

[00:00:01.850] - Melissa Corkum

Is your parenting journey turning out differently than you imagined? It's never too late to begin your family's transformation journey.

[00:00:09.970] - Lisa C. Qualls

Welcome to the Adoption Wise podcast, where you'll rediscover the confident and connected parent you long to be. I'm Lisa C. Qualls.

[00:00:20.330] - Melissa Corkum

And this is Melissa Corkum. Don't worry, we get it, and we're here for you.

[00:00:26.090] - Melissa Corkum

Well, welcome, everyone. This is our workshop on What Shapes You, Unlocking Your Family System for Hope, which we're all about here. And I went after Andy for this workshop because I have the privilege of knowing his wife. We were in an Enneagram cohort together. Andy is an enneagram 7, which of course I appreciate as a fellow 7. So I enjoy his energy, the fun, and he has tapped into this 5 line where he is. I feel like an expert on so many fun things, and I'll let him tell you more about that. But I had the privilege of hearing him speak a little bit about something called Family Systems Theory almost a year ago. And obviously because of the work that I do, I kept thinking like, oh my gosh, there's so many connections between just me as an adoptee, thinking about my triangle, thinking about how we as foster and adoptive parents have merged all these family systems together. What does that mean? What kind of insights could that give?

[00:01:40.530] - Melissa Corkum

So I'm so excited to have you, Andy. Welcome to our community. Welcome to our podcast. I would love for you to start by just telling us a little bit about all the things that you do and all the things that you know, and then tell us all the things for how we can kind of start thinking about the world through Family Systems Theory.

[00:02:01.020] - Andy Stoker

Melissa, thank you so much for having me. Hey, everybody, it's good to see you. I'm Andy Stoker. My pronouns are he, him. I am currently standing on the grounds of unceded land of the Pueblo people of northern New Mexico. I've been here a little over two months as an interim pastor at central United Methodist Church here in Albuquerque. And a little bit of my background: I grew up in El Paso, Texas, and I'll share more about my background as well as we do the recording here. Grew up in El Paso, Texas, and have slowly moved east to Dallas. I've spent most of my life in Dallas, as Melissa said, my partner in life, Megan, is a nurse and a diabetes educator and has been for 25 years at the children's hospital in Dallas. And so we talk a lot about families and family systems and how she is connecting in profound ways. And so not only do I get to do this professionally, to talk about families and family systems, but it also happens to be my pillow talk. So there you have it. I'm steeped in it.

[00:03:17.760] - Andy Stoker

So a little bit about, a little further about me. Obviously, I'm a united Methodist pastor. I'm also a certified mindfulness meditation teacher in the western Buddhist tradition. I attempt to live out my life mindfully, and that's really where our work comes in when it comes to Family Systems Theory. Family Systems Theory is about confronting our conditioning. Confronting our conditioning. If we just took that one line, we could probably film multiple podcasts about this. There are several ways that we could go. For example, one of my passion areas is racial justice. And so what is it? As I show up as a white, cisgender male, have higher education degrees, what is it that I'm checking about my own conditioning, in how I engage with people on a day to day basis, on what my implicit biases are and what I've inherited as my understanding. Does that understanding, for example, still make sense for when I'm engaging in the world around me? I was training a church staff a few weeks ago back in Dallas, and it popped in my mind, a very simple thing that happened that morning, driving to this Baptist church, I said, a black man walked across the street in front of my car, and my conditioning said, lock the doors. Be careful. He's dangerous. Had I not been aware, I would have allowed that conditioning to be true for me in that moment. I had the choice, in that moment, behind the wheel of my car, to confront my conditioning and live in the real, to understand where that implicit bias came

from and check it. Is this still true for me? Do I want to carry on this implicit bias? Do I want to live this out?

[00:05:35.000] - Andy Stoker

So as an enneagram 7, thanks for mentioning that. What did I do is in order to get out of that pain of my conditioning, I waved at him and he waved back. I didn't keep my hands on the wheel and allow that conditioning to freeze me in that state of quote unquote, fear or whatever's going on. Instead, I had a choice. Am I going to be. I don't know what my face was reading or how he read my face, if he saw fear in my face or who knows? But the wave, I think, allowed us both to have a similar checkpoint. We're good in this one 3-second moment of my day. I raised that because that conditioning is from my family of origin. My family of origin taught me to be afraid of people of color. The evening news taught me to be afraid of people of color. The history books that were taught me in El Paso, Texas, about Texas independence and our independence with Mexico taught me to fear people of color. So all of this, dear friends, these are all of the tells to my conditioning that put me on this place, that I now, on a daily basis, have the opportunity not only to confront my conditioning, but confront my privilege, confront my power, confront the spaces and places of my life that need to be confronted in order for me to be fully human. Okay, it's Wednesday, and Sunday was three days ago, and then I've got another Sunday.

