

Marshall [00:00:02]:

Every human being has a story. It might be the only thing we all got in common. In a sense, it may be how we belong to one another. Welcome 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, and I've always been fascinated with how people are connected and disconnected. For a while now, I've been on a journey with Jerry Colona. He's the author of *Reunion, Leadership, and the Longing to Belong*.

Marshall [00:00:42]:

We've sat with the Stories, as I've learned to say. Listening to stories of ancestors, of our origins, and our individual and collective longing to belong.

Leticia [00:00:58]:

I have this image in my head coming up, And it's it's a bit cheesy, but just because you say, you know, looking into someone's eyes, we don't spend enough time doing that. And I can't say I've ever had enough time to spend time looking into someone's eyes that I dislike, that I don't wanna be around. Mhmm. But what I do think about is this vulnerable moment when I stare into my partner's eyes, and I take my time, but I actually who I actually see is me. Her eyes are a chocolate brown that just reflect light, and it's like looking at her, I'm gazing into her eyes, but I'm looking at me. And I just kinda wonder, like, what it means, like because that's what makes me nervous and that I'm spending that time and Just kind of becoming, you know, one with each other, going back to the point about descendants.

Marshall [00:01:51]:

I've come to find out this journey towards being fully human, of belonging to ourselves, to our people, and to each other, I think it starts with our stories. And before we sit with more stories like Leticia's, I wanna share the story of how the reunion podcast came to be. It was in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic when I read Jerry's first book called *Reboot, Leadership and the Art of Growing Up*. I read it during a time in my life, like many of us, when I was doing some soul searching, exploring my inner child, childhood trauma, all that radical self-inquiry, as Jerry calls it. I got connected to Jerry over email, and that turned into the last three years of being in a men's group with him, it's how I've learned to call him elder, a mentor, my white Buddhist brother from Brooklyn.

Me and Jerry externally couldn't look more different or disconnected. I mean, from our ancestors to the types of people who spend time around our dinner Jerry and I, in some ways, breathe in different air. I spent the last sixteen years creating circles of chairs in rec centers, school cafeterias, and housing communities between DC and Birmingham, Alabama where students, Their families, educators, creatives, entrepreneurs, and community members come to take a

seat in those chairs and design health and wealth together.

Marshall [00:03:25]:

Jerry has spent decades coaching leaders and executives. For over 10 years, he's led Reboot, a coaching company that through 1 on 1 sessions, workshops, and retreats helps people like you and me live out a belief that in our work lies the possibility of the full realization of human potential. We may have had distinct paths of growing up, of longing for connection. But it's through our brotherhood we've been convinced to courageously consider. What if we all belong to one another?

Jerry Colonna [00:04:01]:

As you read *Reunion*, you're going to see or hopefully experience an assertion that I make, which is that, so much of the way we are constructed and wired stems from our desire for love, safety, and belonging. And it's a useful framework, and that's all it is. It's just a construct. But it's a useful framework to start to unpack and understand parts of our experience to do what I referred to as what I call radical self-inquiry. Right? Pausing and asking fairly substantive questions about your own experience, not to find blame or fault, but really out of curiosity. And it and I often say that it's radical because we don't do it. We kinda just move through life, And we kinda don't actually pause and ask a question like, when did you first start to experience belonging? Have you ever experienced that safety that precedes belonging? Because we just have to kinda get our shit done. We just have to move forward. Right?

Marshall [00:05:33]:

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 us as we hold space for full-body listening, as Jerry likes to say. Listening to stories captured during whole group conversations, as well as excerpts from independent activities and recordings that our guests completed. Stories from people representing an intersection of identities, lived experiences, and generations. You'll hear stories of seeking belonging with people And to 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. But this podcast isn't just about the stories you here, it's also about your own story, about your ancestry, origin, and the longing to belong. That's why we close each episode with curiosities and activities inspired by the stories you're about to hear.

Marshall [00:06:42]:

On today's episode, we focus on two stories from people whose journeys to find love, safety, and belonging included what it meant to be the first in their family. Stories from people like Leticia.

Leticia [00:06:57]:

I'm Leticia. I am originally from Colorado, but came here to DC from New York. I'm just a big thinker that ends up in big places, so I'll dream of something and end up meeting Spn and Erika, and then I'll dream something else and end up at a really cool restaurant making a beautiful community in East Harlem, and then I'll dream something else, and I end up here in DC reuniting with so many people.

