

Episode 37 | My adoption journey with Al Coates transcript

Welcome to CoramBAAF Conversations, the podcast series dedicated to adoption, fostering and kinship care. We asked children, social care professionals, and experts by experience to join us to share with us and you, our listeners, their experiences, reflections and knowledge. I hope you enjoy.

Hello

Well hello.

I'm Jane Poore. I'm Adoption Consultant at CoramBAAF and I'm here with Al Coates, who some of you might not need any introduction at all, but he's well known as one of the voices of the adoption and fostering podcast. And he's also worked with us. Recently presenting our our adoption conference that focused on adoption support. And do you want to introduce yourself? What's your title, Al? Do you have one?

My title? Mr Coates. Yeah. Mr Coates? Yeah. Al Coates. I guess you might say MBE, but that's feels a bit. Yeah. Yeah, it's it's complicated feelings about that. Very. My mother's very proud.

The code. That's good. That's good. OK. Welcome. Thank you for joining me. So one of your most recent podcasts was with Laura Payne, who talking about her good practice guide, exploring, assessing motivations to adopt. And and so I know we might touch or come back to that in a bit. But you're joining us to talk about your role personally as an adopter and a career and a, are you foster carer and a special guardian as well? Are you all of those things? Are you just that?

I haven't quite reached the glorified status of the Holy Trinity of all three. No, I have been here, foster care my wife and I were foster carers, approved for about 3 years, but that's. Yeah, that's a story of itself.

OK. Let's start at the beginning, then.

Yeah.

Not first inspired you to think about adopting a child or your person. Or did you foster first? The first time.

Right. So and cast your mind back to and I was young and happy, right? So I got married in a whirlwind with to my wife. I met my wife and we've been friends for a few years and then we decided it just literally over the course of weekend that actually we wanted to get married and we were friends. And then we got we. We started going out and then we got engaged. Then we got married six weeks later. So that was a bit of a shock to everyone. Percent. And.

And she my wife is 10 years old. Me. Paul is uh. She was 36. I was 26 and and uh, which is fine, which is a bit of a shock to everyone. But then we pretty soon after we got married, she said. You know, we need if we're gonna have children, need to think about that this quite soon. And I was sort of a bit oblivious and we've not had a chance to have those conversations. But there's been this anticipation that we would have children. I think oddly for me is that I'd never. I'd always seen myself with children, is in my mind's eye, but never, never, but never necessarily babies, which is always a bit complicated because I was never really enamoured with babies. So it is a quite a long story, but like everyone's infertility story is quite complicated. So we tried to to conceive. For a year or so, and this is late 90s and nothing happened, so we I think we didn't even wait that long because we were conscious of time. Ticking. So we went to the GP and the GP referred on to specialist and the Long story short is that Paula or where we couldn't conceive and it was, it was on uncertain as to why. And and so we sat down and where our options were that in front of us. And I said, look, we'd always sort of hummed and heard about the idea of adoption from sort of sort of fairly altruistic perspective. And I said, look, the maths from my perspective, the math doesn't work for IVF. You could do it 100 times and it's still quarter of a you know 25% chance. Conception and and Paula felt the same way really. And we said well, look, we've always talked about adoption. What we know through all the different things we've done prior to that, we knew that there. Were children who? Needed adoption, so we just cut to the chase and said right, let's let's apply to adopt and that that was the crooks of it. So. So I was 20. Oh, look back now. I was 27 when we made the application. I was 26 when we made the application and. 27 when I was approved.

That's pretty young, actually, as an as an adult actor, isn't it?

It's it's really odd. I remember thinking that I was a real grown up at the time, but with hindsight now sort of sitting at the other end of the spectrum, you know, in my early 50s now and and biggest social work for the last 10 years, really interesting. Then to sort of reflect back on those conversations where people are saying no, are you really ready to take on?

Yes.

Children and because as. What's that? Again? This is very sort of nuts and bolts starting to get the process we. And so we made, we made a phone call. So this is pre Internet and we we Paula phoned up a local that that you know she went to the Yellow Pages first air for adoption and phoned them. Yeah. And and phoned them up and and they said Oh well tell us your story.

