

Marshall [00:00:00]:

If the past few years have revealed anything, I really hope it convinces us of our need to be reconnected. You know, how did you and I, how did our people, how did we get to a point where, I mean, at least across different ancestry and origin, the status quo is to be disconnected? And maybe more importantly, I'm wondering how those of us who do long for belonging, how do we confront the fact that we are all paying a price for this disconnection? Some more than others. I mean, if it is possible to move forward, connected, belonging to one another, maybe we got to explore the stories of how all of us, I mean all of us, you, me, our people got here. Welcome back to the Reunion podcast. My name is Marshall Pollard, often referred to as Mr. P by creatives of all ages. I was an elementary school teacher that turned into an intergenerational network builder. I've always been fascinated with how people are connected and disconnected.

Marshall [00:01:09]:

For a while now, I've been on a journey with Jerry Colonna, author of *Reunion: Leadership and the Longing to Belong*, to sit with the stories, as he likes to say, listening to stories of people's ancestors, of their origins and our individual and collective longing to belong.

Darryl [00:01:30]:

I'm from Washington, DC. But I'm from a neighborhood, Kenneworth Parks. And I started out as a normal and innocent kid. Want to play sports, baseball, basketball. Good in school, still good at them things. But that was mainly what I was focused on at the time. But the neighborhood, growing up, I didn't really recognize what I recognize now as an adult.

Darryl [00:01:55]:

So I might have been running through bullets, I might have seen things, but I wasn't worried about it enough to remember them. Because I was a child growing up until I was twelve years old, I started noticing things that weren't normal. Like say, me and my mom and my little brother and sister, we go to the mall one day. We got to get on the train, other people hop in a car or we share a meal at the mall, stuff like that. I started recognizing at the age of twelve, and that made me realize a lot. Like I didn't want to be here for that long. But when I was a child, I lived because it was fun. Fire hydrant on. Summertime.

Darryl [00:02:41]:

It was really fun. All my friends were still there. None of them was dead. It was OGs, the OGs that really was looking after you, like holding the hood down. But it ain't like that no more. So if you go around there today, I swear to God you can hear souls like, I ain't gonna lie. I might sound delusional, but I know because I've been there for so long, and energy, it ain't right no

more. If you look at it, it's really declining crime rates and all that.

Marshall [00:03:09]:

That brings me to being curious about who your people are, right? You mentioned a few of your family, your friends, the OGS in the neighborhood. But growing up, and even to this day, how would you describe who your people are? Where are they from? How did they get to DC?

Darryl [00:03:24]:

Yeah, man, I ain't gonna lie to you. I don't really know none of that. Like, my family is secretive about the past, as in, you need to stay in a child's place. And I had that idea, that mindset for so long, I don't even ask about it. But I'm realizing I need to know because some traits that people dismember can be in you and you won't even know. You know what I'm saying? But do you think we can be our own person, like, without our ancestors? Even if we have no knowledge or we have knowledge about them? You don't think you can just be your own person? You don't have to have no traits from your ancestors or anything? Do you think that can be possible?

Marshall [00:04:04]:

I don't know, man. That's a good question.

Darryl [00:04:06]:

I'd be thinking about it because I feel like I don't relate to anyone in my family. Like, if I have a talk like this with them, something they go over it like they mind just wondering. But that's what I'm saying. It's also someone lost, because the people that probably would have listened to me are ancestors. My grandma. I know for a fact that's what I'm saying. See, I just answered my own question.

Speaker C [00:04:32]:

Hi, I'm 86 years old. I was born and raised in Washington, DC. Thank you for the opportunity, Darryl, to want to interview me. I've been wanting to tell this for a long time. Really? My first memory of actually going to.

Marshall [00:04:57]:

School, he said, It ain't right no more. When I heart. Darryl, 22 years old, born and raised in DC. Say this. I wonder to myself, when was it right? As I listen back to his story, his grandmother's story, as I come into consciousness with my story, my people's stories, I keep on wanting to ask, was there ever a time when each and every human inherited a world of love, safety, of belonging? Because in his voice, in his story, I'm confronted by the tragic tension between his

longing to belong and his experience of a place designed to disconnect him from his people, even his childhood. It's a basic human need to belong, to be safe, secure, and to become our own person, as Daryl said. And yet his story reminds me, maybe you, that the places we grow up in carry the legacies of those who came before us.