Marshall [00:07:28]:

Leticia is a designer and strategist, a 1st generation Peruvian American on a journey of living out her family's traditions. In one of our listening sessions, Leticia shared that growing up, home was her mother's restaurant, dinner tables full of family, and those they prepared and shared meals with. It was the hub of their community, of where and to whom she belonged. It was there that she listened to the lessons of her family, realizing that for generations, sometimes to be safe, To sustain the family table requires you to leave it.

Leticia [00:08:06]:

I almost wonder sometimes if I wasn't more mature and grown-up when I was little. My mom always made sure that I was looking at what existed beyond her. She always had me thinking, asking questions like, what are you gonna do without me? How are you gonna take care of yourself? Because all you have is you, because I'm an only child. My grandparents came to the US when I was 8 days old, and so I grew up Helping them translate immigration papers, going to doctors' appointments, and being 5 years old trying to translate medical language for my grandparents, which is a pretty experience for a lot of people, a lot of, like, us that are the first ones born here and grew up speaking both languages. And so I think I was, in a lot of ways, very acclimated to that sense of care and what does a grown-up do very early on, and my mom would make sure that I almost a comparison. Do you see these conditions that people are living in? How do you be of service to that since we are in a restaurant and we are of service to these people that come in? But also dream out, because her story was when I was 18, I came to the US with nothing but a little hand luggage. And so I took that as a kid, and I was like, what is gonna be my story? Like, where do I go? But eventually, it became a sense of where my mom had to surpass conditions that limited her because of her gender, because of her location, where she was from. For me, it would be one kind of much more of a fulfillment, a spiritual, a psychological one, where I would go and explore what it meant to be happy, fulfilled, or self-actualized. I hop around from place to place.

Leticia [00:10:00]:

I think it's because I'm looking for what kind of vibe or what kind of identity is going to be the one that feels right. I think as I grew up, I've had kind of this, like, very token precious child

upbringing with a very protective family. We have a very protective and educating and involved mom who was gonna make sure I had everything and was, you know, set up for success and to be ready for a world without her and my two grandparents who left everything they had in Peru and just stayed to take care of me. And it put a lot of pressure on me to know, like, What did we give up for you? Look at our labor. Look at all of this for you. And so that pressure to carry something on, and if it would be worthy enough or good enough and what that would What could that even be? So kind of thus, like, that story of, like, am I gonna immigrate? Or, like, how do I parallel their story and how do I replicate their story good enough for them to kind of see me in themselves and how much, I think I failed at that. And when I see kind of those echoes and reverberations, I've started to see more patterns where there's a loneliness that they've all gone through.

Leticia [00:11:27]:

My grandpa's story was, like, he was young. He was, like, 16. They altered his birth certificate so that he could go work in the mines and provide. And he talks to me a lot about that loneliness and how it hurt him when I went to grad in New York or when I travel, that I would go off alone. He didn't want me to experience that loneliness. But I was in very good structures, so, like, I was in school. My mom, when she came at 18, she talked about the loneliness, not speaking English, and not being able to call her mom, she'd have to send a telegram for them to travel 4 hours to get to a phone and maybe be able to talk. Where like, when I left, like, I had FaceTime, so and Skype, so it was, like, fine. But I think where the loneliness I'm feeling now is the loneliness and experience where my family has no parallel.

Leticia [00:12:16]:

My peers, my people don't have a parallel for what I'm going through professionally and kind of in, like, this move to DC and undertaking probably one of the hardest things I've done where I'm blending history and policy and all these kind of intangibles, which is what I kind of picked as my thing when I said I'm gonna choose to be happy or choose to kind of be creative. It's not gonna be, a restaurant. It's not gonna be a farm. It's gonna be something else, something magical. I don't know what it is. And so that that search to build and that loneliness is something I'm struggling with. I know I'll eventually go back to my family and my people, but anxiety for me is quiet with myself, and I've had to learn a lot these past couple of years how to be really uncomfortable. And I hate it.

