It's not to say that I didn't hear my mom before, but there is absolutely something visceral that we need and that we respond to when you see someone that looks like you. I mean, that's primal. It goes back a long time, that's actually how we survived. So yeah.

L

Lauren Pinkston 25:09

Yeah. And that's, it is a survival mechanism. It's built into the makeup of animals and protecting their children, small animals, they all have names. You know, and for us, too. And I know that's been a huge part of our family culture and having, you know, looks to the left and looks to the right to say well, how is this family over here doing things? How do they decorate their house? How do they dress? How do they, how do they do things that are different than our family culture? And one thing that we've really struggled to navigate is that our home culture is still very white, even though we have lived internationally and we speak different languages and we tried to, you know, be engaged with as many different people groups as we can in our town, but our home culture is still very white. And so when my daughter is in a place where she is the majority, that can bring up some really new feelings. I want speak to how she's processing that because it's still very new but I would love, just as a mom, to hear and for other for other parents who are listening, you know, what was that experience like for you and what is it now as an adult adoptee when you enter into spaces where you were you are the racial majority in a space? What kind of comes to the surface for you?

A

Angela Tucker 26:31

I remember this time when my mom took me to an African fashion show in our town, and she was the only white person there and I was probably in middle school. And I do you remember the sense of just being able to let my guard down and not worrying that I would have to like, explain myself to everybody. I just felt like I could just be in that place. I could just enjoy the fashion show. I love fashion and clothes. It reminds me a little bit of transracial adoption camps that occur all over the country and they vary but sometimes it's just like doing ropes courses and playing soccer and running around and jumping in the pool. And other camps have educational components to it. But in any regard. It's like hundreds of transracial families all together and I've noticed that those places when a kid yells out to their mom, no and like a white person comes over to attend to the kid. The kid doesn't feel that sense of embarrassment which may be really hidden deep down. Adoptees are really good at people pleasing and being chameleons but that none of their friends around them are like, "Wait, that's your mom? What?" And so in that sense, I can see these kids call out to their mom, get whatever they

need, and then just go right back to playing soccer. And that image, even though it might be hard for people who don't have this experience to understand how big that is, but it's so refreshing to just be able to play and I feel like that's what I experience when I was in places that were predominantly black. Just this sense of I don't have to represent all black people, be the representative, you know, and have people think that all black people act how I act or there just wasn't that pressure and that felt so freeing.

L

Lauren Pinkston 28:47

And you're bringing to light something that so many of our kids carry and may not have words for that. Yeah, but it's just one added brick, you know, in a backpack of emotions that they're carrying around. That is really helpful for us to be sensitive, to help them scan a room for safety, to help them scan a room for identity, to help them you know and to recognize, help them recognize that you're sitting in that scanning with them to say, "Where do I fit? Where do I belong?" Not that we can ever identify fully if we haven't if we haven't been a transracial adoptee ourselves but that's so helpful that have you put that to words.

A

Angela Tucker 29:30

Yeah, I think with regards to the kind of intrusive, but well meaning curious strangers about our family makeup. I was chatting with a journalist who said to me something that I feel like is what underlays all the comments of like, you know, "How did you get here? Wait, that's your Mom? What's wrong with your birth parents? Were they drug addicts?" or all of those sorts of assumptions and questions this journalist said to me. Transracial adoption and your story constantly challenges people to hold two things in their mind at the same time. Are you a victim of the system of white supremacy or did you benefit from the system of white supremacy? And I feel like that is the cognitive dissonance that is happening when strangers are trying to make sense of how we became a family.

L

Lauren Pinkston 30:35

So powerful and I think we do that with with people that carry an identity that, or we expect them to carry an identity, that is so clearly one sided, you know, that we can put them in a camp or we can we can label them in some way and wrap their entire identity up in what you just said it's one or the other - you're a victim or you're, you know, are you benefited from that? And gosh, I mean, we are just all of us are more complex than that, right? We deserve deserve layers to our story.

A

Angela Tucker 31:12

And the beauty is in the layers and the complexity and that's why I feel excited about my work, I love it, is that I love being in the gray, being in the nuance, understanding every story is complicated and there's not a correct answer. Oftentimes, I really enjoy that space. I think it's because of the family that I grew up in where I had seven siblings all adopted from foster care except for one of them and then constantly having foster kids in our family and then foreign exchange students, all these differences. I think that allowed me to have an enjoyment in

things that aren't clear cut, which is one of the my great hopes for our country is that we can come to kind of embrace and see the beauty in complexity and I kind of think black and white thinking is really boring.

L

Lauren Pinkston 32:08

Yeah, for sure. You know, and it sounds like, you know, with your family that you had growing up, what a unique experience you had and what a unique way to define family and still, you've referenced kind of that hesitancy to express your desire to meet your birth family and I've heard this from many adult adoptees to say I just couldn't believe that my mom didn't know how badly I wanted to find my birth family or, you know... You recently, I don't know how recently, maybe sought out to make that connection? Is that true? Would you would you be willing to share some of that experience?