[00:07:22.530] - Andy Stoker

So I'm going to move on from the preaching and I'm going to move into Family Systems Theory. I hope that's helpful just as a global, as we think about what's really at stake. For those of you online, I have a slideshow that I will use word pictures for, for everybody else as you're on this recording. So because Melissa and I connected last year. Gosh, it's almost been a year Melissa, last year, on the topic of adoptees, parents of adoption, Suzanne Stabile and I have had a lot of conversation about how to break into this beautiful community of people who are looking to find maybe new language together. And so I'm honing in on one aspect of Family Systems Theory, and it's emotional cut offs. Emotional in Family systems theory isn't necessarily feelings. An emotional cut off or sorry, emotion, is the connection we feel with those who care for and about us. So a family is the smallest emotional unit. Now, the care could be positive or negative. The care could be absent or fully present. It's not that binary, there's a spectrum there, right? For our beloved in the adoption community, we are starting at a starting point with emotional cut offs where we're cut off from those who are our birth or first parents. And that cut off, either one or two parents, that cut off creates this lifetime of confronting that level of conditioning, potentially, for many, a choice that wasn't theirs. So Family Systems Theory is about relationships ultimately. Father R. Richard Rohr, in his book Everything Belongs, says this. Even the new physics tells us that matter is merely the manifestation of spirit. But spirit, consciousness, relationship itself is the real thing. We used to think all the energy was in the particles of the atom. Now it seems the energy is, in fact, in the space between the particles.

[00:10:12.470] - Andy Stoker

Family Systems Theory is absolutely interested in family members. Sure, there are ways that we show up in personality, et cetera. And that's all important information. What we want to hone in on, especially with our beloved in the adoption community is we want to hone in on the relationship. What is the relationship to those who are in our care, those who are closest to us? Family Systems Theory is based on the belief that individuals have power to change their behavior when each individual begins to understand the history and origins of their family structures. Now, this is tricky because some of us, maybe listening to me now, may not know the family structure, family of origin that has been passed to them over generation to generation. And, not but, and your generational transmission is still within you. Not to get too strange or mystical about this, but I truly believe that our family trauma, our family generational transmission of pain, heartbreak, oppression, marginalization, minoritization is with us at the cellular level. Once again, that is confronting our conditioning. One aspect of Family Systems Theory that I want to make sure that I talk about first are triangles. When two parts of a system become uncomfortable with each other, they bring in a third person, a third issue or a third, maybe even non animated, if it's a pet or dependency, a family secret. Two people in that emotional system become uncomfortable or diseased with one another, they bring in a third in order to stabilize the relationship with one another.

[00:12:36.370] - Andy Stoker

So let me share a silly vision here. So imagine you're going on your first date with someone you really, really have been waiting to go on a first date with. And you have made sure that for me what little hair I have is combed, that I've made sure that my eyebrows aren't, that I have at least something that I think is presentable and I look good and I'm ready. I practice in the mirror, our agenda for the conversation, so on and so forth. And I really want to tell this person across from the table on our first date how much work I've done for us to be together. That I really am head over heels of their brilliance, their kindness, their compassion, the way they enter a room, the way they exit a room, the way they fill the space, and how I feel when they're there. So we finally sit down at the table. And I look across the table to this one that I've asked on this date. And I say, good weather we're having, huh? Something to ease that tension. It would be too much on the first date to have that much intensity with that other person sitting across the table that I've got to bring up the weather. Or what's your favorite book? What's your favorite movie? Instead, I bring up this third person issue, concern, some inanimate object that helps us to maintain the level of intimacy and intensity early on in our relationship. Our lives are surrounded by triangles.

[00:14:23.770] - Andy Stoker

As a matter of fact, we're in one right now. Melissa is the host of our time together, I am the guest, and you all are all on mute or simply listening. It is very clear that we're in a triangle. There was a triangle, so a triangle, when I was logging into Zoom, I had a phone call here at my desk. I have this covenant with Melissa to log in, but I know who's calling. What do I do? We're faced with triangles in a myriad of ways. Triangles on a more serious level. Think about a family system where two members of the family have had a long relationship and there is a third party that is brought into the relationship, and it's alcohol or alcoholism. Then the relationship begins to be shaped by the way each one of those family members relate to alcohol or alcoholism. For the one who is codependent on alcohol, it's necessary to be in relationship. For the other who is viewing their partner or this family member, they view them through alcohol. So triangles can happen a lot, and there are a myriad of ways that these show up. The first law of triangles is exactly what I said in defining it. The relationship of any two members of an emotional triangle is kept in balance by the way, a third party relates to each of them or to their relationship. So how that alcohol or alcoholism is may be defining a relationship or disintegrating a relationship, it's entirely up to those two members on how they are correlating to alcohol or alcoholism.