Oh really? Yeah.

But very briefly, we gave them a this is this is who we are. And they said, all right, well, actually you need if you need to go into IVF.

No.

And and so we were, yeah now. Wow. Yeah, yeah. And and we, we we bit heartbroken cause we didn't have any sort of we weren't system literate at all. We were just told well, that's the end of that and a friend of ours had heard that and we went Oh my goodness, that's awful. Why don't you just ring up I think. It. Was well, I'm not naming Shane. Well, yeah, the the next local authority on the list.

Another agent, yeah.

And as it turned out, it was actually a closer local authority because she was. Paul was just literally going down. I mean, Newcastle, I live in Newcastle area, so there's lots of very close local authorities. You know, you could travel around about 7 in a 20 minute drive. And so we phoned them up and they said if they think this was a Monday and they said, well, actually we've got a, we've got a preparation cost Saturday. Do you want to come? We went. All right then.

Yes.

And and so so and literally we that was January 1998 and we we we were on the course and we just loved it, we just.

Pre Stage 1 and stage 2.

Yeah.

So there was there wasn't that division. There wasn't that Stage 1, which is a doctor LED and you're doing all your background stuff before you actually get to the assessment.

No, it looks like real hard work at the moment. I mean doing it now, it feels like you. I see. I see if I'm part of groups and I look at people doing it, you're cranky. You guys really put some hard. OK, I don't remember much about our preparation, cause I remember a couple of things. One is and and they're the head of the service now and head of our air. And I remember them saying to to us and. There's no such thing as a simple adoption.

Yeah.

And I meant that sort of stuck in my head and the other thing was this conversation on nature versus nurture. And I remember that intriguing me, but also with an absolute passion thinking.

Did it.

It's got to be nurture. It's got to be nurture. So like almost from a. Almost like a an element of faith in that rather than just a scientific approach, just maybe naively thinking, surely the the environment you grew up in is has a much bigger and profound effect on how you then develop and grow in your perspective on the world. So I remember thinking, oh, it's probably 75. Percent. Nurture and 25% nurture. I may have a different opinion now.

Yes, yes. I used to do a an an exercise when I used to run prep groups and you know you get 2 circles, one's nurture and one's nature, and they overlap in the middle and you say, but all the things that that children get from their birth parents and their birth family in one and all the things they get from their doctors in another and and everything in the middle that overlaps. And they start putting, you know, looks they get from their parents jeans they get from their parents health they get from their parents. You know, culture, all these other things and then they go what do they get from a doctors? Well, they we keep them safe and then they go. Ohh. But we love them. And I'd be like, well, you don't think their parents love them then. And they're like, oh, yeah, I suppose they do. Oh, yeah. Well. That better go in there as well, you know, and by the time they've done it, they realise it's all all birth that's happened. This little bit of a doctors.

Well, yeah. I mean, in the science of like when you look at things like epigenetics and you know the whole bottle of anticult, the body keeps the score and the impact of early adversity that. But then I think there was research out in the beginning of the in April this year about the impact of adversity on mothers on the children, the mothers of children, the impact on children. That there's a garbled sentence, but you know what I mean. And that even if the parents didn't raise their children, the impact of diversity on. Those children is profound and is long lasting and is enduring, so it really. It it it, I remember it just being in that preparation course and that me thinking very clearly that I I had to believe. But I do think about preparation courses now and I think that there's we're a bit like fighter pilots in the Second World War. By the time you were 20, you were kind of over the hill as a fighter pilot because you had that absolute enthuse. Theism and optimism of youth that this will not happen to me, and I remember thinking those these sort of slightly I don't think there was a lot of negative stories or or sort of trying to break through any of our sort of mythology around adoption. You know that we've all seen Annie and all of those things. But I remember thinking quite clearly it's all going to be fine for us.

OK.

It'll it'll be fine for us like that. That optimism of youth and and that confirmation bias that, yeah, all the I can imagine it going wrong for that couple over there and that individual of there you know me sitting there in my sort of high and mighty other but for us.

Yes, yeah, yeah.

We will love them and it will be fine and yeah.

Yeah. There's another whole bit that I think human humans self protection. You don't want to know that stuff in great detail really. So you have to have the optimism to carry on.