Jerry Colonna [00:06:13]:

So for me, the honest question was that I only looked at the question of belonging through the lens of a very narrow aperture of how did it feel, emotionally and psychologically in my own body and my own family. And it really wasn't until I started to try to do this work that I began connecting the dots to a larger experience in the world. What was it like to be the only white family in a predominantly black neighborhood? What was it like to experience a certain kind of violence both within the house, but outside the house as well? And it was only really through this work that I connected the emotions of what I was experiencing with the intellectual knowledge of realizing what was happening in Brooklyn at the time, which was the result of blockbusting and redlining and economic policies that are centered on white supremacy, that are centered on systemic othering and systemic oppression. And for me, it's been a journey of actually coming into relationship with these parts of me that I actually dismembered my theory. And that's all it is at this point, because I'm still working with it. My theory is that the more we come into reunion with these parts, with these stories, the greater the chance for a broader reunion to happen.

Marshall [00:08:00]:

Jerry and I are on a journey together to better understand the intersection of ancestry, origin, and the longing to belong. In each episode of the Reunion podcast, you'll join me and Jerry as we hold space for full-body listening, as he likes to say, listening to the stories of people. People who represent an intersection of identities, lived experiences, and generations. You'll hear stories of seeking belonging with people, and two place stories about what living in a world of systemic othering has done to all of us. Maybe, just maybe, you'll hear your stories. Stories about what a reunion may look like. In today's episode, we focus on two stories from people whose journeys are influenced by the neighborhoods and communities that their ancestors lived in and brought them into. Stories from people whose journey towards love, safety, and belonging is influenced by their place.

Marshall [00:09:09]:

Stories from people like Grant.

Grant [00:09:18]:

How does othering shape the communities you're connected to today?

Marshall [00:09:24]:

Grant was born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama, and has spent the majority of his adult life as a husband, a father, and a professional recruiter. And I've learned firsthand he is someone who has always cared deeply and critically about where he calls home for Birmingham specifically.

Grant [00:09:43]:

And there are lots of books and papers that have been written on this topic, so I'm not adding anything new here. But there's a physical manifestation of othering in Birmingham that is the embodiment of Red Mountain. For people in actual mountainous areas, it's more of a hill, but we call it Red Mountain. And it is a very clear, both now and certainly historically, a very clear divider of Birmingham. You have the over-the-mountain communities, which predominantly have been white communities and were white flight communities, and inner city Birmingham, which is predominantly black. MLK famously described Birmingham as one of the most segregated places in America, and there's still a lot of that is true. And this physical mountain is still very much alive. And we have taken nature and used it to help establish our othering strategies in this city.

Grant [00:10:46]:

And I think that still very much shapes the community that I live in.

Marshall [00:10:53]:

Birmingham, Alabama. It's a place I've learned to call home. And it's way more than bull, Connor's fire hoses, and dogs. It's also more than just a few women and men that the remaining history books tell us stood up to white supremacy. Birmingham is called the Magic City largely due to the growth and population that resulted from the magical amount of steel that enslaved and indentured black folks bore from the mines of Red Mountain. I've come to know that her magic is in her people. A city whose people, young and old, sparked a worldwide revolution for human and civil rights. A city that has proven, if systemic, belonging is to be realized.

Marshall [00:11:45]:

It requires residents like Grant to nurture and sow seeds of reconciliation and redemption.

Grant [00:12:00]:

All right, it is a very warm February. Oh, no, March. Very warm March day. The year is going super fast. I am sitting outside. There are birds flying. There are squirrels running around. It is spring in full effect in Birmingham, Alabama.

Grant [00:12:34]:

All right, what were the stories you were told about your ancestors? Not a lot, is the answer. So where I live now, where I'm sitting currently, recording this is no more than 2 miles from the house that my dad grew up in and that my grandparents lived in. And I drive by it every single day, but I know almost nothing about them. I know that he was some kind of an engineer. The was a homemaker. People would say that my grandfather was a hard, stern man, but that's how he was that's really some of the only things that I've ever heard said about him, that he was a stern and serious hard man. And I don't even know the names of my great grandparents on that side nor any associated cousins or great aunts, great uncles, et cetera on my mom's side.