[00:16:36.190] - Andy Stoker

Stress can also cause triangular relationships to stabilize. What do I mean by that? If there's stress in a system, financial stress, emotional stress, mental stress, I don't know. There's a global pandemic going on. Then those two members become dependent on the stress in order to maintain the balance of their relationship. Part of the journey of these triangles is to begin to understand who we are and how we relate to other family members and to that third party. Edwin Friedman, rabbi Edwin Friedman, who was a licensed professional counselor in the 60s, 70s and 80s, I believe, beautifully dovetailed Family Systems Theory for emotional systems like synagogues, churches, mosques, workplaces, et cetera. He has seven laws of emotional triangles. I'm not going to bore you with all seven. I think the first and the seventh are the most important for our time together today. The seventh law of emotional Triangles. And this is for those of you who are looking for some hope today, I'm not quite there. This will be a deflator. That's why it's at the beginning. We can only change a relationship to which you belong. You can only change a relationship to which you belong. Therefore, the way to bring change to the relationship, and no one said it was easy, is to try to maintain as much of a defined relationship with each of the parties to avoid the responsibility for their relationship to one another. To the extent we can maintain a non-anxious presence in a triangle, it has the potential to modify the anxiety in the others. The problem is to be both non-anxious and present. So when I teach this to graduate students, sometimes they add cursed words before lifting up seventh law. It's been called a variety of things because this is the worst news I have for you. You can only change a relationship to which you belong.

[00:19:11.570] - Andy Stoker

Let's pick on those who are preachers. So talking about a rabbi, a pastor, an imam, those who are orators, there is a relationship we have to the congregation, those who have gathered, and to God, the

universe, the spirit, the great spirit, whatever that vision of the divine is. And there's the preacher, congregation, God, preacher. So if this is true for me, a preacher, that I can only change the relationship to which I belong, I cannot move God closer to the congregation and I cannot move the congregation closer to God. So I can only work on the relationship to which I belong. What is my relationship to the divine? What is my relationship with the congregation? And maintaining a non-anxious non-anxiety and presence with both parties potentially helps them see the congregation and maybe God. See how I'm attempting to bring them closer together, but I cannot change their relationship. Think about our beloved who are experiencing alcoholism or other dependency in their families. I can only change the relationship to which I belong. If I'm partnered, let's say my husband, my husband is an alcoholic, my relationship to his alcoholism and to him. I can't change the relationship of alcoholism to my husband, my husband to alcoholism. I can only change the relationship to which I belong. It's tricky, friends. It's really tricky. So let's talk about me. Go ahead, Melissa.

[00:21:05.030] - Melissa Corkum

I was just going to say we talk a lot here about how we only have control over ourselves. So this actually might be bringing hope to people because I tell them all the time that they have control over themselves. So you're telling them they may even be able to have influence and control over a relationship. So you're actually giving them great news.

[00:21:20.540] - Andy Stoker

Oh, good. Thank goodness. Yeah, good. Okay, well, what are you doing next Wednesday? I'm ready to come back. Yeah. When I think I'm giving bad news to people, it's sometimes good news for you all. So, I'm glad I can bring some of that hope. And let's be clear about. I want to be clear because it's something I'm struggling with, Melissa, being apart from my family. My family is still living in Dallas. This mythology of control. I cannot control so many factors of my life. The only thing I can attempt to control is my behavior. I can't control the conditioning that comes up in me. It's thoughts, it's feelings. They're just doing what they're supposed to do. They're just thoughts and feelings. It's information, so I'll not preach on that. But that's a key for me, is trying to get out of that idea that I can only relate to these two. Therefore, how am I showing up self defined and self regulated in every moment that I have with people? Who am I, and how am I showing up? Self definition, self regulation.

[00:22:40.370] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. Hopefully that will feel familiar to those of you who are listening.