Yeah. So we did and then, but again, again, rather pragmatically, we decided that, UM. Uh, we would always envisage again this in my mind's eye and and again. It's very often it's funny because often times people say, Oh well, it's this Paul, you know, Paul is the one driving this. But often it was. It's very mutual. It was very absolute. We're all on the same page always and we both. Thought that we like. A lot of children, you know, so we we said to our supervising social worker, sorry not our super assessing social work, we said. But we'll we'll take as many as you'll give us. And she went well. We can only give, you know, can only approve you for three. And we were like, oh, we'll prove this for three. And again, you know this.

And they were told, yeah.

25 year. Old who's got it? It is a bit peculiar because in the midst of all that, we were followed by the BBC for a documentary, which is we were actually deferred at our first panel. We went to panel and then for a whole holster.

OK.

And I think mainly because I was 26 at the time and wanted to take on three children and they were like quite rightly said, whoa, we need a bit more work done on this.

OK. Yeah.

This then you know that this assessment, which I think is totally right with hindsight and we were a bit bored and we were due to go on holiday and there was this advert in, I think it was adoption UK magazine and it said the BBC were doing this documentary and and Paula would rang them and said, well, we're going through the process. Would you be interested? No, not really. And so we went on holiday.

Yeah.

And but as we were leaving and we were downcast because we've been. And deferred and not. You know that conversation where the social worker says, well, no one ever gets deferred but and it's we're pretty sure you'll get through, but we can't say definitely you know that dance that people do with those words. And we were the couple have got deferred and as we were leaving Paula rang the BBC again and left him an answer phone message and saying we. We got deferred actually and part of that was because we're, you

know, we both have a faith and I think that was slightly discombobulating for the. For the panel as well, I think there was a lack of faith literacy and and so we went to hold it and we came back into this voicemail that says we're interested. We'll be you. Know we'll be there in the morning and and to our social workers credit and to the local authorities credit. They said. All right, let's do this. So we then it was like we would.

Yeah.

Well, so it was a fantastically positive experience because the BBC followed us for 2 1/2 years in every meeting, every assessment, every and you had these four, sometimes 3, sometimes two people sort of over our shoulder. What it meant was the system was really efficient, cause no social worker wanted to be the one on screen.

Yeah.

Who kind of procrastinated over a form and but what it did also give is it gave us an insight into what the other stuff that was going on in the so we we saw the next. We then went to panel a few months later and everything we got through but the the BBC filmed the panel so I've got.

Yeah.

The panel where they discussed me, I've got that.

Maybe at the point when you got deferred, was that a real challenge or were you expecting talk me through that bit?

And that's this probably reflects most people's experiences that I'd we've just sort of we were on track to become parents and that we'd invested every sort of every spare moment of our lives into this process. We felt we'd been open and.

Yeah.

Just and and you know, and not to be dismissive of the social workers, but and and this is the way I see it now, even as a professional, is that if you don't get through panel, it's a failure of.

Yeah.

Social workers, not you.

Yeah. Yeah.

It's a failure in, you know, articulating the issues or.

Unless there's a reason why you're not. Suitable of course.

I would argue.

If it's a lack of information. Or there's something missing or it's not in the assessment. Absolutely. And they should know. You should know when you're going to panel. And I think most people do. Generally, you get a sense of what you're going to be asked and what you know, you describe yourself as 26, you know, and and more things for each of those are the issues that they're gonna pick up on, aren't they?

Yeah. I mean, I I would. I would contest the the the point you said that that it's not a failure of social cause. I think it is a failure cause if you aren't suitable that should be picked up and quality issue. The app.

Yeah. Yeah. No, I agree with you on that. I think that probably.

Right, OK. But also I think I think that well, I I think it's a I think it's a really difficult I think a really difficult thing to assess families and I sort of think issue of you need to UM. Highlight the issues for the panel and you need to lay them all out in a really transparent way, but then explain in with absolute clarity why those are not necessarily things that are going to stop people being able to adopt.

Yeah.

And. But I do think there are people who shouldn't adopt.