Jerry Colonna [00:13:09]:

Leticia, I'm gonna venture a guess that There are a couple of things that may be going on. And in Buddhism, there's a teaching called the genuine heart of sadness, which is that when we pause and we reflect, part of what emerges it's the genuine heart of sadness that exists behind it all. And one of the ways that we may have learned to keep safe is to keep at bay the genuine heart of sadness. I hear your story, and I hear the past, just the terrorism of Peru, and the losses

and the positive affirmation of keep going, be independent, keep going. And yet, you are bravely remembering People. And in that remembering, you may be coming into contact not only with your genuine heart of sadness, but their genuine heart of sadness, what I hear a yearning for are the elders, the old ones, Who are actually well beyond ancestor. They are the wise ones who hold us. See, this process is through remembering, we turn the ghosts into ancestors so that we can access their elder Wisdom. And sometimes the door we step through It's the door to the genuine heart of sadness. You're doing brave work and feeling that loneliness.

Marshall [00:15:13]:

I've heard it once said that people are people because of people. In her story, can you hear that of her mothers, her fathers, her grandparents? People longing to belong to each other, to belong to more than one country, choosing to venture away from home, and Be lonely in order to find themselves. As Leticia said, you go off on an adventure and learn who you are in order to come back. Leticia accomplished many firsts for her family. The first of her mother's bloodline to be born in the US. The first to grow up speaking both languages, the first to move around the country, and live and work in some of the world's most powerful spaces. Sometimes, being the 1st in your family means you have to cross the threshold from childhood to adulthood early in life. Next, we'll hear from Erica, a designer and film and television producer, born, raised, and currently living in Los Angeles, California.

Marshall [00:16:22]:

I've come to know Erica as one of the most creative and thought-provoking people in the world. Y'all, she is funny and really real.

Erika [00:16:31]:

It was wild. It was Traci with an I. Traci with an I. Like, You're deciding from that point forward. She used to live a happy life and chew bubblegum. There was no it's not a serious name. Erica with a k is a serious name, and it was a name that, Like, now it's a little bit more popular. No one was named Erika. It's so hard, and it's Germanic and hard consonants, Erika. So bars make it so intense.

Marshall [00:16:56]:

Similar to Leticia, in Erika's story, I hear about what it means to grow up as the first. But this time, Growing up, longing to belong is less of a journey of carrying on a family tradition. What if this journey is impeded by a family who, due to forces in and outside of their home, struggled to keep you safe? What if growing up as the first means doing it alone?

Erika [00:17:26]:

As far as, like, my dad, I certainly think that part of the reason that he was interested in my mom was, like, a super, like, fuck you move to this space that he is from. He wasn't softened or, like, compliant or needing to conform to a white space. Like, that really wasn't his thing. He did dress like Magnum, PI, which was wild. But outside of that, like, he was a black dude. And my mom was very much like a white woman. She wasn't a white woman. You would know has, like, black children or is married to black men. Like, knowing what I know now as an adult like, looking at your parent I have parents through adult from an adult perspective.

Erika [00:18:06]:

Like, even for them to decide to be together in the early they got married in 73. I don't even know when they got together, but I would assume it would be, like, 71 probably at the latest, and that wasn't, like, that far past thresholds of the Civil Rights Act And all that came with it and legislation is one thing, like, real life is something else. And just that they both they had to take audacity, bravery, and probably a fair amount of delusion.

Marshall [00:18:35]:

As someone who is literally here because of an interracial marriage from the seventies, I totally get it. There's a sense of rebellion and impossibility that we're born with. Lived realities that this country just doesn't embrace. You're created to be an oddball. The too much of or not enough of in most spaces that you enter. And our parents, they've never lived in this body. Sometimes it's these native differences and what race were considered. Sometimes it's the differences between our and our parents' languages, our cultures, religions, wealth, and yet, sometimes our parents' journey to create love, safety, and belonging for themselves, and for their children.

Marshall [00:19:22]:

Sometimes it coincides with addiction, with struggles of their own.

Erika [00:19:28]:

My father worked he's an air traffic controller, And he would drink after work, which most often was when he got off work around 3 o'clock. So he would go and he would drink until about, I don't know. It seemed late, but we were younger. So it was probably, like, really 7 or 8 o'clock at night. If it was late enough, we would go to be asleep in our bedrooms, like, hoping he would just ignore us and go to bed. And most often, he wouldn't, at least not for me because I was the oldest. And so, Therefore, very little of what was happening in the house was, like, about my own, like, wellness or safety or anything like Yeah. But even if it was like, oh, I got an A in a class, you didn't get an A plus.

