Adapted Podcast:

Eric Poole is a 55 year old Black Korean adoptee whom I sat down with recently to talk about his life. This is part two of that interview. In this episode, we'll follow Eric as he moves to the US for a new life and a new adoptive family. But as we'll learn family can also be found. Here's Eric.

Now, Eric, you said that a lot of times you felt like you were punished a lot for just being who you are as a kid and you know, obviously a kid with some challenges and some trauma. Is, is there an example you can point out?

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yeah I think one of the, probably the, the most traumatic thing that I, I got, I got in a fight at recess and I, I wanna say this was like maybe fourth or fifth grade in elementary school. And, and this is, this is where in hindsight, I, I look at it and, and I, I, I went to a place, really dark place in my brain where I kinda lost, lost. I don't, I don't wanna, I don't wanna say I was untethered to reality, but I was inflicting harm on, on a kid who wanted to inflict harm on me. And I just didn't have the capacity to stop when I, I knew I had the upper hand and I ended up like kicking him in the face and my friends were jumping on me and to get, get me off of him and all. I ended up in the principal's office and I guess there was talks of ex expulsion.

And I think that that may have been a good time to cue in maybe somebody professional to kind of help me, you know, process this. The only thing that I, I remember having the us this conversation about disappointment and, and if you keep doing this, you're gonna get shipped back to Korea. Kind of those kind of conversations, just again, like a lot of fear associated with my behavior and action. And you really need to, you know, get ahold of yourself. And then I think I was like grounded for, I don't even know how long. so I spent a lot of <laugh>, like almost solitary confinement in my bedroom for this to think through. And so, yeah, I just, I just thought I remember that that was being one of the, there were never physical, I never got hit or anything like that. Like there wasn't any corporal punishment associated with it. But yeah, more of it has to do, had to do with just how it, how the interaction was and how it made me feel and how, how these situations were dealt with. So that was, that was really tough. So

Eric Poole:

What were their occupations?

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Oh the father was an engineer and the mother, I don't even know what she, I know she worked for a, a company that dealt with like embalming fluids, like selling, selling things to funeral homes kind of thing. I think, yeah, that's, that's all I remember. <laugh>.

Eric Poole:

Okay. So educated white folks in Minnesota in the seventies. Yeah.

Adapted Podcast:

Yeah.

Eric Poole:

Do you feel that, and I also was adopted in the seventies too in Minnesota. Do you feel that your adoptive parents really weren't prepared, ready to adopt kids of color and also kids from other countries who are coming in with with trauma?

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Yeah, I think I, I I think that's, that's probably kind of the baseline of it, right? Like, cuz cuz they didn't really think through the challenges of, of the reality of adopting children transracial adoption specifically. and I think in the seventies there aren't really mechanism. I, I don't know if there is now I'm gonna name drop. Liz Riley wrote this book about kind of the hierarchy of, of, of children that are children that are available for adoption. And there's, you know, there's, you know, there's an element of like profiteering from adoption centers, I guess. But having said that, I, I feel like in the seventies it's

Eric Poole:

White folks weren't doing anti-racism work then

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<laugh>, right? Yeah. Well, and, and they're resistant to doing it today, <laugh>. That's, but having said that, I, and, and I think this is like your yours in my conversation, is it's more tethered to charity and, and, and altruism in, in a way that when the, the reality of raising a child is fundamentally not about those things. And it really kind of upsets the cart, so to speak, you know, in a way. So, so that's a long-winded answer to say, yes, I'm inclined to give, give people the benefit of the doubt and saying I think they're, they were well-meaning to do, do what they did. but the, the work of being a parent and then, and they were older too, you know, I think it was almost like if I was at my age, you know, the energy it takes to be a parent, if I had young, young kids, you know, and then on top of that, a kid with a lot of challenges, yeah, I think it would be hard.

No, no matter who you put in these, this position as a parent, my existence as, as their child kind of looked like this, every interaction I had with people, there was a often an acknowledgement that they weren't my biological parents. So there were always these barriers that were just erected, right? so the explanation, like even new friends, I would come in and they'd be like, ah, those are your parents, you know, or, or people you meet. And it was, that was always that. Or school administrators saying, oh, those are your adoptive parents, you know, like, okay, you know, so there was, there was something not genuinely family about how this thing was kind of put together, right? And so, so you kind of exist in that space as a, as a child of a transracial adoption. And then the parent start putting those, those barriers unbeknownst to them in terms of how they speak to you. you know, like shipping you back,

Eric Poole:

There's always an asterisk

Asterisk, you know, you should be grateful that, that you, you were adopted, you like, there were all these kind of subtleties of, of conversations or at least monologues in, in my case, that would kind of presented to, to you to create this division about the lack of genuineness of our family. And then, and for them, you know, I'm the youngest kid, just kind of witnessing all the older children of color in the family just kind of dis the relationship just disintegrating in front of me. And I'm just like, okay, I guess I'm just waiting to be the next next kid who doesn't make, make this family work kind of thing. And it was, it was, by the time I got, I got to that point, I've, I've kind of figured out that, that yeah, this was not sustainable and it's not gonna be sustaining.

Adapted Podcast:

Well, so Eric, I'm thinking like in Korea you felt like your skin wasn't the right skin color, you know, you were, you were not Korean, and that was made clear to you, and then you get to America and your parents, you're also darker than your parents. And maybe you, you dealt with some racism within your own family and environment. How did you feel, you know, looking back now, do you, how did you feel about your identity and your, your racial identity?

Eric Poole:

So going back to Korea, we were identified as Black kids in Korea, right? Like, and whatever Korean equivalent to the n word would be thrown at us constantly. I remember, I don't, I don't know how well you remember Korean, but we were called in in the orphanage. I remember like somebody called us [inaudible], which is like a Black crow or in something like that. It's like, so early on, even in Korea, we knew that we were Black. And then, and then I get adopted into a, a family where there's no question that I'm, I'm certainly not white and I've never been able to pass for white. And, and if you were to look at me physically, I mean, as I get older, I think more of my Asian features are becoming more pronounced. And so now I get more like, oh, Hawaiian or Simonean or Filipino, maybe.

