

Adoption: The Long View Transcript

Torie DiMartile

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Lori Holden, Intro

This is Adoption: The Long View, a podcast brought to you by Adopting.com. I'm your host, Lori Holden, author of [The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption](#) and [Adoption Unfiltered](#). Join me as we take a closer look at what happens *after* you adopt your child and begin parenting them. Your adoption journey isn't over then -- it's just beginning.

In this podcast, you'll hear from a variety of thought-provoking and influential guests as we help you make the most of your adoption journey. Like any trip worth taking, there will be ups and downs and challenges. Here's what you're going to wish you'd known from the start.

Ready? Let's go.

Lori Holden, Explanation

So...on the way to this episode, something happened that has not happened to me before. This conversation blossomed into such richness that it turned into two episodes right before my very ears! You'll hear the first half now, and the latter half next time. Make sure to subscribe wherever you listen so you don't miss a single word that our brilliant guest, Torie DiMartile, shares with us.

Here's Part 1 of our conversation.

Lori Holden, Greeting

We know from 1st grade math that a half plus a half equals 1. But for adoptees, the math doesn't always add up the way we think it will, the way we hope it will.

At one time I thought that if I could just incorporate my children's first families into ours, then Tessa and Reed having access to both their halves – all their pieces – would make them feel whole. I even subtitled my first book along those lines: *The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption: Helping Your Child Grow Up Whole*.

But the more I listen to adoptees, the more I understand that there is not just one time the math doesn't work, one split...between the family of origin and the family of experience (to use the language of April Dinwoodie). There are a lot of splits in which an adoptee needs to span distances, lots of ways an adoptee feels like they are not something enough on either side – no matter what we adoptive parents say to them.

Adoptees are always navigating two tracks: how their two sets of families feel about them, and also how they, themselves, feel about their two sets of families – the most integral people in their lives and for their survival.

Besides all adoptees being trans-familied, some adoptees are also intercountry or transracial, like today's guest. These adoptees also live with divisions between race, culture, and sometimes language, trying to figure out how and where they do and don't fit in.

Back to adoptee math, there are times for adoptees in which a plus and a minus don't zero each other out. Many adoptees have told us that the easy emotions, like love for one's adoptive family, don't simply take away the harder emotions, like the loss of one's birth family.

This is what we'll talk about today with Torie DiMartile, a biracial and interracial adoptee and doctoral student who has been in an open adoption since her very beginning, more than 30 years ago. I know you're going to want to hear about how Torie is bridging all these gaps, and the ways she coaches parents to support their adoptees in doing so, as well. So let's bring in Torie DiMartile. Torie, thanks so much for being here today.

Torie DiMartile: Thank you so much, Lori, for having me. I'm so excited to chat.

Lori: I've been really excited to dig into this with you. Let me tell you a little bit about yourself so we can have some context for what you bring today. Victoria (Torie) DiMartile is a speaker, consultant, and cultural anthropologist. As a biracial, black, transracial, and an adoptee; and let me just break that up a little bit. Biracial and transracial are 2 different things. Biracial, meaning who you are in relation to your original family. Transracial, about the constellation of you in your family of experience.

So, Torie was raised in Kentucky in a white Italian American family. She's the founder of Wreckage and Wonder LLC, a small business that educates prospective white adoptive and foster parents and provides webinars and training to adoption and child welfare organizations.

Torie has been featured on podcasts such as the Honestly Adoption podcast, the Adoptee Next Door, and participated on panels and given presentations at conferences such as Replanted Conference, Insight Conference, and the Families Rising Conference.

Torie is a doctoral candidate in Anthropology at Indiana University working toward a dissertation titled Transracial Adoption In The Age Of George Floyd: Race And Kinship In US Adoption. Torie's personal life and academic pursuits have made her passionate about addressing racism within the domestic and international adoption industries and advocating for family preservation and reproductive justice. She was recently named an Indiana University Griffin Graduate Pathways Fellow for Summer and Fall 2023, where she worked with adoption agencies and post-placement organizations to improve adoptive family education and create adoptee and birth parent centered programming.