Let's let's not go down the the Dressel policy route here. We're gonna stick with you, Al, cause I'm determined that this is your story, because we could, we could go off and put put the world.

I do have an opinion about every aspect of this, so you will have to rein me in. Keep me on a tight leash.

So when you went to Palen, you were deferred, you were then it it, it was like part of the process to you and you just felt well, that's OK and you it it you coped with it, evidently.

Well, we did, but I think I mean, Paula took it hard and I'm quite pragmatic. Paula, really, really took it hard. And and I I totally get that and it was a it, it felt like a no, it didn't feel like it.

Yeah. Yeah.

Go in, you know? Well, in fact, it was that. And the social worker. My social worker was great and really said, look, we dropped the ball in certain regards and but no, there's no blame and we weren't grinding our teeth with them. And. So I think that, you know, it was, it was a really positive. Ultimately, it was it was positive cause we now see. I don't think

we've got children any sooner, but it gave us it. It opened the door to the BBC, which I think was a fantastically positive experience for us and our children and our children were all shown on the on the on it and we got to. See their. Experience. And so all things sort of tend to workout for good, don't they? Hopefully 1 hopes.

So then you were approved eventually.

Yes.

And then what was? What was the matching like for you? Was that hard or?

While I was social worker went on holiday. For four weeks. And which was a planned holiday, which is fine and and what we later discovered is that we would have probably been matched at our approval panel if we but we weren't.

Right.

So it was only 5-6 weeks later, which but in adoption as an awaiting adopter, that might as well be 1000 years. I think after the frenetic activity pre your panel then there's this total drop off and I but I remember and so there was there was an element of. So we were sort of.

Yes.

There was a there was a bit of telegraphing cause the BBC would kind of dip in and once it's gone quite so, the BBC sort of slunk off for a bit and then they said, oh, we wanna come round cause we heard your social workers coming and went alright, OK and I said and I thought to myself, Oh well, there's only one reason why that you're coming round, not just filmed some random.

Yeah, yeah.

But I I can remember it's probably the most profound experience of my entire life. And so this is pre digital link maker.

Yeah.

I can remember every aspect of it. I can remember where everyone was sat, and I can remember my social worker. God bless her. I can remember she'd write, she said. We've got three children that we think would work, would be perfect for you and.

Hmm.

So there was no sense of us searching or looking, and she'd written their names on her piece of lined paper paper that she'd sort of ripped out of her a notepad.

Yeah.

And I remember looking at these three names with ages next to them. You know, 2 girls and a boy 6/3/18 months. And I remember thinking, I can't. And see this. I can't. I this is this is a door that's been opened that can never be shut now that this is a this is a before and after.

Yeah. Well.

Moment in my life that this will define the rest of my life.

Yeah, that's amazing.

Yeah. I mean, even now I thinking about it and just and I've still got the piece of paper, you know it's hidden away and and it's just a it's just a gutty bit of paper and then we were given the documentation we given the CPR's and but we'd already put you know Paul and I we just said well yeah.

OK. Yeah.

And we've with the three, three names and ages. That's enough for us. I mean, that's.

Make that emotional commitment, yeah.

Yeah. With hindsight, we're obviously clearly over enthusiastic. There's nothing worse than over enthusiastic people. And then we read the referrals and we were like, yeah, there's nothing in here that's that's that's made us think. Ohh no, we shouldn't. In terms of their story and their experience and who they were as little people and and then you sort of you're dancing through that process, you meet, you meet the foster care people. People want to kind of stress test you a little bit more and. Yeah. And I think that it's remarkable that all the people involved were willing to be filmed. I think there was no one who wasn't.

Yeah.

And that was so again, all those moments. Of course, you know, we've got got some VCR's kicking around.

Yeah. Amazing.

And it got transferred to DVD eventually and.

So that you can. Do your panel before you met them.

So well, this is again, this is a a time before being nice to people was discovered. So we were just it was a I mean at the time they were having competitive matches in the local authority. So if there was a child and there.

Yeah. Yeah.

Was two families, they think. Good. I mean, that's all.

We'll go away and talk about them. Yeah. Whereas three. Yeah. One go. You would? Yeah. There be fewer fewer families to conquer. Yeah.