Grant [00:13:35]:

The stories told were much more impactful and accessible. My grandfather died pretty early on. He died in 1989 when I was four years old. And both my mom and my grandmother did a pretty good job of just describing him and talking about him. This Lanky. Poor Alabama farmer. One son of eight children from Arleigh, Alabama. North of Birmingham.

Grant [00:14:00]:

Mr. And Miss Smith. My great-grandparents, James and Leela Evans, were just poor farmers. They had 80 acres and they farmed it and they sold their products and they had a mule that they would carry products to and from the market. These were just very unassuming farming people in north central Alabama. And that is my root system. If there's anything I do know about my grandparents and my great-grandparents, the message is these were hardworking people. And sometimes these were hard people.

Grant [00:14:33]:

These were hardened humans, right? Hardened by their work, hardened by their environment sometimes maybe I would imagine hardened by their own experiences of life but hardened nonetheless. And it's interesting to try to tap into that and think through what are the realities of that that feel native to who I am and that I want to keep in place. There is a work ethic that is well established in my bones and yet at the same time I want to be cognizant and I hope that my life is not marked by that exclusively. That there is an openness that there is an appreciation of arts and culture and there is a pursuit of community beyond my work ethic that keeps me from slotting into the hardened category, right? That he was a hard man or that he was short short-tempered man. He's the person you want to call when you need a job done. But he can't relate to his kids. He can't relate to his spouse. He can't relate to his community.

Grant [00:15:40]:

I want to flee from. I want to reject that wholeheartedly. And that's a big part of how I experience, whether rightly or wrongly, and certainly imperfectly. And it's never black and white, but that's how I think about my ancestors in many ways, is that these were hardworking, hardened people. But a rich tradition of broken relationships and hardheartedness that I mourn, that I hope gets rounded off and the edges become less sharp. In my generation and in my marriage on behalf of my children, I think there's something very nostalgic very tactile and palpable that I can feel even in our own property, right? That we live on this land. We have seven acres. And the fact that our property, in our home that we chose and that we found and we feel unbelievably blessed to be the stewards of is beautifully reflective of our desires.

Grant [00:16:35]:

It is technically in the city of Birmingham. It is not quote, over the mountain. It is bound to the welfare of Birmingham and the residents of Birmingham of which we are counted. And yet it is also a very unique property in Birmingham. It is seven acres. There are aspects of it that are grand. There are aspects of it that are aspirational. There are aspects of it that are this beautiful kind of canvas to work on and it keeps me tied to my root system of farming.

Grant [00:17:11]:

People of people who whether they loved the land which I imagine that at least part of them did whether they loved the land or simply viewed it as their means of survival. We plant plants. We have fruit trees we have chickens we have trees to care for. We have some land management to be considered. And it's a gift. It's a gift and it's also a weight. So as I wrestle with some of the subroutines I think part of it is who do I come from? Who do I think I am that I'm also prone to desire navigating a white-collar professional world and communities of investors and people with MBAs and Ivy League education. And by and large, the people that I engage professionally are all top 2% earners and that is just not the world that I come from and it's not the world that I want to inhabit exclusively.

Grant [00:18:19]:

Are there parts of it that are enjoyable and are there parts of it that are eye-opening and illuminating and even fun? Yes, there are. But I'm never fully able to shake free the sense that this is not representative of all the people that I want to engage, of all the life that I want to live, of all that I want to be said to be a part of and tied to. And so there is this constant kind of waffling back and forth of who am I? And I feel disjointed in that. I feel that on the days where I am working on my tractor to change the oil or feeding chickens, trying to think through what I'm going to do with 150 fire ant hills that are popping up. Sometimes I'm dealing with those things on the same day that I'm also planning to talk with the head of a private equity group and talk through their portfolios and companies that they are acquiring and what that will mean for their leadership teams and how I might be implicated in helping with that. There's a big part of that that feels energizing to me that I'm constantly doing both and yet there's also always in the back

of my head, always that little voice that's saying you're an imposter and you're not just an imposter and a phony in one of those worlds. You're actually a phony in both of those worlds that you don't belong. It's not inaccurate to say that you don't belong exclusively to one world or the other or any number of other worlds that I might inhabit both now and over the course of the rest of my life or the worlds that my children inhabit.