[00:22:44.630] - Andy Stoker

So, good. Let me share with you a little bit about me, my primitive triangle. I was born in 1975 to William Craig Stoker and Barbara Louise howis Stoker Lockett? In October of 1979, my father was killed in a car accident. I was four. My little brother was two. My mom was 25. We were in Houston. We moved back to El Paso, Texas, and lived two blocks away from my grandparents. My mom eventually remarried to my stepdad, six years after my father's death. I was not allowed to go to my dad's funeral. And everyone that came back to the house to drop off food or offer their condolences to us, I remember as a four year old, people putting their hands on my shoulders and saying something to the effect, you are the man of the house. You have to take care of your mom. So as a four year old, I don't have the skill set. I don't have the tools. I don't have a way of really caring for my mom. So I became the parentified child in a lot of ways. My mom was so young, and I was the oldest of two, and so she told me a lot of things growing up that potentially 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 year old children probably didn't need to know about what was going on in the world, or a relationship with her parents, or relationship with those she was dating, that kind of thing. And so you don't have to be a Freudian too far friends to know why I might be in the work I'm in, but we'll save that for another podcast.

[00:24:23.540] - Andy Stoker

So this is what I call our primitive triangle. Biological dad. Biological mom. Yes, it is heteronormative. Let me say give 30 seconds on heteronormativity and Family Systems Theory. Family Systems Theory in the medical field, you can see this when you go to your doctor's office. On page three, they ask you a series of questions about your biological parents. Did your father have x, y or z diagnosis? Did your biological mother have x, y or z diagnosis? Click the boxes that say yes or no. When were they

diagnosed? If more information. So on and so forth. Likewise, because we are products of sperm and egg, we are genetically connected to our biological parents. That is our first, I believe, our first bond that we make at the cellular level at conception. Please hear me say this has nothing to do with reproductive rights or reproductive justice or anything like that. This is, on the cellular level, what we've inherited from our families. The relationships are entirely different.

[00:25:58.690] - Andy Stoker

So what is my inheritance from my family? So my dad was a traveling salesman for AMF. He sold bowling balls all over the southwest. That's now Brunswick for those of you who are bowlers out there. And he was a traveling salesman, so there was distance. And the dotted line between myself and my father represents distance. There's a little equal mark in the middle of that dotted line, cutting off that distanced relationship. Because of my father's death. The relationship to my mom is we are close. That is the two parallel lines together. The zigzag lines in the middle represents conflict. So we're close and conflicted. How does this make sense in my everyday life now, 44 years later from my father's death. I have difficulty with male relationships, especially with older men. I feel most comfortable with distance and cutoff. With women, especially older women, I feel especially close to older women. When I'm close and there's some conflict, there's a little bit of edge there. It's, can I please this person? Can I be loved by this person? Can I be cared by this person? And that goes on today. That is my conditioning. This is what I call my primitive triangle, my inheritance that I carry even today.

[00:27:46.390] - Andy Stoker

If we had more time, I'd share with you a little bit further of my story of my mom's remaining focus some 44 years after my dad's death. That is the arrow pointing from my mom to my dad is there is a focus on that relationship. I visited Dallas last week, visited my parents, went by there, and like, every time I'm about to leave, my mom tells me that she loves me so much and that my dad would be so proud of me. My stepdad and my mom are celebrating 39 years of marriage coming up. There's a focus there. She still has unresolved grief, just as I do, just as many of my family of origin or my family members do as well. And this is representative of cutoff. A cutoff begins to shape how we understand the boundaries we have with one another, begins to shape our relationships with one another. This cut off begins to define not only that relationship with that primary care or our birth parent, but it also begins to define our relationships into our adulthoods, maybe even beyond men, for me. Maybe I'm very comfortable in a large organism, a large organization, where I'm able to be the CEO and I can have walk around management and be distant with everybody. And then I go in my office and close the door and cut everybody off. Right? I don't know. That hasn't been my experience. But maybe some have experienced me in that way, that the cutoff can be both ways. So let's talk briefly. And then, Melissa, I want to be mindful and allow some people to maybe liberate their mics or take some time to think a little bit about what's there. So I'm going to do some boundary work, and then boundary ambiguity, and then maybe we do Q&A, and then I'll close with ambiguous loss and how it might be helpful for us to have that framework. Does that sound okay?

[00:29:57.230] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah, sounds great.

[00:29:59.070] - Andy Stoker

We oftentimes inherit boundaries from our families of origin and our families of choice, how permeable a family is. How restrictive or strict a family is, and every other kind of family in between. Boundaries are often defined by how primary birth parents or adoptive parents were conditioned themselves. What type of home were you steeped in? Did you have permeable boundaries where everything was bendy flexy for you? You got to ride your bike around the neighborhood, go visit friends, take walks with friends, walk home from school. Was it more restrictive where you had to ask permission and it was a planned activity and a parent needed to ask or needed to meet the parent of your friend before going over because they didn't fully trust who you were hanging out with and all of that? Were you driven to school every day by your mom? Not that that was my experience. It was totally my experience, by the way, that overprotection, that restrictive boundary. In our beloved community, adoptees and those who are adoptive parents, oftentimes we are confronted with all kinds of boundary ambiguity. What has happened with our beloved child family member who

experienced permeable boundaries, and why are they responding so negatively or maybe even positively to the boundaries that I'm presenting.