She currently coordinates the activism and adoption speaker series for On Your Feet Foundation (love them) and volunteers locally in Bloomington, Indiana, as an expert witness in family court cases and a consultant for small family centered nonprofits designing staff trainings around race, adoption, and foster care.

In Torie's free time, she likes to go on walks with her rescue dog, Rowdy; who you might hear today, draw portraits, and play with her 3 nephews.

So, once again, Torie, welcome, and I'm so pleased that you bring all of this experience to us today.

Torie: Thank you so much, Lori. I am honored to be here. I love the way that you approach your podcast and conversations about adoption. So, I'm just thrilled to be able to have this conversation with you.

Lori: Wonderful. Let's start with what brought you here. Tell us whatever you'd like to about your story about becoming an adoptee and being an adoptee.

Torie: That's a great question. So, my story starts with my adoptive parents who wanted to grow a family but couldn't because of infertility issues. And at the time, open adoption and transracial adoption were fairly rare. Surprisingly, their agency was at the forefront of providing open adoption education. So, they learned a lot about what it looks like to maintain an honest and kind of integrative relationship between biological family and adoptive family.

However, they did not get any education on race, racism, hair care, skin care, topics such as color blind parenting, and racial identity development were not in their vocabulary. They pursued adoption, first of my sister, who is also a biracial black adoptee. And afterwards, they pursued adoption of me. But we are not biologically related.

So, we grew up in a very small, very conservative town in Northern Kentucky. My parents were, I would say, pioneers in open adoption and transracial adoption. This is 1993. So, this is for some social and historical context, the beginning of the Multiethnic and Inter-ethnic Placement Act (MEPA), which prohibits the consideration of race, national origin, and skin color as factors for consideration in adoptive placements, particularly in foster care. And that federal policy on transracial adoption really shaped the industry, shaped the kinds of practices and procedures and the kind of discourse that's happening at agency and professional levels.

So, many people at that time were advised (poorly so; we know now) to embrace love and affection and believe that that is the way to a successful transracial adoption. And that discussing race, bringing it into the foreground was not necessary, and that love could transcend those racial differences. So, because that was the larger narrative of the time and that was the education many adoptive parents were receiving, my parents were not immune. They, kind of, took that approach. To kind of give them a little bit of credit, my mom, in particular, recognized that racial identity might be an important component of our lives. So, she tried to learn a little bit through the limited resources that were available at the time.

I remember she often walked the neighborhoods looking for black people. She was desperate. She felt like she intuitively knew there would be a gap, but she wasn't provided any professional resources or guidance on how to help her children navigate racial difference in a dominantly white homogeneous community. So, even though she tried, we did not have access to black people. This is probably 0.1% people of color at the time. My sister and I were often the only children of color in our school classes, certainly in our neighborhoods, and always in our places of worship. So, even if there was a desire to connect us with black community, there simply wasn't black community that existed.

So that contributed to a lot of confusion and frustration and identity struggle for me growing up that I kept largely to myself. I was an introspective, creative, and passionate child that loved to observe the world and write about the world, imaginatively. I was always telling stories. I was always writing poetry. I was always in a headspace where I was analyzing the world. And that

came through in my diaries and in my stories that I wrote, but I didn't necessarily have the ability to articulate that out loud to my parents. There was a level of disconnect from my own experience. I didn't have the vocabulary to begin expressing discontent or loneliness or isolation or feelings of racial imposter syndrome or to be able to identify and describe what it felt like to witness and be a victim of racism. All of that was outside of my scope of ability to communicate to my parents. So, I did the best I could by writing and creatively engaging the topics of my own life.