Absolutely. And then the this sort of this serendipity which every adoption story has got these serendipitous moments and so in our preparation course they were, they would give you. They're giving examples of those, these children and these children and set up and literally they said in the. The one of the preparation courses, they said. Ohh this week we've had this thing happen. And they talked about these three children, and Paula told me then she said, those I when they said those three children, she said I want those three children. And those were the three children that these, you know, they they told their story and all of the serendipity around all of that. And so really odd that our journeys were then in parallel time parallel we went to matching panel which was.

Yeah, yeah.

Again, it's like a living torment, isn't it? But we again. This is pre being nice to people we weren't invited to attend. We did. We hadn't gone to our for our our first panel and we were just sat at home waiting for a phone call. And then with the same at the matching panel you sit at home, wait for the phone call.

Ohh really? Wow.

Yeah. So yeah, I mean, just the the real. Test of people's endurance and.

That's really hard, isn't it?

Yeah, I mean it. Yeah, it is what it. Is I guess but.

Yeah.

It was just what it was. You just do it and and then within a few weeks. So that was maybe early. It was within six weeks of getting this piece of paper, then all of a sudden just sitting down planning and again. UM, all these things then turn into apocryphal stories that you tell your children around this Sunday dinner, and I was the first person. There's a local drive through near US, and I was the very first person to go through the drive through because it was a like. A. 10:30 on a Monday morning. And then we'd we'd had to go and have this meeting after panel and. With planning the transitions and. Yeah. And I'd come driving along. It was like it's open and I was the first person. So like that. My children all think of that like, you know, like children grown. Yeah. When you tell them, oh, they. And they're like, I'm like, oh, Dad, you're so dull. Mind numbingly dull.

We've heard that story so many times, and you're like this life changing.

So it's so boring. And. Yeah, this is. Yeah. For me, it was quite a profound moment. Yeah.

Yeah, yeah.

And and then within. But was really peculiar in that just because of the needs of the children, they decided that they weren't going to tell them. That they'd found new parents for them until within 30 minutes of us arriving.

Oh really?

Which again is really peculiar and they were just not sure how that would kind of. There's just thinking, how is it going to land and is it going to be a cause for worry if it's kind of a prolonged so they just literally told her at lunchtime?

Wow.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. But 30 minutes before you arrive. Wow.

Well, yeah, there was a there was a like, literally go home. We will ring you if it if they take the news well come round. And and it's really shocking. Thinking about it now. So literally we got a phone call going, they've taken it well, come right now. And so I remember this kind of there's this huge culmination of everything, isn't it the it's almost intolerably painful for adoptive parents and for children to have this couple bounced on you. And. And we had again filmed.

And and all, all your respected baggages that's that's the thing, isn't it? It's and. And that thing we always end up having to try and it's the baggages matching the baggage that's the difficult bit. If you could just put two people and three children together that would be fine. It's all the life stuff that comes with them, isn't it? That's and the mismatches and and you sometimes can't quite predict where it's going to work and where it's not going to work.

Yeah. I mean, there's an, there's an element of alchemy to all and well.

There is absolutely a matching influence, but you, well, I don't know. I mean, like you were saying, you had a gut reaction and and and your wife had had the reaction when she heard about them in that in the prep room. So you'd already made some of that emotional commitment.

Is that? Yeah.

Then, but that wasn't the children that you got. That was what the children in your head. That wasn't the real children, was it that? And that's the thing about thing is that people commit to an image and a bit of writing.

Links.

Or maybe even the video, but they're not committing to the real child. They're committing to what they envisage as is going to be their children.

And I think as well, the truth is. What what I would observe as well is that the children themselves were not themselves at that time they were in and I I really. I reject the notion that children can have a languishing foster care. I really, really object to that that notion and that language. But what I see is that their children, who are almost.

Likewise, yeah.

In sort of this kind of stasis, they are neither between here and there and they and they even, and even as little children, they don't necessarily understand that. But there's a sense of.

Yeah. We're in limbo, yeah.

They're not claimed and it's really complicated, but.

Is the claim is that claiming that is it and that's the word, isn't it? Yeah.