Adapted Podcast:

Yeah, you've got the apple cheeks.

Eric Poole:

What's that?

Adapted Podcast:

Got the apple cheeks. Apple cheeks

Eric Poole:

And a broader face kind of thing, right? Yeah. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. So I think, and then once I was adopted and living in New Hope, I, I pretty much existed as a young Black boy. Like that's how I was kind of, even though I was living in a all white environment. So that was, that was com compartmentalizing. My, my race was just being Black. And then there were, I had two other two of my absolute best friends in elementary school. They were both Black kids, right? I think there was a, there's an element of at least African American, American African American culture, American Black culture I guess is very, like, if you look at the spectrum of who is is identified as Black, they can be white as white and still be Black and Black as Black. So this the, there was a greater acceptance of yeah, you're one of us kind of thing.

And I, I realized that in a way, I remember I went to one of my Black friends, like family barbecue, and I still remember his mom was introducing me to his grandfather who came from the south, I guess. And the mom said, oh, this is, this is Eric, he's part Korean. And the grandfather kind of laughed it off and says, said something to the effect, like, I'm sick and tired of these niggers not thinking they're niggers. Like, like that's how he's, he said that to me, like Everybo. And I think, you know, his whole thing was like, oh, I remember what he said. He said, yeah, it wasn't like he wasn't gonna be sold as a slave kind of thing, you know what I mean? Like, so if all that makes sense, but I just remember having that interaction and understanding like I didn't say anything, you know, but you know, like he, he was just saying

Adapted Podcast:

Like, somehow you were better than,

Eric Poole:

Well, somehow I was diminishing me, me being Black by her identifying me as something other than Black, along with being Black kind of thing. Like, you know, and, and in his, his eyes I was just, you're Black, you know, don't, don't, don't gimme all this other stuff that you're not <laugh> kind of thing. At least that's that's the way I took it. And, and I think that was the first, my first kind of understanding of and this, you know, this was like maybe early junior high or late elementary school kind of first understanding of the, not not the history necessarily, but just the, the subtleties of being Black in this country kind of thing. I don't know. There was, there was something that that was kind of odd to me that really stuck with me for a long time. So which was kind of, yeah, it was, it was, it was an education for me and it was just one single exchange that I, I kind of carried on would be

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Yeah. This is something that I just kind of wondered, and I don't know if it's ever been something you've thought, thought about or processed Eric, but you know, you've got, you know, this slave history in the us you know, our country is founded on, on slavery and, and, and an oppression of that whole history of art of this country. And then you think that you, you know, what happened in Korea and, you know, some might say colonialism of the <laugh> and then being brought to this country adopted by white folks. Do you make any kind of correlation? Is it complicated for you?

Eric Poole:

I think the thing, and, and I do think in that realm quite a bit, I think, you know, the, you know, if you want to get kind of this broader perspective of how this world exists is like, yeah, there's a, definitely the power structures that really is centered in, in Eurocentric world, you know, capitalism and all the, you know, the structures that, that have really worked. I feel like we're coming to a evolution in human existence, at least in modern human existence, that we're starting to un unpeel these layers to, to better understand hopefully how we got here and, you know, where we're moving as, as a, as a humanity to make this world more equitable for all that resides on this planet. But I, I think there's gonna be a lot of starts and fits to, to get to where we need to go, whether we ever get there or, or not.

And I, I think for me there is a lot of correlation from my experience from, as a young Korean kid to a an af African-American child and adult in this country. And there's, and at the end of it all, it's, it is kind of rooted in, well, for me, certainly just kind of this buying into some of the kind of the corrosive parts of like, you know, white culture that, you know, there's some, certainly some really wonderful things about white culture, but there are some really dark, dark side of of white culture that exists that we have to navigate. Yeah. It, it is. And the more more we understand it and more we unearth, unearth this, I think the better it's gonna be moving forward. But there's a, there seems to be a huge resistance to, to contextualizing the story so we can kind of move forward as, as humanity kind of thing.

I dunno, does that make sense? I feel like it, it was kind of clumsy, but at the end of it all, I've always been this class half person, right? Like, because at the end of the day, if I can't hold for a brighter and better future, I, I'm like, what am I, you know, why am I here and what am I doing kind of thing. And I think, I think it, you know, as rough as it is in terms of where the politics in our country, in our world is that I think it's, you know, one of the things about what Martin Luther King said about the arch of justice, you know, it's as a, in the macro, it's all moving in the right direction, even though in the micro sometimes things are, things are looking really <laugh> really bleak at times, you know what I mean? So yeah, I just, you know, I'm a huge, huge philosophically appreciate somebody like Martin Luther King who was able to see through, through these things in, in the most meaningful way. it's, it's, it's, it's really hard for me to understand how people couldn't see his greatness while he was living kind of thing, you know? and so, yeah, I, I, I think I'm hopeful. I am certainly hopeful,

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You know, Eric, it sounds like to me just from the little bit that I've known about your story, that hope has been your survival.