It wasn't until I left my home and went to college and finally was in this beautiful vibrant community of people from all over the world; black people, Asian people, people from all different socioeconomic statuses, people that spoke different languages, people that occupied a complex social position, just like me. And I finally began to develop the language necessary to understand myself. And that's when I started taking anthropology classes, and I started reading books about different cultures and different races and ethnicities. And that's where I started to find myself feeling seen. That's where I started to find myself resonating with these stories of difference and identity that we were reading in class.

So, that really, I would say, was the beginning of my racial consciousness, which obviously has blossomed and changed and evolved as I've become more connected to my racial identity, more connected to my adoption story, and have begun to speak about it publicly.

So, that's a little bit of what I like to call the arc of my story, and we can talk more specifically about certain moments or milestones. But that's a little bit about my adoptive story. I do identify as an adoptee lifelong. I wasn't just adopted as a final act in a process of parents pursuing forming a family.

Lori: In other words, you would say, "I am adopted" instead of "I was adopted?"

Torie: It kind of depends on the context of the conversation. I do use the terminology, "I was adopted," but I'm always contextualizing it with the fact that adoption is something that is ongoing, that it is not a destination. It's not the finalization that happens in court. It's not parents bringing me home. It's not the ceremony that they had to represent integrating me into their family. It is a lived experience that happens quite literally daily. It's not something that pops up at specific milestones, like the loss of a relationship or feeling rejection or finding a life partner or reunion. Those are all milestones where adoptive identity would logically come into play. It is something that I think about in the grocery store. It's something I think about on my daily walks with my dog. It's something that comes into play for how I am treated in the world, how I am seen, how I see myself.

So, I do place an emphasis regardless of if I say, "I was adopted" or "I am adopted," just on the fact that adoption is lifelong and how one feels about adoption can evolve from day to day. So, that's kind of my adoption history, but also just how I orient myself to the identity of adopteehood.

Lori: Thank you for all of that. I'm really excited to talk with you, both about the racial consciousness that you came into and also the more general adoption consciousness that you are probably still coming into, because I'm gathering that that's probably not a milestone thing

either. You get there one day and you throw up your hands and say, "Touchdown." It's, like asymptotic; you're always moving towards that place in the distance.

So, let's talk about open adoption because it sounds like your agency and your parents were primed for the open adoption piece of this, from your very beginning, and you had access to your birth mom from early on. What does this mean with all four of your parents?

Torie: Yeah. That's a great question. I am quick to tell everyone I meet that open adoption was successful for me because I had, in particular, two mothers that were healthy, self-aware, and highly communicative with one another and were very quick to subordinate their insecurities around motherhood and around legitimacy to my well-being. And I see that as the key to an open adoption that is beneficial for the child and that is child centered.

That being said, I'm also quick to tell people that open adoption is not a fix all. It's not a salve that null and voids all the pain, the trauma, the sense of abandonment. What it does is it gives me access. It gives me the chance to connect to my history, to my biological history, to the connections that have been altered. I can ask questions. I can find meaning in that open adoption relationship that does, to a degree, soften some of those harder edges, but it does not completely eradicate that pain.

And I think, actually, Gretchen Sisson does a great job in her newest book, [*Relinquished*](#); discussing how open adoption is often used coercively to pull women into the choice of adoption. That you'll have this beautiful, perfect, connected relationship with your child. So, that is the reason you should choose adoption because you'll have this open adoption. And while my parents did what they did to make sure I had that open status, I still struggled. And I know that my birth mother still struggles. So, it's not necessarily accurate or truthful to tell women that by choosing open adoption, there will be no emotional or relational consequences because that's simply naïve. I often times feel like I am frozen in time as a child with my biological mother. We saw each other, but we saw each other intermittently. So, Halloween, birthdays, Christmas. And as a child, you grow substantially over time.

So, at one visit, I would be into horses. And then 3 months later, she would bring me a set of horse figurines. And I'd say, "Oh, well, I'm not into horses anymore. I'm into theater." So, while she had the benefit of knowing me, she didn't have the benefit of connecting with me in meaningful ways over a substantial amount of time and frequency. So, I was always changing. And that often caused some friction or just a sense of not connecting with one another. And I think that's very real and very normal.