A

Angela Tucker 32:52

Yeah, actually it's been 10, 11 years since I've known my family. But I was 21 when I was legally able, through the state of Tennessee, to apply for my original birth certificate, which is the document that would have my birth mother's full name on it. So when I was 21 is when I could finally get that. And I applied for it. I had to pay \$500 for it. At the time I was in college and I couldn't afford that so I had to ask my parents to help me and they gave me a little bit of money loaned me a little money to do that which all started the feeling of injustice, like how come I can't have this information that's rightfully mine? But through a series of events, I was able to locate my biological father first, and then through him meet my biological mother. And when I found my biological mother, she said, "I don't know who you are, you need to go away". Just rejection. And my biological father said, "I can't have kids. I couldn't have kids. I'm sterile. Doctors told me I could never have kids." But we did a DNA test and he was he is just overjoyed to know that he had a daughter - he couldn't believe it. We look exactly the same. He died a few years ago. So I just had seven years knowing him but now I know his extended family who just love knowing that I'm out here and just embrace, not just me, but my husband, my whole family, my parents, and my birth mother also. She needed a year to kind of tell everybody that she had me and one other child that she placed for adoption, in addition to the three others that were kind of in her care. So she had kept her pregnancy a secret. So she just needed a year to kind of do that and now we have a relationship. One of my highlights is, I think last year or the year before, my parents went on a road trip from Washington State down to Biloxi, Mississippi, where she was living and I just loved getting this photo from them that they were out having lunch together and walking on the beach and the moments when my birth mother and my mom are together are the moments I just would wish could never end. I love it. I love seeing them together. It's beautiful to me. It's just so powerful because the reality is, you know, you don't ever feel... we are always attached to to our birth families. We're always attached to that. That womb that grew is that voice that we knew before we ever entered the world and so to be able to hold both things that you love so much to not feel like you're having to to reject one in order to love the other or deny one in order to love the other - that's a really beautiful picture. Amd not just for me, but to to see my mom and my dad genuinely love and want to be in the company of my birth mother. I often hear adopted kids say things like, "If my parents don't love my birth parents, how could they really love me?" I come from and I think that's what I feel when I see the genuine love that my adoptive parents have for my birth mother. There's

like an extension of why they love me. It just, really it's like the action to the verb. You know, they can say they love me but the action is what cements it for me and that's those are the moments.

L Lauren Pinkston 36:42

Can you think of a time that that was cemented for you, where you knew without a doubt that you belonged? That the circle of belonging, the questions of where you belonged, was kind of closed and you thought, "Okay, I'm allowed to exist and be who I am with my story"?

A Angela Tucker 37:07

I still struggle with that. I don't feel 100% sense of belonging within my adoptive family even though I'm very close to my adoptive family. It's great, but lacking that biological connection is significant. And with my biological family who have lived in the South, socioeconomic status way different than mine, I certainly don't feel a genuine sense of belonging there either. Where I find genuine belonging is with other transracial adoptees, other folks who kind of straddle both worlds and are kind of forced to do it with a smile, and can only express the truest sense of the complexity with other transracial adoptees in closed spaces. That's where I feel like the greatest sense of like just I can just be.

L Lauren Pinkston 38:13

There's such great research that exists for third culture kids, children that were raised, you know, in military families or missionary families that were raised in the in a culture different than the one of their passport. And I think they're starting, you know, psychologists and researchers are starting to fold in that experience of blended families as well but you mentioned you're bringing to the surface, you know, some of that language of where third culture kids, the only place that they really feel at home is with other TCKs that have shared their life experience, right?

A Angela Tucker 38:52

The reason it's tricky to articulate that is because I do hear in the back of my head, a chorus of, in our case adoptive parents, who take offense to that because they're like, "I'm doing everything I can to give this child the best home ever." And it's just like we're missing , you're missing the boat. That's not what we're trying to say. But this is I think at that top of the episode you asked a question or said something about how "I in my book, in the the intro I talk about how I kind of feel like I have to mince words sometimes." And that is, in a nutshell, that it's really hard to express a feeling of not completely belonging to parents who are doing the best to give us everything they can and feeling like we are bashing them, you know, that we're not being respectful or kind or understanding and that feels like my, the work of my career. Just figuring out how to articulate those things aren't one in the same.

L Lauren Pinkston 40:11

LAUREN PINKSTON 40:12

That's so good and really, I think is a great challenge for those of us who have adopted, seek to adopt or, you know, foster whatever that may be... my therapist told me a few weeks ago, he said, "Love cannot heal trauma." Oh, and I was like, "I'm sorry, what?" Like it really, as soon as he said that, I thought, "I finally feel free first of all, but also like why didn't anybody tell me that a long time ago because I've been trying so hard to love and love and love and love and love and love and trauma is still a huge, like it takes up two or three seats at our dining room table." And, and that has to be okay. And I've had to come around that thought a lot in the last few weeks and again, revisit my role as a mom, revisit my role in my kids lives like I am not their Savior and I am not going to be able to fix every hole.