Eric Poole:

No, absolutely. I think every day, I, every day as a kid, I woke up. I just yeah, and I, I framed it this way, like, and my wife says this all the time, she's like, you know, you're, you're, she reads these zen philosophy and like, living in the moment, right? Like and I think, you know, after my mom passed away, I felt like every day I wake up, get the food, whatever, whatever that day entails, you know, and, and, and surviving that day, or, you know, the victories are at the end of the day, I look back and that's that I lived through another day, right? Somebody gave me food, somebody gave me shelter, provided shelter for me. and then even as an adult, sometimes I think I'm doing pretty well. I still have a tendency to kind of live, live in the day, so I don't <laugh> which, and, and which I think is is a good carryover from my history, is to be hopeful for every day. And so I think if I didn't have that hope, I think yeah, I would probably be wallowing more in, in into the dark spaces of my brain. And, and, and yeah, I, I don't, I don't think I'm clinically depressed, I feel like, and, and I think oftentimes people say for somebody to go through so much shit, you got, you got a pretty good, like perspective about, about life. And I, I mean,

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I mean, think about this Eric, from what your early origins, your origin story to today, family of three kids, some, you know, in college you have a great career as a, you know, basically breaking, you know, the, the color barriers in, in your field in aviation, think of the long journey that has been

Eric Poole:

Early on. I've had to rely on other people and trust in other people. Yeah. Sometimes, sometimes this has kind of steered me not in the right direction, but in the, in the overarching narrative for my story is that I've always been able to find somebody who, that I can lean on to guide me through some of some of the, some of the areas that I don't know. So, I mean, I think, you know, the Village and Wei jumbo, the people in the village, and then when I went to the orphanage, I, I like singly is definitely that person. And then I, I came to the US and it, it was really murky. And, and part of it was I built myself the social network of friends that allowed me respite. And then when it all fell apart with the family situation that I actually went to live with the pools, which is my family. And, and the pool family and, and Chuck Pool was a friend of mine from the football team. Right. And and the thing,

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Were they African American?

Eric Poole:

Nope. No, they were white family. So I, and, but they were younger. And I think one of the things that I realized about the family, I mean the, the family, I wouldn't say is like idyllic, you know, Norman Rockwell family, right? The father was a recovering alcoholic. And I think one of the things that he kind of helped me is kind of processing my trauma through his kind of alcohol alcoholism in the, in the 12 Steps, right? The aa, he I think he was like 20 years sober. And, and I, I just felt like, like he kind of understood and, and provided that kind of unconditional, kinda loving, welcoming environment that I didn't have with my previous family. Like, there wasn't really that much, that much critique of who I, who I am and, and what I experienced. Like they didn't go through and help me unpack my hope, you know? But at the time, by the time I got to them they provided a really a nurturing environment, and that was supporting. And, and so I really leaned heavily on them, you know,

Adapted Podcast:

He understood this new father figure, understood the power of grace and support and forgiveness, maybe.

Eric Poole:

Yeah. Yeah. I don't, like, I felt like, you know, my mom and dad, so they're, so I took on their name. So the story behind that was, I was, so, I had, so when I got adopted, my last name was Whitbeck, so that was the first Whitbeck, WHIT B E C K. Right. And I felt like I was just carrying around this empty name that was, had no relevance to me anymore. So I went in the Navy, and, and while I was in the Navy, I found out my father and I called him Big Jim had gotten a really bad car accident. They didn't think he was gonna live. So I, I ended up coming home and I think this was, God, I'm trying to remember what year it was like '97, '98, and he had to like be airlifted into I think St.

Luke's Hospital in Duluth. And I remember seeing him, and he had, he was jaundice and just like swollen. He, he's, he was a, he's a big guy, and he just looked massive, right? And I didn't realize how I, I, I was thinking through his, his kind of frailty as well as potentially like losing him. And so I wanted to kind of figure out, like, it was like two things I was trying to figure out. I wanted to drop the Whitbeck name, you know, I was kind of thinking through what that name was gonna be, am I gonna go back to, I wasn't gonna go back to Charles Kim. And so I wanted kind of the semblance of, of figuring out, okay, who do I wanna be moving forward? And, and with this situation, I'm looking, looking at it, I, I realized that, well, the answer's pretty clear.

I need to take, you know, this is my family. Like, this is my dad who's on, on his deathbed. Like, I wanna, I wanna be able to, you know, if I'm gonna have a name, this is gonna be the name kind of thing. And so I, I, I still remember telling him as he was in I C U, I'm gonna change, I told him I was gonna change my name, and he was un, we thought he was unconscious. He just kind of, he took it on, like, he doesn't remember any of it, but I, I, I still remember him physically like trying to get out of bed when he was hooked up to all these things. It was then that moment that I kind of realized the impact of this man and this family on me. And I, I think I, if I'm dragging this name that I, I don't feel affinity for and I need a new name.

That's how the Poole name came to be. And so, I mean, I didn't live with him a long time, but I mean, to this day, you know, there oh, the happy ending was that he actually didn't pass away. then he passed away in I believe 2016 or maybe a little after that. So my kids, that's grandma and grandpa, right? My, my brothers are uncle, uncle Chuck and Uncle Jimmy. I mean and I, I probably talked to Chuck while he, he sends me texts and TikTok tos all the time kind of thing. But yeah, it's, so that's my, my family and how I exist. And I, I think that this whole experience has kind of sh shown me that not to be so negative about, you know, transracial adoption. It's, it's, it, it can be, it can work as long as parents, the adoptive parents have kind of a greater understanding than that. What's the most important part is being a parent, right? And, and, and providing an en environment, no matter how, how much the kid struggles to have create an, create that nurturing environment. So

Adapted Podcast:

Did they ever formally adopt you?

Eric Poole:

No. 'Cause by the time this all happened, I was already an adult, so I, the only thing I could do was change my name. You know, I think I went to, I went to live with them was I 16, you know, and before that, so from like 12 to 16, I just, I would periodically just live at other friends of mine's places, you know? So I, I would get respite for a couple weeks and then go back.

Adapted Podcast:

Is that because of the things just got too bad with your, the family that had adopted you?

Eric Poole:

Yeah, it was, I mean, it was so bad that I, like, there was hardly any communication. Like, I would just walk in the house and, and not talk, and they didn't solicit conversations either. So I was just kind of, I felt like a stranger that lived in that house. The, the one person in the family that I, I really connected to was the grandmother, the maternal grandmother. She reached out to me out of the blue. I remember I was in college, I was actually graduated, but I was, I was a flight instructor up up at university of North Dakota. And I, I got a call out of the blue because I, I, I felt like everyone was ashamed of me. So there was no, like, nobody had reached out through the whole process. Like nobody, none of the siblings ever reached out of the grandparents ever reached out.