I was often still perceived as a child, even though I was growing up, because she didn't get to see the day in, day out growth of me into a young person. And then on top of that, I still struggle sometimes with open adoption because I feel deeply for my birth mother. And I continue to have questions about, "Well, did my birth change the trajectory of her life? Did that cause her ongoing grief?" So, there's sometimes a sense of guilt for how your life affected your birth parent, And then there's also a sense of guilt that I love my birth mother because of who she is, because of what she has done for me, and because of the emotional and physical labor she went through to give me life.

But I do not love her because she's my mother day in and day out. I do not love her because I know her in ways that I know my adoptive mother. The love is very different. And I think sometimes as an adoptee, there's guilt there. There's guilt that I don't love my biological mother the same way I love my adoptive mother. And I think that needs to be normalized. That's okay. It is a different type of love. There is a different relationship that necessitates different types of feelings.

I will also say that open adoption was successful for me because my parents allowed me to take the reins. So, at the beginning, they made the choices for me because I'm a child. They're responsible for crafting and cultivating the open adoption relationship. But when I became old enough to voice what I wanted and I did, they responded. So, initially, I would have visits with my entire maternal biological family; cousins, aunts, grandparents. And while that's beautiful and so many people long for that, it was very overwhelming. I didn't know how to process that much contact with people that I knew I was related to, but I didn't have, like, an organic relationship with.

So, I spoke up, and I requested, "I just would like to have visits with my birth mom. That's what I think I need in order to navigate this identity." And they immediately pivoted. They immediately shifted. And I think it's so important as your children get older to pass off the baton, which you have so beautifully articulated, that you were the caretaker. You were the keeper of the relationship until they became able to do so themselves. So, that's a little bit about how I experienced it over time.

Lori: Thank you so much for exploring all of that in such greater detail than we often get. A lot of this is glossed over, like, "Openness is great. It's good for the birth parents, good for the adoptee." And within all of these things, you can always drill deeper and deeper and deeper and see that there's layers and there's complexity and there's webs and there's both kinds of emotions going on.

You mentioned both your moms. Do you have anything to say about both of your fathers; either of your fathers?

Torie: Yeah. So, technically, my adoption was open with my birth father as well, technically, but he was not present for the first 10 years of my life. I didn't see him. I didn't speak to him. I really decided to pursue connecting with him because of the ambiguity around my racial identity.

For so long, I was told that I was white, and I was something else. But the something else was always accompanied by a question mark, And it was possible I was black. It was possible I was Native American. My birth mother knew that my birth father was very physically dark. He has this beautiful, rich, deep, dark skin. But we know, especially as anthropologists, that having dark skin does not correlate directly to somebody's racial identity. You can have dark skin and be from Hawaii. You can have dark skin and be African American. You can have dark skin and be from southern India.

So, actually, for quite some time, my parents told me I was from India, because our local donut shop was owned by an Indian couple, and they had a couple children. And whenever we came in, they would say, "Oh, my goodness. Your daughter looks just like our daughter." And my parents would say, "Oh, well, we're really not sure what her background is because she's

adopted.” And they would assure them, we know this child is from India. We would know. Right? So, for some time, that's how I identified until I met my birth father, and he said, “No, you're not from India. You are Native American Indian from Alabama, Seminole Native American, but you are mostly African American.”

So, that really filled some holes in my self-understanding, and we interacted and visited with one another for a number of years. He ended up marrying, not my birth mother, but marrying and having multiple children. And that was always very difficult for me because I felt as though he could parent them, but he couldn't parent me. Even though, logically, I knew there were circumstances at play as a young man that prevented him from taking on the role of a father that were not present 10 years later.