Erika [00:20:09]:

So even the A wasn't good enough, and I could always do better. If I got an A plus, there would be there was okay. We're not gonna really talk about the A plus. We'll talk about something else that you're failing and you're not doing your best in. And so there's no peace in it. There's no satisfaction. There's none of that, but you feel capable. So I felt like I didn't belong there from a very early age beyond asking if I was adopted in the way that kids do and because they maybe wanna be, like, a little exotic in their space or be different.

Erika [00:20:43]:

Like, I really wanted to be adopted because I didn't wanna belong to them. It just wasn't peaceful, but it looked really good from the outside. Like, I found out a few years ago that when we would go see family members in the south, they would call us the Kennedys. I get it because my dad was, like, super extra, and he always I think he always rented, like, a Cadillac or something. And then he's showing up with his white wife and his little mixed kids before people were mixed. This was 40 years ago, so there weren't a lot of mixed people not in that way at that point, and people were super kind. No one was rude or mean. I didn't feel ostracized by my extended family, but it was all shiny on the outside and shitty on the inside.

Erika [00:21:35]:

And I think the thing I couldn't understand is who if you have a parent who's an addict and one who is not, Who's responsible? Who do you hold accountable? Is it the person who's sober and has the benefit of sobriety and can see what's happening, or is it the person who's the addict and behaving according to their addiction? And the answer's both. Right? But then where does that leave the children? You know? I see the children somewhere in the middle because, in reality, very little is about the kids. It's about these two adults who are working through their brokenness Together, and the kids are just collateral. And that's at least how it felt, which isn't to say that my parents didn't love me. I know that they love me. I love I think they love me as best that they knew how, But it's definitely not the same depth as the best they could. There's no satisfaction. There's no There's none of that, but you feel capable.

Erika [00:22:49]:

You feel like you can figure it out. Even now, like, if I think about the work that I do, the way for me to belong is through work, and it's important that other people feel seen and that they belong. I just think I'm perpetually the oldest daughter, and so that's how I move through the world. And it's exhausting, and it's incredibly frustrating and isolating, and can be lonely. And it could feel like you're not I'm not sure sometimes if people really like me or if they're happy, I'm there because I will make their lives easier or I'm useful. I felt more grounded when I had small children, but now they're adults. I'm, like, attached to them as adult children, but it's not grounded in the same way. Like, they don't need me in the way that they needed me when they were younger, which is great, but that need for me to be there, do things, sacrifice, mother, whatever, is what I think gave me some sense of belonging.

Jerry Colonna [00:24:08]:

I grew up with a really complicated relationship with anger in the family. My mother was mentally ill. My father was, an alcoholic, and anger was often accompanied with violence. What I learned to do was to suppress my own anger, And the result was that I would start to question my own safety, and I would get incredibly anxious, or I would just back away. You know, I started leaving the house at 13 years old, 14 years old, and any excuse I could have to stay outside the house, so much of my journey of being an adult has been really about coming into a healthy relationship with the justness of my anger and the things that really set me off like boundary violations or people projecting their stuff onto me. And I made a lot of good progress. And, you know, P, you asked about where I see it in my life right now. I actually see echoes of the very same subroutine that I grew up with in my children, And that's really, really fucking hard.

Jerry Colonna [00:25:44]:

I see them struggling with the same issues. So sometimes I can feel, sometimes I feel successful In overcoming some of that and really internalizing it in a healthy way, and sometimes I feel defeated, And I feel like it may be lineage, and that it's just still swimming upstream against probably multiple generation teaching that don't rock the boat. Don't speak your mind. Don't say what you really need. Don't speak up. It's like the consequence of, oh, you're gonna cry? I'll give you something to cry about.

Marshall [00:26:40]:

The more I sit with Erika's story, the more it's abundantly clear that while so much of this was outside of her control, her being forced to become and sustain the responsible older sister identity, and it kept her responsible older sister identity. It kept her safe. It kept her younger sister and her brother safe. She's growing up to create a life inclusive of responsibility she didn't ask for. She didn't want that, but a life that resulted in love, Safety, belonging for herself, for her colleagues, and anyone who calls her friend, for her children, and therefore, likely their children in a way that her parents just weren't able to create for her. They didn't know how to. They didn't have the tools. I mean, what strength? What audacity? Her story and even Leticia's, remind us that journeying towards belonging is deeply influenced by our people, past and present.

Jerry Colonna [00:28:19]:

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 us 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 to 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? In whom among my ancestors might have been left behind or forgotten. Lastly, consider what it is that is your work to do?

Jerry Colonna [00:30:11]:

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? 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 stories as well?