So I, I figured what the, as far as I knew, everybody was like, good rids kind of thing. And so the grandmother actually called me one afternoon, and she, she found that I <laugh> I'd went to the University of North Dakota, and then she, through the the Cooper High School Admissions office kind of thing. And, and so she did some sleuthing to figure out where I was at. Like, she deliberately wanted to do this. And I guess the grandfather in the family actually was the one who was trying to figure out where I was at. And he was, he was a little older and, and, and some maladies and, and illnesses. So he couldn't really, and he's, he, he had always mentioned, mentioned me and whatever happened to him. And so the grandma actually said, oh, let me go figure out exactly what happened.

And so I was, I was almost Baltimore, like, you couldn't say my name in that house, kind of thing. So yeah. So I, I connected with her, and then I connected with one of their so they had three biological kids older boys. And I connected with Kurt, who was the middle, middle son. he's probably, maybe 10 years, 12 years, my senior maybe even more than that. And then and then I was able to connect with Tessie. She was, she was the first of the adopted children, but she was the younger sibling of the second adopted Korean girl. And so, yeah, I've had kind of connection with them and communicating, but you know, life just kind of happens and it's hard to get schedules coordinated, but I feel like you,

Adapted Podcast:

You are connected with those Korean sisters?

Eric Poole:

At least one the younger one. And she was kind of yeah, she was closest to me in age. She, she would be the next closest in age. so,

Adapted Podcast:

But the Pooles really were your found family?

Eric Poole:

Yeah, yeah. I, I felt like there wasn't a I feel like they, you know, they provided what I needed at the time that I needed, and it was, and it made me feel like I was at the right place kind of thing. So, yeah. And it was, it was weird because I, I remember my freshman year in college, it was parents' day and, and the football, it, it was gonna be parents' day at the football game. All the parents were supposed to come, they were gonna introduce all the parents at halftime. And at that time, I, I wasn't calling them mom and dad, it was just kinda, it was big Jim and Barb. And I'm like, okay, what am I supposed to do? So I called them and said, Hey, I, I was wondering if you guys would be willing to come. And they're like, absolutely. So they came up and, and they were introduced as my parents. and I think that's where things, things went from less permanent to permanent in terms of my relationship there.

Adapted Podcast:

Well, Eric, I'm just thinking like, if your life was a movie, I'm just thinking that moment where you are, you know, a celebrated football star and the parents are all on the field and they call Yeah. Your name and Big Jim and Barb, what was going through your mind as calling them out as your parents?

Eric Poole:

I don't, like, I don't recall, like in the immediate or at that instance, I think I just remember the, the ongoing conversation because of, I, I, I asked, I think that it was after that event, I started calling them mom and dad, right? Like, and I don't, I don't know if I like, and I wish I could remember when I started calling them mom and dad specifically, there wasn't like a conversation, Hey, can I call you mom and dad? Kind of thing. And at least not, not to my recollection, but I think that was part of how it, it started formulating in my brain. And then when, when we had that accident with my dad, and it, it, it was kind of the solid, you know, it solidified everything I was thinking up to that point.

Adapted Podcast:

Well, it's like you both showed up for each other. Yeah.

Eric Poole:

Yeah. And, and I think for me, there's a, there's a part in which, and I don't want to get too much into detail about the family, but, so after I left for college, they ultimately ended up getting a divorce. So, and, and when I talked to Chuck Chuck said, well, we had, it wasn't like it was the Cleaver family, you know, there were struggles before then, and then you, you came in and things didn't completely get fixed, but it felt like it, it was pretty good. And then, and then I left for college, and it was like, it kind of resorted back to the old, at least the relationship between my mom and dad was back to where it was at. And then, then they ended up getting a divorce. I don't know, like, so I didn't come into a family that was like picture perfect, you know? But through kind of the imperfections for me, it was the perfect thing. I was, you know, and maybe they, they weren't kind of, it, it made them kind of reevaluate their, their own challenges and struggles and the relationship of the family and the continuity of, of the family and, and to take in a kid and having a positive impact on, on the kid kinda helped him, at least for the short term to mend some of the things. But

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Have you, Eric, have you been following Colin Kaepernick?

Eric Poole:

Well, not recently, but I, I did, yeah. Early on and during the whole, you know, kneeling, I think it was, you couldn't help but follow it for a while, right?

Adapted Podcast:

Right. Yeah. But now he's got a graphic novel out. I don't know if you know about Oh, really?

Eric Poole:

No.

Adapted Podcast:

Yeah. Where he's I haven't read it, but, you know, he, he has, from what I understand you know, there's a critical look about his own transracial adoption and the race, the racism he felt from his parents by anywhere from when he wanted to get cornrows, you know, his parents saying that he looked like a thug or something.

Eric Poole:

Yeah, yeah. So I, I dealt with a lot of similar things early on. So, you know, and, you know, take you back to the, the late seventies, early eighties. So I, I, I still had like, connection to singly. Singly would send me, well, let me back up a little bit. So it's Minnesota, so Black music wasn't very accessible. There's a channel called K m oj at the time, there were like 10 watts, and they only broadcasted during the, and I, I remember at, through my relationship with my Black friends in, in junior high school, this radio station existed. So, so I had this affinity for at least Black culture and Black music at the time, right. Was deep into break dancing and early on hip hop, like, and so that was kind of, and singly used to Sergeant Singly used to send me audio tapes where he would be talking and then, and then he would fill the tape with, with urban, you know, urban stations. So I, and these tapes were

Adapted Podcast:

What were some of the songs.

Eric Poole:

What's that?

Adapted Podcast:

Do you recall some of the songs?