Yeah. And so it's just really, I mean every it went as well as anyone could hope. But to be honest with you, I I look back now and I was. Beyond freaked. I was I just unravelled and and Paul unravelled and so all of that that I I take quite a lot of umbrage with this idea of cocooning and because I think that it's. I think that it's a. It's a lack of imagination on people's minds because I think that.

When you say cocooning you mean after children are placed and not, you know staying together and there's there's different ways of doing it, isn't there? And you can build build those attachments without being. There's a difference between the cocooning and isolating, isn't there?

Absolutely, but we were. Yes. Yeah, yeah. I mean, I guess so. But we were sort of given quite strong advice to kind of shut the doors, stay at home and and I remember from for Paula that was catastrophic because she's a social creature. She needs a friend. She was seeing her friends every day, twice a day, you know, and and where we lived, people on our estate and and they sort of they'd been, we'd advise them to stay away. That's what we've been told to do and. And I remember thinking, I remember this. Really. I remember there's a few moments that were terrifying. I remember being at 7:00 in the morning.

Yeah, yeah.

And being in the local park with my kids and thinking I can't do, I've literally, there's everything I could think of to do today is done. I don't know what to do for the rest for the next 12 hours and just massively overwhelmed. But that compounded by this idea that I'd firstly I'd I'd said.

Wow.

No, actually I am. I am an adult. I can't do this. Then the fact that I've been filmed by the BBC and I've been up for that. And I was like, oh, look, you know, someone put point your camera at me and and then me thinking me not having any outlet for that kind of that wobble which I think everyone needs them I think there will be some people who don't need.

Yeah.

Don't wobble, but I needed to wobble.

I think everybody wobbles in different ways. I think everybody wobbles. It's just it's just how they manage that, isn't it?

Yeah, but I sort of took the view that actually love is. Love is a peculiar thing, isn't it? I think that you can. You can create. You can. People have that snap moment where they fall in love and some people it grows and some people work hard and make it happen. And and I just realised that I I I need to work hard and make it happen. And I, you know, my children, they know this. You know, I'm not pretending that I'm, you know, we had this Waltons moment in their living room, but I just really struggled. And I, you know, I was 26, and Paul really struggled for a few weeks until a friend of ours is just aching. Trist said ohh stuff. I'm just coming round. And she went, she went. It's just depression, man. It'll pass, which is, you know. Simply and and literally, Paula said. The minute she said that oil pass, she said it did. She just realised that actually, yes, this will pass and it within minutes and hours and weeks she got better. And but I I went.

Yeah.

Acknowledging it.

Back to work. Yeah, this is. Pre adoption, leave all of those things so it's just we just we just then go on with our lives and started to build our lives. And to be honest, our kids are a testament to their parents. They were. They're lovely, lovely kids and they're.

Yeah.

With hindsight now, there's lots of things I would have done differently, but that is the very nature of. Parenting, isn't it? That that's universally true, and but we did our best, and we

had a we had, we had a lot of fun and we we loved each other and we just we did all the things you would do with your kids and. Yeah, so it was, it was really, really positive.

Yeah, yeah.

Hey. We were just, we were the poster kids for adoption. Honestly, it was just going so well. But then what? I mean, if I'm I'm conscious, it's quite a long story. So we'll we'll aim to get to at. Least all six kids and so.

I know, yeah.

So then I. So about 2007, 2006, 2007, yeah, Paula said. Look, all the kids are in school now, you know, this is only 9 within 5-6 years.

The youngest was 5 or 6 by this point.

Yeah. Yeah. The youngest was, yeah, he was probably 7:00-ish. And Paula said look.

OK.

I wanted to be a mum to be a mum and I'm kind. Of all my. Kids are in school and I'm not and such was the test, a testament to how well that they were doing and a love.

Yeah.

Children and that we made the decision that we would want to foster, and that was partly inspired by the the the What we've seen of foster care and how well they looked after my children and how they've created a, you know. I think foster carers often hold the tension between with these children that they can't, tensions that can't be resolved and so they keep children safe and they created a they they they passed on to us. These children who were ready. To be sort of claimed and.

Amazing, yeah.