[00:31:46.460] - Andy Stoker

Is it, well, my child is ADHD or has problems listening or whatever else? Or is it simply a boundary concern, where elevating the conversation about safety, about security, about friendship, about belonging, helps to frame a different way of shared boundaries? How are we, my beloved, going to work on boundaries together? I need you to know that I grew up being driven by my mom every single day to school. And what's coming up for me is that, yes, we live two blocks away, and I need to at least walk out the front door and watch you go into school, because that's just what I'm dealing with. And both of my children rode the bus to school, and, boy, that was really hard for me. The first few bus rides, Megan would constantly say, it's okay, it's okay. The bus driver had a background check. I'm sure they have a class C driver's license. It's going to be okay. Are you sure? Do I need to go up there and just make sure they're in the classroom? But what was that? That was my conditioning. I was confronting my conditioning.

[00:33:08.580] - Andy Stoker

With our beloved there is boundary ambiguity. Oftentimes when there's boundary ambiguity, and maybe our beloved are from the foster families or different constellations, adoption constellations out there, where there's been difficulty in definition of roles within the system. In one foster home, maybe they were the oldest child, and in another, they were the middle child. In yet another, they were the youngest child. So how definition of roles were defined. And then they enter your care, and all of a sudden, it's maybe a little different. And so it's once again elevating the conversation around the ambiguity that you're sensing and having a conversation. What was it like in those places for you? How did you feel like you had to behave? What are ways that you'd like to show up more carefully and lovingly, or as part of the family, et cetera, or part of our adoption constellation, whatever it might be. Children, especially younger children, can sense our response and our reaction to and with anxiety. So whatever's coming up in us, children have this beautiful intuition about how we're showing up. This response and reaction with anxiety creates permeability. If a child cannot define that anxiety, if we don't spend the kind of time needed with the child, the child attempts to find ways out of that system, to seek their own certainty, to seek their own groundedness.

[00:35:06.690] - Andy Stoker

And so when there's boundary ambiguity, there's also uncertainty, excuse me, about who's in, who's out of that system. If they themselves are in or out of the system. If maybe you as an adoption constellation parent, if you feel like you're in or out of the family system, it could also be about you. And that's always a nice check. Self check is am I in or out? How am I showing up? How am I defining myself, et cetera. Boundary ambiguity is very common in times of transition. I'm not talking about big moves. Well, I am talking about big moves, yes, but it's not always that. It's birthdays, it's new family days. Depending on what your language is around the entry of the child into the family constellation. It could be very simple of starting school, a holiday. These are all transitions, think rituals, whatever has a ritual. There's a day off for school. This is going to be silly. Our next day off from school is President's day or the banks are closed. I don't know. School might be closed, but anyway, at least the banks are closed. It's silly to think about, but it's a day off.

[00:36:27.290] - Andy Stoker

We may not think about President's day. So let's talk ever so briefly about my dependency and potentially my codependency on work. I'm already worried about the future and how I'm going to spend my day at President's day because I'm giving a very restrictive boundary that I can't get in my office and I need to be with mother church. I need to be close and conflicted with mother church here. I need to get in there and work. So confronting that ambiguity so how am I regulating my behavior, regulating my sense of who I am and allowing myself to understand that I can take a day off, that I'm going to be celebrating, quote unquote president's day by joining the bankers of the US, of sitting on my couch. That's what I'm going to do. That's how I'm going to celebrate. Okay, another silly example, but I hope is helpful.

[00:37:26.710] - Melissa Corkum

Andy, I have a question around primitive triangles. Some of us have some information or kids who have some cognitive remembrance of their first parents. How do we use the knowledge that that primitive triangle, regardless of even if we brought our kids home from the hospital or it's a closed adoption or an international adoption where we know obviously these two people existed, but we have almost no information, how can we use that knowledge that that triangle exists to is there age appropriate language that we can use with our kids or is there just takeaways from even the acknowledgment that that's still there to help frame how we're viewing kind of some of the issues that are playing out in our families. Does that make sense?

[00:38:26.130] - Melissa Corkum

Many parents who deal with big behaviors are looking for practical solutions and may also be struggling with blocked care. Private coaching or group programs that require regular Zoom meetings place even more burden on your already busy lives.