Yeah. Well, there were like Parliament Funkadelic songs, Lakeside, old Cameo boy, they were just, you know, all these songs that, that weren't getting any airplay on K D W B or KS 95. and so I would bring these songs to my f my white friends in the neighborhood, and they would really like, you know and, and then I, I remember like the first time I heard Rapper's Delight, and I think that was like one of the first records. I had a paper route, and I had money, and I bought a record Rap Rapper's Delight. And the song is 15 minutes long. And I remember just playing the song over and over again, writing down all the words. So I got it, all the words, and, and I think it, it took me two days to memorize the, the words.

And I would, you know, and then, and then all my white friends in the neighborhood would come over and we'd set up the cassette tape next to the stereo and record it. And so I like exposed kind of hip hop music to a lot of my white friends in that, in that Lilly White neighborhood. So, as I was growing up, I was a young kid who was good at sports, I idolized sports athletes. So I had, like, Walter Payton was somebody I idolized Muhammad Ali. And, and so I would have all these Black sports icons in, in my bedroom, right? And then I would have like, music stars. And I remember at one point, I don't, I, I don't recall whether it was the mom or the dad coming into the room kind of saying, why do you have all these Black people on your wall?

Right? And she go, and I remember them telling me that, that they, they'd wished that I would have more like, not affinity, but more attraction to your Korean culture. Like, and I like when, when those kind of things get presented to you when you're 12 years old, you're like, what does that mean? Like, I, I didn't know what that whole, whole thing meant. And I, I, and I think I took it as, oh, I think they thought maybe they were adopting a Korean kid. And I ended up being a Black kid. And it was, it was something for difficult for them to process. And it was like, and I was, most of my friends that would come to the house that was not from the neighborhood were Black. And, and they were critical of the way I spoke. And there was a lot of that like, like demonizing Black culture in a, in a subtle kind of way.

And I think that's, you know, if somebody like Colin Kaepernick, I, I imagine that's probably a lot of what, what he went through. cuz oftentimes, and these were, they would straighten out my hair so I wouldn't have a bush. They would literally take a curling iron and straighten out my hair so it could be combed like a white hair with part, part on the side. And that was kind of part of my youth is spending and Tessie the older sister who she went to, she, she went to the co cosmetology school. And she would, she would do my hair and it would always be trying to straighten it out with, with, with the, with her curling iron so it can be combed in a fashion that's parted in the side. And, and my hair just naturally, as soon as you wash it, it just curled back up and turned into a frizz. And yeah. And it was oftentimes kind of ridiculing the fact that I, I wanted a big afro. And, and I, I thought it was just kind of a subtle way to, way to kind of diminish it, diminish my, my Blackness, I guess.

Adapted Podcast:

How do you feel about Korea today?

Eric Poole:

so did you ever see that when Hines Ward, do you know Hines Ward?

Adapted Podcast:

Yeah, I've heard, yes.

Eric Poole:

So he's a biracial Korean he was an MVP in N F L Super Bowl like, and then he went back back to Korea and there was this celebration of him, right? And there was this full like unspoken understanding that biracial children in Korea are still marginalized. And, and one of the things I don't, so the photographer from the men's journal, his name was Jun, Jun Park, he and I would have long conversations about, so he was born in Korea and then in Korea, and then he, he, he studied, he went to college up in Canada, I think it was in like Manitoba, Canada. And then he went back and he was the one who, who kind of educated me on just a l still a lack of opportunity for mixed race Korean kids in Korea. Still, they're still fairly marginalized. And for me, I, there's a lot of like deep wounds of my experience with Korea as a, as a Black man, I am hopeful that of all the Asian countries that, or East Asian countries that, because Korea is becoming so international and they're like embracing like Black American culture in through the K-pop medium.

And I feel like my hope is that if, if any country that's gonna be able to create more a embrace diversity, I guess hopefully that country would do it. I think, and what June was telling me, the, the younger generation, you know, and, and much like most younger generation, they, they have a really a broader of looking at, at humanity than the older generation who, who's still kind of rooted in their state ways. so I think my, my hope is that, that Korea tomorrow will be better than Korea today, which is probably better than Korea. When you and I were young kids. and just the acceptance of people who are outside of what their norms are, be it, you know, physically handicapped or of mixed race descent. Yeah. I, I think they still probably have a long ways to go. And I think that's, that sads me.

But having said that, as I get older, I've, I find myself having more affinity toward, like, I, I realize I, I have to understand my Asian culture and Asian roots to fully understand my whole being, right? And so I'm, and I, I'm at a place where I'm really secure as, as a human. And so I think I can do these do some of the research. Like I've been, you know, I'm genuinely in interested in, in the culture of Korea these days as an, as an adult loved the food. I just like, like if, if I had to pick a food and I don't remember being, being a Korean kid, loving the food, and maybe it's cuz I had orphanage food, but, so for me, I, I, I just feel like I have to embrace Korea. Like I, I, I haven't embraced as a young person. And, and so I'm, I'm genuinely trying to do that and, and make sure that I understand the full, my full context of my full history, which, you know, I think ultimately will give me, get me in a better place kind of thing, if that makes any sense, you know?

Adapted Podcast:

Oh, absolutely. yeah. It is a, it is complicated to embrace a country, a culture where you haven't felt embraced. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Eric Poole:

Yeah. Yeah. And I, and I think it's, it's the same situation like many Black Americans feel about America, right? Like some of the white people can't fully understand why that exists, is is just baffling to me. And even some people I think should know better that fails to see, see kind of the nuances of, of different groups of people's existence in this country, you know? But again, I'm, I'm hopeful, I'm hopeful in, in so hopeful in a way that, you know, I, I feel like if you were to see my kids, you know, they're very racially ambiguous. You know, they're, I think if you were to say my oldest daughter probably looks the most like me, but I think all in all, she probably looks more like she could be Puerto Rican or Brazilian or, you know, something, something, not even remotely <laugh> who she is, but that's what she, you know, looks like Malcolm, my middle son, he probably has the most Asian features cuz he, but he is six foot three and just, you know and so he doesn't look Korean in any way, shape or form other than he has very Asian feature eyes.