But that kind of goes towards that adoptee math. Even though that's present, it was somehow completely canceled out in my brain. It was eliminated, subtracted from the equation. And sometimes there is that irrationality as an adoptee to think, “Oh, I was replaced by his biological children he has currently,” and that obviously reanimates emotions of rejection and abandonment.

With my birth father, even though we had a season of communication and visiting, it eventually went no contact. So, that's another potential outcome of an open adoption. Even though I had access to him, I could find him, verify his identity. I could initiate a relationship with him, that relationship doesn't always remain. It's not always sustainable for either party for a number of reasons. And then that leads to secondary rejection, which is feelings of abandonment that occur when biological family knows of a child's existence but chooses to remain distant, cut off the relationship, or even deny the child's existence.

And I think sometimes people imagine that to be just in a closed adoption, but that's not the case. Oftentimes, open adoptions will end in secondary rejection, and that's something that I have had to process.

My adoptive dad, I think, has been from the beginning a little bit behind my adoptive mom. And I think that that's something as an industry we need to address, that the women in relationships are often the ones propelling the decision to adopt, and they're often the ones doing the emotional labor through the adoption process. And as their adopted child ages, they're the ones that are helping them navigate that identity predominantly.

We've come a long way. I've seen him evolve and change and become more open to the types of messy emotions that accompany adoption, but I think he was probably of the mindset that adoption makes a family out of a child that needs one. And I had a generally positive childhood. I was very happy and buoyant, and he perceived that as an uneventful adoption story for me. My mom, who I was a bit more close to, saw some of the tensions and the discomfort and the loneliness. So, she was more capable of holding emotional space for those complexities.

I think as I've continued into adulthood dealing with my mental health in relation to adoption, I've really seen my dad beautifully open up to the kind of trauma and pain that comes with adoption, And I've seen him take on more active roles in managing what adoption looks like for us as a family.

So, I also have to be aware, as I deconstruct my own experience, that my parents have their own experience. They are the center of their adoption story. I'm the center of my adoption story. And they have perceived it and experienced it in a completely different way than I did. And I think one of the signs of maturity in my relationship with my adoptive parents has been recognizing and giving them some grace that the adoption industry didn't just fail me, it failed them. It did not prepare them adequately. It did not give them the full scope of what adoption was or could look like.

And, oftentimes, it's hard to separate your adoptive parents from the adoption industry. But when we began doing some of that familial work together, I started to have some compassion for the fact that they did the best they could with very little resources. And now they are attempting to make repairs for what they retroactively understand to have been harmful.

Lori: Thank you for all that. You and I got to actually meet earlier this year when the book tour for [Adoption Unfiltered](#) went to Indianapolis where you are. So you got to be on our panel and I got to see you in person. But even long before that, Torie, I had been watching your Instagram feed. Your company is called [Wreckage and Wonder](#). And I just love, not that both words start with W's, but also that it's bringing together 2 separate things that don't seem to have a lot in common. So, can you talk about naming your work, your company, your website, your Instagram?

Torie: Yeah. I went to the North American Council on Adoptable Children. It was named that at the time, which we now know it has changed to Families Rising. And there was somebody who gave a talk and had an analogy of a geode. It's this rock formation. On the outside, it's quite ugly, it's bumpy, it's scratchy. But if you strike it and you crack it open and you create this fracture, inside, it has this glorious, multicolored, crystalline interior. And I wish I remembered her name, because I would love to credit her for inspiring the imagery behind Wreckage and Wonder, but I was so moved by this analogy that she made with this geode to adoption, that adoption has two sides. And to actually be able to experience both sides, it has to experience a rupture, which I thought was beautiful. You can't see the internal beauty of the geode without breaking it open. And the outside is rough and disfigured, but the inside is gorgeous. And I loved the idea that adoption embodied both, that you could not have the beautiful interior without the disfigured, bumpy, kind of ugly exterior, And that in order to have both sides, there had to be that wreckage where the geode was broken into two.