Grant [00:19:57]:

And I would even go as far as to say that's actually a foundational spiritual belief that I claim that is good to remind myself of, that any world that I define and that I'm walking in physically, I would profess to say that it is not the world for which I was made right. That there are parts of it that are an echo or a foreshadowing of the world that is to come. So in that regard, there's actually quite a bit of peace to engage the world that I see, to engage the world that I live in and the people that I'm with. I am able to feel even for moments at a time if not exclusively and forever or exclusively. I am able to feel present and at home and at peace in many different contexts. And that's a gift. It's a gift and it's also, I think, a responsibility to bear.

Jerry Colonna [00:20:59]:

Okay, I have to jump in. You've already broken the curse. I know you don't feel that way. I know you worry about that, but you've already broken it. You did not do. Your absence at your father's passing was not the same as your father's estrangement from his father. It is not the same that ghost can rest. How do I know you've already broken the curse? Because your father could not ask the question that you just asked, could not make the statement that you just made, and his father could certainly not have made that statement.

Jerry Colonna [00:22:00]:

It is possible, my friend, to see if you step back far than up. I was just thinking of the Wallace Stevens poem *The Cliffs of Moor in Ireland*. And he talks about he muses about my father, my father's father, my father's father's father. It is possible to see the entire lineage across three generations, four generations of men. Because your grandfather was a stern man because his father was fill in the blank, right? Probably for safety reasons, probably to keep the family fed. Your great-grandfather succeeded because look at who you are. You are not a hardened man. You're just not.

Jerry Colonna [00:23:08]:

You may appreciate hard work, but you're not hardened.

Marshall [00:23:16]:

In Grant's stories and the stories of his ancestors, like Jerry, I hear an opening to life, a legacy

that softens what's been hardened. I heart how one generation's toil can prepare a harvest for those they may not even get a chance to know by name. Maybe it was the birds chirping in the air behind Grant, but there was a melody of triumph, of arrival. I hear in his voice. What must it be like to embrace that gift? The responsibility of not having to, metaphorically speaking, work the land in the same way that your ancestors had to? Grant is and will likely always wrestle with breaking the curse of his forefathers, all while living in a place designed to benefit him. But what if harnessing the legacy of your ancestors occurs while living with the consequences of a system that historically limits your safety and your belonging? At the beginning of the episode, we heard Daryl wrestling. He's realizing he's stuck in systems that don't protect his people or his place.

Darryl [00:24:36]:

I've been in many places. Like, the only home that I ever considered a home was my grandma's house. It wasn't even just because it was a house. It was just the love and the energy there. It was the support. I'm not saying my mom didn't give me the support. The things in the neighborhood, it outgrew her support. At my grandma's house, it was none of that.

Darryl [00:24:56]:

It was just school. We talked. We have talks and all that. I feel like she lived with me. She lived through me. So I know her, but I barely know her. I got memories of her, but I also know I can feel that she's my guardian. Angel.

Darryl [00:25:15]:

Because when I come around the family, I feel like people tell me, they won't say, you act just like my mother. They won't say, you remind me of my mom. But the energy tells me that I wouldn't say anything, and I know she watching me from above.

Jerry Colonna [00:25:30]:

Daryl, do you remember what your grandmother smelled like?

Darryl [00:25:36]:

It's like I don't smell it no more, you know? But when I smell it, I notice it.

Jerry Colonna [00:25:41]:

Yeah, okay. That smell is going to be with you forever. All you have to do is close your eyes and remember. And when you do that, she's going to be in you. And if you need her I know you don't think you need her now, but if you need her, remember the smell. That's how humans work. We



attach meaning to the other senses.

Darryl [00:26:24]:

I realized most people generations before me, they were landlocked, which means it's a book Tony Morrison wrote. It's called *Song of Solomon* that I read, like, in 10th grade. And the thought of landlock stayed with me till this day because it has a deep meaning. When you search it on Google, it says it's full of land. But it's like a person that's stuck in the land, like stuck in a neighborhood, for example, or stuck somewhere they don't want to be for real. And I feel like the generations, my family been stuck where they didn't want to be for so long. And I as just talking about how the only person that I noticed that really made it out was my grandma. But when she passed, the family went back to being landlocked around the neighborhood.