And then yeah. And, and I, I would say Myles is probably the most ambiguous. Like, I don't, some people think he looks a little Hawaiian or something, I don't know. He looks like a surfer kid with long hair. And they all came out. It was funny cuz when they all came, when they all came to the world, they looked like all three of 'em looked like old Korean women with like Black curly hair, right? And then all the Black curly hair fell out and this is all three of 'em exactly the same. And then came out just blonde hair. So they were really blonde for the first three or four years of their life. And then now their hair is kind of more, I wouldn't say they're dark brown, but kind of mid, you know, mid tone brown, I guess. You know, and they're,

Adapted Podcast:

And they're your, your wife is white, right? Yeah. Yep. Your kids are multiracial. How do they identify in the world? And, and they're young. They're probably still trying to, you know, test things out. But

Eric Poole:

Yeah, I think for them and I think it's, it's often funny cuz I, I I do try to figure out what their, what their world is like. Right? we, we had this funny, and, and this will probably help kind of process us a little bit. Like, we're, we're at dinner one time and one of the kids made this joke and it was about Asians and how they speak, right? And, and the other two kids were, and this was a long time ago when they were really young, they were laughing and then they looked over at me and I wasn't laughing. And I remember Lucia saying, don't you think that's funny? I said, ah, that's kind of mean. She says, well, why is it mean? I said, well, you're poking fun at, at, at the way somebody speaks, right? And you are specifically Asian people.

And she goes, well, I'm part Asian. I said, yeah, but yes, you're genetically part Asian, but you're not l you're not in living in the Asian culture. Like you're, for all intents and purposes, like not very many people are finding you to be Asian. So I, I think, and, and I said, and I I said, an Asian couple, that's our friend. I said, you know, would you tell that joke in front of them and one of the other kids? Like, no, that would be mean. I said, exactly. Like, so why, why would you say that joke in that, you know? And I think for, for our kids, you know, they understand genetically where they're at that they're part Black, part Asian, mostly white. and that they exist in, in, in a very white environment because we're in Minnesota and, and most of the time they're light-skinned enough that race isn't a day-to-day conversation for 'em, as opposed to me when I was younger.

Like, there wasn't a day that that went by when I was a kid that I wasn't reminded that I I was different, you know? and I don't think they're, they live in that, that way. And I, and this is one of the things I feel like when I try to contextualize race and and culture to them, is that I don't want them to be burdened by the racial constructs that I grew up with. You know, like, because I think it's, my hope is that their generation, it's, it's less significant, you know, because Lucia for instance, I mean, she had, and Northfield was a, you know, because of the two colleges, it has a diversity, but most of the diversity is more international, right? so she's had friends that were other friends that were biracial Black white mix. She had friends that were of East African hair, heritage yeah.

And so she kind of existed in, in this world where I think all, all the topics of race, hopefully to them looking at the greater society is like, it's, it, I'm hopeful that it sounds silly to them, you know? Like, why are we do doing this kind of thing? And, and but having said that, I mean, after George Floyd, we had some really sobering and coherent conversations in this house. And that was the, the first time my kids have ever seen me cry. You know, they, you know, I, I remember I had resisted watching that video, and a friend of mine says, you cannot one of my Black friends called me and said, you, why, why have you? Like, you gotta see the video? Like, so I went up, up in to the bedroom and started watching the video and my, I think my youngest, like one of my kids came, I think it was Miles, but I may be wrong, but somebody came into the room and saw me crying and all of a sudden he ran downstairs screaming, dad's crying, dad's crying.

Then all of a sudden everybody's coming up to the room and I'm like, Ooh. You know? And it, it, it really allowed us to have yeah, a really meaningful conversation. And we all went as a family up to the kind of the tribute site in South Minneapolis. I'm hopeful for, for our kids, they're gonna have a better place at, at least racially than there may be other things that are, that are gonna be worse. But, you know, I think the next gen, I'm, I'm really hopeful in the youth of this country. I think a lot of the movement, like if you're looking at what's going on in Tennessee, you know, it's really driven by the young that are protesting against old, you know, mindset and thought process. And I am hopeful of that. You know,

Adapted Podcast:

Do you have, do you envision taking your kids back to Korea one day?

Eric Poole:

yeah. So one of the, one of the things that I really, we were working on doing was right before the pandemic hit, because, so the last time we went the, the enclave where I was born just to kind of paint a picture for you, like everywhere else was very modern. And, and you've been to Korea, I'm a Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. You've been there. So, so much of my recollection of Korea was not what Korea is today. Right? And, but that piece of, that, that land where I was born is still very squalid and poor, which was really interesting for me. I guess we were walking, I could smell the sewage and like, although the,

Adapted Podcast:

It's like time stood still in a way.

Eric Poole:

Yeah. And, but the structures that were housing that, that was there was more modern than, like, we literally had homes that were like with thatched roofs, right? And, and so, but then it, it was juxtaposition, the, the rest of the high rises. And so they, they were, they were telling me that through the interpreter, we went to the city hall that alt that area slated to kind of be knocked down and, and probably more apartments and everything else. Like it, it was, it was so, like when I first went there, I didn't realize it was the same piece of land because there was a huge mountain that was there, and they had just blown the side of a mountain to put an elevated highway. So it, it looked very different, you know? But, but the military post was there. So we, we were gonna take our kids kids there, and then the pandemic hit and it, it was, it was not tenable. And so that's one of, one of our bucket list item to do is go back and, and and sh she'll, you know, show [inaudible] and <inaudible>.

Adapted Podcast:

are they interested?