And and so we thought, let's do that. We could do that. You know we we've got five years of parenting and brought with them an expert at this. So again we went to panel, we were deferred again not a recurring theme which we might get back to and yeah why would defer this time was I think they they said we think you want to you think that this is a route to adoption.

Yeah, yeah. Oh really?

You are serial adopters, so and we went and we said literal. No, that's just not the truth. Absolutely not the truth. And they said, right, we're we're gonna put a caveat on that. We're

not gonna place any children under four with you. And we went. That's fine. That's, you know, but obviously four. I think it was 14.

What difference does that mean?

Well, exactly. And so they. Yeah. So that was in the that was like the I can't remember it was the IT was October and then they said well we we need you to do a bit of respite for her local care if she's a single carer and she's doing she's got 2 little ones she's got a three month old and a 15 month old and they're they've got really complicated there's some health stuff.

Really.

And and so we went. Yeah. Yeah. So we took him for the weekend and then Mrs Coats in her head went. Ohh, we'll.

Yeah.

That's it, yes.

Well, yeah, that's it. And and then the such was the the quality of Mrs Coulter's care. I'm just, you know, I'm incidental. I just, you know, I I I'm not sure what I do. She they said yeah, I am I'm I'm the entertainer. I'm the jester of the of the thing and sometimes the Commandant it's not a good look and then within just after Christmas they funded.

Right.

Said look at the careers. Just as at the end of herself, would you? And she's asked if you would take them and went alright then. So we took a three month old and a 15 month old, which was exactly the the advice they hadn't given us and and that was a very different experience being foster care because it's.

Yes.

You know you're into family time, you, you and and they were. Babies. So they were doing five days a week at tea time.

A lot of that.

Which is stupid.

And you've got three older ones as well.

Yeah, I mean, but again.

And it's not. It's often more difficult. With birth children and well with you, you know, older children in the adopted family already.

Yeah, but it was peculiar because like my eldest and probably my second eldest had a memory of foster care as well. And so they were very. They were a lot of compassion, and especially my eldest, who really understood this world and kind of could see how this all in fact, it was an A really valuable learning tool for them to kind of watch this happen to with the children. Not that we did it for that.

Yeah.

Not really informed and and they were incredibly compassionate and empathic and.

Yeah.

And once you get to five kids, you kind of you, you, everything changes you sort of, you you sort of turn into, everything changes you. Everyone needs to, you know, pull their weight, which is just the nature of. Big. Families and a lot of very Long story short, and that would this, you know, this bit of the story is the book. I will write a Long story short and. At the end of 2 1/2 year, we we were. Asked to. Adopt them. Which I was really reticent to, and they know this again. So I'm not, you know, I'm not. I'm not spilling any. Beans. And I just said, well, this isn't they've got family, they've got people, and I and I think by then my perspective has changed significantly. They've got family, they've got people in their lives, they is this in the best interest of these children to be placed in a house with five other. You know, to make up five children, you know, they could. They are beautiful children who would maybe thrive.

Yes.

And so we had lots of complicated conversations, lots of complicated conversations with my children. They were up for it. And Paul was up for it. And I was the one going. Yeah. But you do know that it's not one holiday anymore. It's two holidays, and it's not one car. It's two cars. All of these complicated conversations. And then there was a plan that there was, there was really complicated plans that just fell into absolute chaos.

Yes.

Ports and that then protracted for what we were approved to adopt at one point and sort of forgot this, we approved to adopt one point and by then they changed. Then you could go. So we went and actually. There was a court case that needed to be heard and it was going to be it was like everyone said, it's a done deal. So just come to panel anyway. So we we were approved on that basis. We came to panel and. We sat outside panel and we were the

first item on the agenda and they said. You'll never guess what, but the they've not doesn't been no decision yet, so you can have to just wait. So we waited. It was like 11:00 and then we waited and it got to 12:00 and everyone came in and went into panel and then left happy. And we waited and we waited and then it got to the half 12 and the.

Yes.

Panel. Said, look, there's a buffet lunch for us. We're going to have it, but if we'll hang around because would you go after? And they all had their lunch. And then they went home. And we went home and there's no decision to be made. And. And. We just went home and we just went back to caring for the the girls and it was a. Another year and and it what it took a year and the children, there was a there was a failed, there was a failed introduction into special guardianship that we that we did everything to support. We could and and.