Darryl [00:27:23]:

And I just feel like that's very deep because somewhere that I call home shouldn't feel like I'm locked there or stationed there. It should be somewhere that I want to go for comfort. And I feel like my mom, my little brothers and sisters, to them, it'd been so comfortable that they don't see it as something that's not right. So I feel like my grandma was the startup of removing herself from being landlocked. And I also feel like that's living through me also because when I go back to my way back around my neighborhood, I don't feel how I used to feel. I got more sense now. I know what's going on now. So it's just a lot of depression.

Darryl [00:28:13]:

It's a lot of death. It's just a lot of everything. Anxiety that go through my head as I pull up around the and it shouldn't feel that way. If I call that my home, I can't become landlocked no more because even the thought of that makes me uncomfortable. Also, sometimes I do have to separate myself from other people to really know who I am, to remember why I was put here on Earth. I know that I have to experience that happiness within myself to become on with myself. I have to experience that. I have to experience a lot to learn from my experience, to become one with myself.

Darryl [00:29:00]:

I feel like I lived a life where I was happy enough. I laugh, I smile a lot, like I joke around. But most of the people that I live with, I don't think they experience that. So I force myself to make them happy or lead them in the right way so they won't feel like me. So they won't feel like you have to make this person happy, to make yourself happy. You know.

Marshall [00:29:29]:

When Daryl goes around his way, he says he knows what's going on now. He's learned and is a

model for me. Maybe you how to remember the smell of your guardian angel. Ghosts now experienced as ancestors, elders who have been remembered, known again, known in a new way, or maybe even for the first time. Daryl and Grant, like you and me, are descendants of ordinary humans. Mothers and fathers, daughters and sons who be it from soil, in the ground or street corners are people journeyed towards love, safety, belonging in extraordinary ways. The guests you've heard from on this episode captured dozens of hours of stories about how they remember their ancestry and origin. I wonder what their descendants will hear when they take a listen.

Marshall [00:30:36]:

I wonder what will be remembered, how their longing for belonging will be continued and created.

Jerry Colonna [00:30:46]:

*Remember* by Joy Harjo. "Remember the sky that you were born under. Know each of the star's stories. Remember the moon. Know who she is. Remember the sun's birth at dawn. That is the strongest point of time.

Jerry Colonna [00:31:09]:

Remember sundown and the giving away tonight. Remember your birth. How your mother struggled to give you form and breath. Remember your birth, how your mother struggled to give you form and breath. You are evidence of her life and her mother's and hers. Remember your father. He is your life also. Remember the earth whose skin you are. Red earth, black earth, yellow earth, white earth, brown earth.

Jerry Colonna [00:31:48]:

We are earth. Remember the plants, trees, animal life. All who have their tribes, their families, their histories, too. Talk to them, listen to them, they are alive poems. Remember the wind. Remember her voice. She knows the origin of this universe. Remember, you are all people and all people are you.

Jerry Colonna [00:32:26]:

Remember you are all people and all people are you. Remember you are this universe and this universe is you. Remember, all is in motion, is growing is you. Remember, language comes from this. Remember the dance language is that life is remember our what is your story of belonging?" Reuniting with the stories of others is part of the journey to that grand reunion where there is no separation and no end to paradise. And as with every such endeavor, all who participate have their own stories to share. To help you find your own story, consider journaling

in response to three broader questions, the first to get ups started is who am I? Journal in response to prompts such as these how do I identify who and what that might relate to that identity? Have I not seen? How did it benefit me or my family, including my ancestors, not to see or recognize such things? And which stories of my family of origin have we chosen to remember? And which have we chosen to forget? The second broad question is whose am I? That is, to whom do I belong? Consider journaling in response to these prompts to whom did my parents belong? What is it that tells me I belong to my family? What does it feel like to know that I belong? And whom among my ancestors might have been left behind or forgotten? Lastly, consider what it is that is your work to do. What is your work that may not be finished but may also not be neglected? In response, consider these journal prompts how have I been complicit in and benefited from systemic othering?

Jerry Colonna [00:35:27]:

What would I have to give up that I love, that might make me feel safe, and that I belong so that others might feel the same way? How might I create systemic belonging for others? And lastly, whose story should I be listening to? Whose stories are after all, my story is as well.