Eric Poole:

I don't, so I don't think the younger boys are that interested. I think, I think this is one of those things that's gonna come, come to them as they get older. They're, they're just, you know, I think at, at this juncture, they, they know that I have this story. I remember reading the story to them when it first came out through the Men's Journal article and, and it didn't, and they were young. And, and so I, I feel like I, I feel like eventually it's going to, they're gonna be more curious, right? And then, so I can give, provide them some context. One of the wonderful things that Ben Percy did was, so Men's Journal asked them for a 7,000 page articles. So he wrote 10,000 page words and then I guess he got paired down to 7,000 which is, I mean, in, in that magazine, it's the longest article in that magazine.

And but he wrote a 12,000 word essay for to give to me as a, as a gift. so we have that. yeah, the thing that I appreciated was kind of the research that he did regarding kind of the historical piece of where, you know, and the thing that I, I guess I, I knew that I, I just hadn't contextualized it in, in the way, but you know, they, they imported Jim Crow into a foreign land, right? Like that's why I thought Americans were Black and most interactions with Americans were Black Americans, right? So and as we were talking about Ben and I like, you know, you think about when the Korean War was in the fifties, half the country was segregated, so white guys had a hard time, you know, sharing drinking fountains and bathrooms with Black guys, much less socializing and, and sex workers, right? That's just so, so yeah. I mean, it, it all makes sense, you know? So

A lot of the Black soldiers were stationed along maybe more of the front lines or

Adapted Podcast:

Absolutely, yeah. And that's what he found out in his research.

Adapted Podcast:

That's Jim Crow,

Eric Poole:

Right? Yep. Yep. There they were doing the, the line share of the, the difficult work in the battle. I mean, I just, I just got a notice from the va, so I'm, I'm a veteran, right? and there was a concerted effort now for the VA to go back and cuz VA had this history of not processing military related disability for African Americans in a different way than, than white Americans. So it was, yeah. And they acknowledged it. So they were inviting, essentially inviting Black service members to go back and, and revisit the va. So like,

Adapted Podcast:

You know, when you enlisted, did you, did you think of your father, your biological father?

Eric Poole:

So n no, not really because I, I went in as an officer <laugh>, you know, which Okay. Which was a kind of a leadership position. and I didn't do it. I did it for my affinity for aviation, right. It was all self serving kinda thing. Yeah. So yeah, so I didn't, I didn't think through, like, I think for Mo for a moment I thought, well, maybe this is my legacy. Cuz my dad was in the army, but I'm assuming he was, he was a fairly so in, in the military there's enlisted in officers. Most of the African American soldiers in, in that realm were not officers that were, that were enlisted. So meaning they're doing the line chair, the grunt work kind of thing. the thing I remember about my dad though was, I remember the word baker because I don't know whether that was his last name or that's what was his occupation in the, as a cook, you know, like, but I remember that to be, his name was, or at least that was the, the the name or maybe a nickname that was given to him was always Baker.

Like, that's, that's one of those things that I kind of held onto. cuz I, at certain point when my mom was alive, I knew who my dad was. And I still remember this, there was a picture of us three that I had, and then when my mom died, I think I used to just carry it around with me all the time. And then I went to the orphanage and I have no idea what happened to that picture, but there was a photo of us three when I was an like an infant or maybe a toddler. So

Adapted Podcast:

Were, do you know if they were married or if they just, you know, he was there for a time and left or, okay.

Eric Poole:

Well, I, I, because I know after that she was still working in, in that line of work mm-hmm. <affirmative>. So I don't know, you know, I don't know how

Adapted Podcast:

That, but he knew about you.

Eric Poole:

Yeah, I think he did. So, so a lot of interesting questions about, you know, why not do a genealogy like, you know, like ancestry.com or stuff like that. And, and, and I've, I've thought about it, but I think there's, there's this I think there's sometimes a dark side of that too, right? Like all of a sudden you're, you're unearthing somebody's past that didn't really want, wanna unearth kind of thing, and now all of a sudden they gotta do some, you got some splaining to do, you know, kind of thing. there's an

Adapted Podcast:

You haven't been, you haven't been ready to do that.

Eric Poole:

Yeah. And I'm not like, like I, I don't know if I'm that curious about it cuz it's just, I don't know, like I don't have a huge amount of curiosity about my father's side or, or even my mother's side for that matter to know who's, who's alive and who's who I'm related to. But I don't know, maybe one day I'll do it. Just I'm, I'm assuming it's gonna be my kids who one of the kids will do,

Adapted Podcast:

One of the kids will do a DNA test someday and then they'll be curious and then,

Eric Poole:

And then all of a sudden, dad did, you know, so and so, like.. . But like,

Adapted Podcast:

Well, and it, it, it, it probably is, you know, for them just being their ages that right now it's dad's story. Yeah. Until one day it will resonate with them that it's part of their story too.

Eric Poole:

Yeah. And I think that's, that's, I'm hopeful that, that ultimately that's where it'll go as she my kids have become a little more curious and figure out, hey, this is part of my story much like probably in the last 15, 20 years, my, my affinity for doing more research and knowledge about Korea, right? Like, like, hey, this is part of my story. I just, you know, I understand the context of, of why I was hesitant or, or not wanting to identify myself as a Korean for a long time, but, you know, I can deny it all I want, but, you know, this is part of who I am and I I really need to appreciate that. So having said that so it's funny, in, in May I'm going to a professional Asian Pilots association and I'm, I'm doing one of the speaking engagements for, for the Professional Asian Pilots Association. So as few Black American pilots, there are, I think there's even fewer Asian pilots, you know, maybe compared to the overall percentage of general population, maybe it, it's probably closer to the general population, but

Adapted Podcast:

Yeah, you're one of us too, Eric.