[00:38:40.150] - Lisa C. Qualls

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[00:39:06.290] - Melissa Corkum

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[00:39:21.090] - Andy Stoker

Yeah, that's a really amazing and complex question. What hooked me a little bit in your question was developmentally appropriate ways of introducing triangles with our kids. I don't know that I've thought about that before. Because oftentimes in my understanding of brain development, there is in front of you is reality. So bringing in someone else or even an abstract thought is difficult to bring that in. I think that's where I would move to developmentally appropriate spaces and places, which this has nothing to do with First, parents, I want to get to that, but this has everything to do with allowing thoughts and feelings to be whatever's going on in the child to be that other bit of information. That having a thought or feeling isn't necessarily good or bad. Having a thought or feeling is information. Your brain's doing what it should be doing, your heart's doing what it should be doing. And having a child check in with themselves, where does that thought come up in you? Does it make you tear up? Does it show up in your body? Are your hands sweating? Is your heart racing? What's going on with your body? And so allowing the child to see and sense, not see, but sense how that thought or feeling is coming up within them and using that as, okay, you're having this feeling, we're at this birthday party and you're here. Does the feeling and the birthday party, do those two things match? And if they don't match, explore the feeling or thought, explore the event. And it's all exploration, it's all discovery. Instead of giving a child, I believe, a binary, this is a party, it should be fun. So we're having fun. If you're having this feeling at a party is bad. So you need to shove that feeling away and have fun. I think for children, being aware of thoughts and feelings as information instead of directives is really helpful, especially with our beloved, who potentially have heard a myriad of voices in their young lives in utero, after they're born, at the cellular level. Once again, not to get too mystical about this, which is a real temptation for me. So those are my initial thoughts, Melissa, on what may be coming up for children.

[00:42:17.550] - Andy Stoker

Your question about first parents is a really good one. To imagine how we can begin to have the kinds of conversations needed about emotional cut offs that sometimes, and there are all kinds of books out there that they're not going to say, this is an emotional cut off book. But there are a ton of books out there for children that talk about these emotional cutoffs. Reading books, telling stories, seeing that emotional cut offs happen quite a lot. It happens quite a bit for so many of us in life. As a matter of fact, there are multiple times in my life when I've had an emotional cut off and helped to cure that

cut off, that our lives aren't defined. Our lives are actually what we make it. So allowing a child to see, sense and hear that a cut off from first parents may be information that they'll need for the rest of their life. And what they're learning about themselves and what they're learning from you is an incredibly helpful for the remainder of their lives into adolescence and adulthood. Is that helpful?

[00:43:48.990] - Melissa Corkum

Yeah. I think the thing that I'm thinking about is I grew up thinking, because in my story, there wasn't any information that there wasn't really anything there to explore. And as I've continued to do my own work, and then some of the things that you've said around that triangle that Suzanne hates so much. And as I was thinking, know if my triangle has to be these two parents who I have no information about, but there's still a relationship there, that's an emotion. Enneagram work has been helpful with me. Even though I know nothing about this woman, I do have a relationship with her. My perception of that relationship matters, and my core motivations change what that perception is like. I have a sister who has the same type of primitive triangle cut offs in both ways, adopted as an infant, no information. But her relationship to her first birth mom, in terms of an emotional level, I would say is actually pretty close. Like, she feels like she wants to be connected or wants information where I don't. Right. And so there's, like, a relationship to be explored there, even though there's no concrete person on the other side. Does that make sense?

[00:45:08.450] - Andy Stoker

Absolutely.

[00:45:09.220] - Melissa Corkum

So that's what's helpful.

[00:45:10.680] - Andy Stoker

You're not going to like my answer, or at least an attempt at an answer here. So our work then, is not how we're in relationship to our first parents, but how we're in relationship to the relationship. What I mean by that is how we relate to cutoff is going to help us define our relationships to the myriad of cutoffs we'll have for the rest of our lives. The gift of your first parents is to give you the gift of this cut off if we're to put us a bow on this. But it's not necessarily what you've lost in your first parents. Instead, it's how you are relating to the cut off. And when you can find a healthy way to relate to the cutoff, then all of a sudden I believe you sense more freedom because your primitive triangle with two significant cutoffs. If you can have a healthy relationship with cutoff and recognize it when it comes up, or when it's about to come up, it potentially liberates you from being afraid of the cutoff, feeling shame from the cutoff, angry about the cutoff, whatever that emotional response is about the cutoff, you have done the work to relate to it when it comes up.