A

Angela Tucker 41:17

No and not just that but as adoptive parents you're complicit in part of the trauma, you know, not necessarily just the adoption itself. But to think more macro level, letting our society get to a place to where we haven't yet figured out how to better resource those who want to keep their children. And again, I'm speaking in generalities because I know not every adoption story is the same. But for me, knowing that my birth mother really, it boils down to poverty, the reason why she couldn't care for me and to know research shows that many biological parents would be able to keep their children if they had just \$3,000. That's in America, that study, but I even think more globally for international adoption as well that Americans are complicit in the story of America being the best nation. You know, and I think about that, when I had been working with a woman who was pregnant and unsure of what to do with their pregnancy didn't feel capable or ready to parent and she had a black baby. She's black, the father of the baby is black. And she's like, "I want the adoption to happen outside of America. I don't want the child to be adopted here." And that was like, I hadn't heard that story very often. But I thought it was really important for Americans to realize that not everyone thinks that we are the land of opportunity. But the assumption that other places need us also is part of the trauma because it's part of the trauma in the sense that so many of us adult adoptees are doing what's called "coming out of the fog", which is like trying to make sense of all the "isms" that came into play around our adoption: racism, classism, you know all of the aspects of society and then that sense, you know, the adoptive parents have some complicity in it.

L

Lauren Pinkston 43:36

That's so very helpful and I hope that people can hear that without, you know, dropping their jaw and feeling offended. Yes, you know, with the presence of privilege also, as you said, comes that complicity in a broken system, unless we're using that to make sure that everyone is given the opportunity to live the life that they want to live in abundance. So that's a great a great challenge. I remember when, when my girl was eight, I asked her to help unload the dishwasher and she goes, "All you white people want to do is make us black people work for you." I said "You are't wrong. Also, I still need your help unloading the dishwasher."

A

Angela Tucker 44:24

Yeah. Also you're gonna do your chores, right? I love that she said that because to me it marks like a freedom to express and figure out who she is. I don't think for transracial adoptees trying to figure out our racial identity is stating comments like that in a safe place. It's no different

than a teenager wearing black nail polish and a choker when previously they'd worn, you know, pink and flowers like we're just trying to individuate. We totally accept teenagers when they try on different outfits. And for me, I remember wearing blue mascara that was the thing, you know, that when we do that it is like yes, this is the work of teenagers. But for transracial adoptees that is the work that example you just gave of like, how does it feel to say this? I'm in a safe place where I can try it out. You know, this gets a little tricky with white parents and black kids who need to understand their relationship with the N word. Which is again, another reason for a more expansive family to have other hopefully black or brown people in their lives to help go through that period of trying to understand who am I in the world who am I to you? And so I love that example.

L Lauren Pinkston 46:02

Well, she is she is so incredibly strong. She's so incredibly wise. And I think that your work is going to really mentor her and give her a safe place. She's already she's already familiar with you. I'm asking for myself. I don't know if you mentor teenagers. I know you mentor adult adoptees, how might people tap into your knowledge and your openness?

A Angela Tucker 46:23

Yeah. Oh, all adoptees 12 and up can be mentored through the Adoptee Mentoring Society, which is a nonprofit that I founded last year, and I'm working really hard to build it up so that there can be more mentors for adoptees. So I'm proud of that organization. So for adoptees, that's the spot. It's both one-on-one mentorship and group mentorship, which is really lovely to just feel like you're not alone and it's virtual. So folks are all over the country and all over the world now, which is also pretty neat. So that's a great way to for adoptees to get connected for adoptive parents. I have a lot of research resources on my website at angelatucker.com, both consulting to talk in one-on-one about things that are going on in your family and then also films and my podcast and then my book of course.

L Lauren Pinkston 47:25

Well you are such a gift to us. I am excited to lean even more heavily into your work as, you know, as we move into these teenage years and I just I'm thankful that you've been willing to put yourself and your experiences out into the world so openly for those of us who are trying to navigate all kinds of big feelings to learn from and to have any language inside our homes to make our homes a safer, more vulnerable, honest place for our kids to feel like they can speak directly to us and honestly about all the all the things going on inside. You're just such a such a joy such a gift and we will make sure that your website is available to everyone who's listening. Anything else that you'd like to share with with folks as we close today?

A Angela Tucker 48:18

Thank you. Thank you for listening. Thanks for hanging in there for any listener who felt a twinge of discomfort to sit in that and hopefully explore that feeling and whatever was stated with a friend over tea you know, like keep the conversation going. Don't let it go dormant

because I think will help the future health of us adoptees, so thank you.



Lauren Pinkston 53:15

Thank you, Angela.