Eric Poole:

Absolutely. Yeah. And I'm, I'm, and I, I'm always like, it it, I think it's funny. And, and, and this is one of the conversations that I had with the photographer on, on the men's journal article was, you know, trying to figure out like, you know, where the acceptance is. And, and that's when he cynically told me about Hines Ward, when he went back, you know, there was, there was this facade presented that, you know, the, and these were his words and not my words. He said, Koreans will celebrate anything that, that, that is a, a success. Yes. Right. And and he was a mark of success, so they'll celebrate it. cuz cuz he had Korean in them. But he goes, but if you're not successful, and if you're not, you know, it's, it's a whole different story. And I'm, you know,

Well, yeah, in some ways, I mean, in, in the same for even full-blooded Korean adoptees, you know, it's almost in a way like you had to be sent away and then you become a success on your own and then come back and then it's, you know, we love you, you're Korean and you're one of us.

Adapted Podcast:

Yeah. So

Eric Poole:

That kinda thing. But

Is there a podcast of you interviewing you <laugh>?

Adapted Podcast:

Yes. Yeah. So it's, it's on adapted. I I think it's like season three. Okay. If you go season three, it's the last one you'll hear a friend, another adoptee interviewed me. So I'm on podcast.

Eric Poole:

Oh good. Okay. I'm, that's, that's gonna be my next one to listen to.

Adapted Podcast:

Okay. Because you know, it started to not feel fair, right. Because I'm interviewing all these people about their stories and it's like one-sided and then people are like, when are you gonna tell your story? Right. And, and I had not intended at all to talk about me because, you know, as reporters we don't talk about ourselves. And then but then I realized, you know, I have to participate as well, you know and I did. And it's all there. So you can, you can listen. I guess one last thing and then I'm gonna let you go. Oh my God, you've spent so much time today. So I appreciate it. It's just so fascinating talking to you. but do you feel like there's parts of you that still needs to heal from your wounds? Or do you think you've, you've done that or has having your own family been healing?

Eric Poole:

I think, I don't, you know, at least how I view this is that we're all kind of work in progress, right? Like, so yeah, absolutely. There, there's parts of me that require healing. and I am happy with where I'm at, which allows me more strength and kind of stable footing to, to kind of venture into the places that are darker and things that I've kind of repressed a little bit. But also, having said that, I'm I'm 55 years old. I'm like, I've gone all through this, you know, my life through this point, not unpacking some of the things that I just don't want to unpack and I'm okay with it. Like I'm, I can live and move on without un unpacking some of the trauma of, of my youth. And yeah. And so I'm, I feel like I've, I've, I don't know if I'm completely healed in, in a way, but, you know, it's, it's like, it's like some of my old football injuries from playing football.

Like I've figured out how to navigate the fact that my arm, my right arm doesn't straighten out all the way because I have so much scar tissue from landing on there. And I don't really want to go get surgery to fix something that may not be fixable. Cuz you know, it is, it is a reality. And so, and I'm okay with my little bent and right arm that, you know, doesn't fully work. And yeah, I guess, and I think that's, that's part of how I look at this. Like physical trauma and, and, and emotional trauma sometimes, you know, a lot of us figure out how to, how to live with it and, and I don't know if, if unearthing some of that may heal it, you know, it may just, it may exacerbate the situation in some way. You know? I, I don't know.

So I feel, I feel like I'm who I'm supposed to be through all the, all my experiences. I'm happy with who I'm, who I am. And, and at least, you know, I I, it took me a while to get me in a position to be able to speak about this. And it required me having children to kind of have kind of a internal dialogue. Like, okay, it's no longer about me to, to have, have me unpack my own story. You know? Now I have these kids who are gonna ha be tethered to my story in a way that, you know, that they have no control over. And so let me, let me get all this stuff down as much as I can. And, and through the process I've become more comfortable talking about these things. yeah. And I really appreciate the opportunity to having a conversation with you and like I said before, I Yeah, I, I think you're, you're doing God's work on this thing and I, I really appreciate you. I mean, it's how many seasons? It's a lot. Six.

Adapted Podcast:

Yeah, six so far. Yeah.

Eric Poole:

Lemme just think, thank you so much. So

Adapted Podcast:

You sound, you sound like you're at peace.

Eric Poole:

Absolutely. I think that's a, that's a good way to Yeah. And I'd love for you and I to get together and go out to lunch or dinner.

Adapted Podcast:

Yeah. Let's, if not, if I'm Yeah. Northfield, we can go to Ole Store or something. There you go. Or you know, so yeah, I, I went, I went to St. Olaf College, so I know, I know Northfield and well, I knew, I know Northfield like 30 years ago, Northfield, but

Eric Poole:

Oh, you should come down. It's a, yeah. It's, it's

Adapted Podcast:

Very, yeah. Let's, let's get together one time. So one last question, Eric, though, before we get into, you know our coffee date or whatever what would you like your Korean oma to know about how you turned out?

Eric Poole:

Oh, huh. That's something I've never been asked. I think, you know, as a parent, what do we want for our kids, right? Like, I don't like successes, but I think, you know, and Mary and I talk about this all the time, like, we just want them to be good people, right? And I think for, for my mom to know that, that I've turned out good in, good in, in the way that, you know, I had a good family. I'm a good father, good husband and good steward of this, of, you know, of my community kind of thing. And so, yeah, I, you know, I, like I said earlier, I just, I feel if I could let her know that I am who I am supposed to be and, and I think I am who she would want for me to be, I think that's probably the best. Yeah, I think that's it, you know, <laugh>

Adapted Podcast:

Okay. Thank you so much. And you're giving back to the adoptee community too, because this isn't easy to tell your story, even if you've, you've done it before for a magazine. But to come on a podcast and talk about these really personal, I've asked you a lot of really personal things. So to be able to do that is, is really giving back to the community. Cuz these stories, you know, they help all of us. So

Eric Poole:

Yeah, I think this was a great quilt. You're, you're kind of, you know, putting together that we can all kind of, you know, warm ourselves and wrap ourselves around this wonderful quilt.