[00:46:40.510] - Melissa Corkum

So can my relationship. This is turning into a Melissa therapy session. So can my relationship to cutoffs now, like, not that cut off, but my noticing of how I react to other cutoffs. Tell me something about my primitive triangle. Like the other direction.

[00:46:57.930] - Andy Stoker

Yes, and you're exactly right. Your enneagram work, or if you have other self inventories that are helpful for our listeners to help you define. Define who you are and how you show up. Self definition and self regulation, that this is critical. There's a question that's come up, how to create a healthy relationship with the cut off and how I can help my teens with their cut offs. Man, this is so rich. Oh, my gosh. Okay, so this podcast is 4 hours long?

[00:47:35.440] - Melissa Corkum

This will be our last question in interest of time, but if you have time to answer that, I'm dying to hear the answer.

[00:47:41.440] - Andy Stoker

No, it's a great question. How to create a healthy relationship to cut off. Let me give you a very brief mindfulness meditation. I'm going to call it a shortcut because it's helped me confront my

conditioning. Remember, that's sort of how I lean into Family Systems Theory is confronting our conditioning. So I want you to be a pro - P R O - when it comes to creating a healthy relationship with cutoff. PRO is pause, relax and open. Pause, relax, and open. Why do I bring this up talking about relating to cutoffs. Cut off, in western culture, we have put so much energy in this sense of belonging that we have to be in a group, that you must stay connected. That even when I go to the grocery store, they ask me, are you a member of our savings program? We want you to belong, right? I don't know if I have ever gotten a discount, but I have that little key fob and I scan it every time because I really want to belong. Like, oh, I'm a member. I'm thinking there's sirens and confetti. Okay, so we're so honed in on that that when an emotional cut off happens, we feel like we're not belonging to our family, that our family of choice or family of origin, but we feel like we don't belong anywhere. We feel like we're floating in space, and then all of a sudden, we no longer are connected in a way that culture, society wants us to be.

[00:49:30.820] - Andy Stoker

So how do we relate to our cut off is when it comes up for us. And a lot of us will feel it in our heart and gut space. Our heart and gut space will tell us that something's not right, that something's about to happen or happening in a separation of an experience. Pause right there. What's coming up in you? Are there past events? Are there feelings, thoughts, other information that's coming up in you that's creating this sense that a cutoff is somehow bad or negative? Relax if you can, in the moment, take a deep breath. Put both feet on the ground. You're grounded where our ancestors walked, where they stewarded the land, where a lot of hard decisions were made long before we got here. They had the courage to live the lives they did. And I'm going to be in this space with all of my ancestors, and I'm here with them in this moment. I'm going to relax into the care of the universe. And when I relax into the care of the universe, I open up to the possibility that I can have a healthy relationship with the cutoff, because potentially I need a break from this person, this activity, this way of being, this worldview.

[00:50:59.810] - Andy Stoker

How we help teenagers with that? So adolescence is a wonderful time of life. I was in youth ministry for 17 years. My doctoral dissertation was on ethnic and racial identity formation in twelve year olds and 22 year olds. I'm an armchair teenager expert. How about that? And some people think that I haven't left my teenage years. That's for another podcast as well. Melissa, that's now seven podcasts I need to be on with you. So with teenagers, you've got a variety of things going on. The hormone piece is critical, and it's those who are gendered male and birth gendered male, birth gendered female. This happens a lot. So information about what's coming up hormonally in us, sometimes clouds or causes a little bit of uncertainty about what emotion is actually going on, what thought is actually going on. So checking in with the body. Any hormonal change, there is sweating, heat of the body, especially feet sweat. Your feet sweat a little bit more when you're going through hormonal changes, et cetera. I've talked a lot about this through the years, that menopause is not unlike teenage hormonal challenges. We just didn't recognize it as teenagers. We were a lot more energetic than as those of us who are experiencing menopause, not going to PE, not running around it, running home, or doing all the activities we have. And so recognizing what's going on in the body. So for your teenagers with cut offs, recognizing that there's something going on about them anyway. So is that part of what's happening before me or within me? In front of me or within me? And so when a teenager can figure that out, then it's like during menses, cramping, et cetera. For young men having nocturnal emission or involuntary erections, those kinds of things. It's your body offering information about what's going on within it. Right? It's all information. So there's something already going on bodily.

[00:53:32.790] - Andy Stoker

Now, recognizing for teenagers what's actually happening in front of them. I feel like there's distance because of something I said, something I did, something another person said or did, and recognizing that they have a body, that they are an embodied being on this planet, and they're here. They take up this beautiful space. They're unique and loved just as they are. And then for them to see objectively what's going on, sometimes hard for teenagers, but helpful. Asking a teenager what actually happened, was that real? Was that a story? Was that a myth? Is that all the information you had? What was their response? I've heard a lot about what was going on within you. What did they say to you?