So, that's kind of the inspiration behind the name. And to recognize that adoption does begin in significant wreckage for everyone involved. Many times, adoptive parents are experiencing the rupture of their own dreams of building a family through biological conception, and they're having to grieve. And sometimes they're even having to bury children of theirs that they have lost to infant loss. And then parents who have a pregnancy that is unplanned, so much of their life goes into a state of chaos and unknown. And there are competing desires to raise a child, but also recognizing the immense impossibility of doing so. And they experience that loss through relinquishment in adoption.

And then, obviously, the adoptee is experiencing that loss and that pain of the maternal separation. And then if you're a transracial international adoptee, the motherland separation, separation from your national identity, your cultural, or your racial identity.

So, I really saw everyone involved having to come to terms with a moment of wreckage in their life, but also being cognizant that that can be a catalyst for wonder and joy and beauty.

And I love that because everyone's immediate instinct when they meet an adoptee is to ask them, "So, do you wish you weren't adopted?" And I always say, "Who does that question serve? Does that serve me, or does it serve you? It serves you because you would like a definitive answer. Yes or no."

And oftentimes, it's coming from adoptive parents. And the answer of, "No, I never wish that I hadn't been adopted." It's an answer that serves their ego and their pride and their need to be needed. And those are all valid, but they are not my responsibility.

And I always wanted people to recognize that the answer to that question is, "I can't choose." You're asking me to lay both trajectories of my life down, look at them, and decide which one I want. And I would have to give up so much in order to make that kind of decision. And I think that the true answer, which many people are uncomfortable with, is the real answer, that there is a duality there. I can't decide to turn back time and be part of my biological family. And even if I was, while I would have that connection to my racial and cultural and biological identity, there would still be pain, there would still be trauma, and there would still be difficulty. The same for my adoptive family.

So, when I was coming up with this name for what I wanted to do in the world, how I wanted to be perceived, but also the type of work I wanted to do. The work I wanted to do was bringing people into this bigger, more expansive understanding of what adoption is, but it's not black and white as rarely anything in life is, and that two things can and do exist simultaneously. And that truly is what I believe is the core experience of adoption.

Lori: I have a geode in another part of my house and I will never look at it the same way again. With the internal and the external. And you're making me think about how in our culture we really want to try to either pretend there isn't the wreckage part or get past it as quick as we can so that we can just have the wonder.

Torie: Yes.

Lori: What I hear you saying is that all along the way, it's a both-and. And so, I want to get into that a little bit further.....which we will do next time. Let's take a break here. We'll resume our conversation with Torie DiMartile on adoption math that adoptees have to deal with, the worlds they must precariously straddle throughout their lives, the opposing emotions they continually experience (and are sorely misunderstood about), and how their parents can help or hinder their efforts. All in our next episode. Make sure you subscribe wherever you listen so you know when the next episode drops.

Lori Holden, Close:

A special thanks to *adopting.com* for producing and sponsoring this podcast. Please subscribe to give this episode a rating and share with others who are on the journey of adoptive parenting so that more people join for real talk on the complexities of adoption earlier and earlier in their journeys. You'll be doing them as well as me a favor.

With each episode of Adoption: The Long View, we bring you guests who expand your knowledge of, and ease with adoptive parenting. Thanks to each of you for tuning in and investing in your adoptions, long view. May you meet everything on your road ahead with confidence, curiosity, and compassion – and a little bit of wreckage and wonder

Show Notes

Keep up with Torie's professional, scholarly, and community-based projects via her website www.wreckageandwonder.com.

- **Article:** [Love is Not Enough: What it Actually Takes to Raise Transracial Adoptees](#)
- **Torie and her mom** [in the trenches](#)
- **Torie and Angela Tucker** on the [white savior narrative](#)
- **More on Adoptee Math** via [Lori's NCFA article](#) (p6)
- **More on the Math of Openness** in [Adoption Unfiltered](#) (p163)
- **Mentioned:** [The Open-Hearted Way to Open Adoption](#)