And asking very pointed, objective questions, not out of judgment, but out of curiosity. That helps teenagers have a script for what's going on within themselves and outside themselves. Can a teenager stay curious about what's happening with their body, and what's happening in the relationships around them. Why is no one treating me like a child anymore? I feel all alone. I feel isolated. I'm going to social media, or I'm going to this friend group that I haven't talked to in a while. So helping a teenager have a script is really helpful with cut offs, recognizing what's going on in their body, recognizing what's happening in their everyday interactions, and what is the real story. I know that's long winded, but, like, that is an amazing question. I love it. I love this energy. Oh, Melissa, you have such an amazing community.

[00:55:27.660] - Melissa Corkum
We think so, too,

[00:55:29.040] - Andy Stoker
Melissa, thanks. Thank you so much for all that you do, for your continued connection with so many of us, including me. And thanks to each one of you. Keep up the good work. I'm all about extending this positivity into the world, and I don't know that when I'm ever going to have this smile wiped off my face after being from you to see the hope and the courage that each one of you have. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you for allowing me to be with you.

[00:56:00.070] - Melissa Corkum
Before we let you go, you have a podcast which I think our people might enjoy. So could you tell us a little bit about that? And are there any books, additional resources where we can go if you've wet our appetite.

[00:56:19.290] - Andy Stoker
You know, Melissa, my big temptation is books. So I'm doing all that I can to self regulate and not go there first. I'm kind of a bibliophile, just so you know. So let me tell you about the podcast. The podcast name is Parenting for the Present. It was started by a pediatrician, child psychologist, and me. We are imagining helping parents in body, mind, and spirit to create a holistic container for their families to care for one another and the children in their midst. We didn't realize that three overly educated white guys doing a podcast would be so popular. But I think, sadly, there are too few men in the parenting space. And I think we do need to have a broader approach to what this looks like. And I'm real big on division of domestic labor and equity, especially between the genders, et cetera. So we're excited about that, and we fill that space well and call men out as frequently as we can to stay engaged.

[00:57:34.310] - Melissa Corkum
Is there, like, a standard family systems book? Is that, like, a thing? I feel like it's not, which is why I'm asking.

[00:57:42.230] - Andy Stoker
No. Yeah. So Suzanne Stabile, the Enneagram godmother, says that in my head there is the family systems book.

[00:57:50.710] - Melissa Corkum
I know, say, it sounds like maybe Andy, you need to write a book.

[00:57:55.110] - Andy Stoker
I just, my challenge is, do we need another book written by another white guy? But, yeah, it'd be great. Family systems really fell out of favor in the 1970s and 80s because I think a lot of people saw it as potentially too much work. I don't want to delve that deeply within myself, et cetera. So for those of you who are in the Jewish or Christian community, Rabbi Friedman's *Generation to Generation* is probably the best book of that in that it was published, Melissa, in 1983. So just to kind of give you a framework that, I mean, that's like classic literature for you researchers out there. Anything beyond what, probably four years now because of the swiftness of journal articles, there's also anything by Michael Kerr - K E R R - is good. The Bowenian Center has a lot of great YouTube videos, et cetera, on

snippets and continuing education in Murray Bowen's way of thinking. I recommend a book by my family systems coach that isn't necessarily a textbook per se, but a workbook. It's called *A Family Genogram Workbook*. My coach is Elaine Boomer, and she co authored that book. And it's a great way to explore your family, your family relationships, asking the kinds of questions you need to ask yourself and those who are around you. I appreciate the encouragement to write the book.

[00:59:32.870] - Melissa Corkum

Andy, thanks again for the extra time. I think you've given us a lot to ponder and think about. And thanks for all that you're bringing to the world. We appreciate you.

[00:59:42.970] - Andy Stoker

Thanks goes to all of you. Good to see you all. And I hope to see you in person one of these days so we can high five and fist bump and encourage one another in this life journey. Take good care of yourselves. Take good care of those who are in your care. Keep up the good work.

[01:00:01.330] - Melissa Corkum

Before you go, we'd love to connect with you on social media. Our Instagram handle is @adoptionwise. Or better yet, join our free Facebook community at [adoptionwise.org/facebook](https://www.adoptionwise.org/facebook).

[01:00:15.570] - Lisa C. Qualls

Thanks so much for listening. We love having you. Remember you're a good parent doing good work.

[01:00:23.970] - Melissa Corkum

Music for the podcast cast is composed by Oleksandr Oleksandrov.