Yeah.

And.

And we were then re. Then we had to be reapproved. Ohe what happened then? Oh, then we were. I'm trying to think now, the, the timeline, it's so blurred. And then it ultimately we were then asked to go back to panel, and we went to panel. And I remember thinking. There's nothing you can tell me. There's there's we went to panel. We were. It was the first time we'd ever attended panel in person. You know, after all of this and. And I remember sitting there. They just said, oh, we just want to thank you and take them home. There's no questions or anything and there are number.

Yeah. Finally. Yeah. Yeah. So that's five. How did number six end up with you?

Well, I think it's worth commenting at that point that we as a whole family, we felt the pieces.

Oh, did you?

Yeah, and the the needs of the children are such, and because of the impact of some of these really negative pre care in care, I mean some of the stuff that happened in care to them was a. Horrendous. The idea of taking a 2 year old like a 2-3 month old to contact at tea time every night for for eight months. Is just what? What impact does that have on a child and and then we? The behaviour was such that we unravelled. I mean we literally that and again that really was profound, you know, to think that we were quite we were sort of I'm trying to I'm trying to put it in a way that you know I totally my perspective on my children's needs is that they were incredibly vulnerable.

Yeah.

And but and just literally had lost all trust in every adult that ever met, including me and Paula. And and we unravelled to the point where our mental health started to deteriorate. Paula started to have panic attacks and I started to I was really twitchy and I just said to Paul one day.

Yeah.

If I don't stop working, I'm not sure we'll be functioning in three months time, such as the needs of the children that were consuming the household, and so I had enough money in the bank for three months, mortgage and. I. Said, well, we've, I know we've got three months. Let's give it a go. So I just give up work just and.

Yeah.

And found myself asking for help of social workers post up. Just put workers and just then saying just get out, don't come back. You know them saying, you know, my my child does this and then going well, maybe they're just picking up your attention. I was going. What the hell are you talking about? Just had a wee get away. It's no no sense. So we just and I got put myself on every single course I could find. I joined an adoption panel because I, mainly because I knew that they.

Yeah.

Would. Have to do CPD. So I went to every training the local authority would put on and I just started to Hoover up every bit of information. And I would ask for support from everyone in terms of violent, aggressive behaviour in. Small children again, which you know I'm a geek. Hairy northern block. I should be able to manage this.

Yeah.

And then we, I picked out a living and then there was this. There was a birth St to be a social worker, and I thought I thought two things. I thought one is I need that money and two is I need to be system literate. So 2010 I started so about 218 months after I finished stopped working. I started the degree and just loved it.

What were you? What were you doing originally? What were you? What was your job originally?

Well, when I left school, I trained as a structural draughtsman, which on boards to lose pencils and pens and rulers, skill rules and and then that transferred to computers and doing architectural metal books. I would design staircases, helical staircases and you know, all kinds of jazzy stuff. Loved it, loved my job.

OK. Yeah, yeah, but nothing really nothing related. To social work, then.

No. I and I loved it and I, you know, I, I I remember sitting outside the office discreetly crying the day I had to give up work because I loved it. So much just loved my job. The fact that they'd sell it my bike to the ceiling hadn't helped because that's the nature of men and work. And so I then social work and I I did that. But in the middle of all that for the two little ones, they'd had contact with other family members and and especially an older sibling and who was in a special guardianship arrangement. And we've got to kind of vaguely know. And informed by our younger children's experience, who had another sibling that they have no contact with and the, the, the, the portals going down. We said we do not want all of us said we do not want this to happen for these girls they the contact and the local authority it.

Yeah.

Said that, ain't going to happen. And we said. I'm pretty sure that's not how the rule the world you know by then you get you're able to articulate, you get a sense of agency and a sense of like devil may care what? You're gonna do so we. And actually, our poor fostering social worker to go to court and petition for that and. Said, bless her. That's the only social work I've ever made cry and. She was overwhelmed just at this because she tracked with us and then yeah, and. And really, what an amazing, amazing social worker and.

Delete it. Yeah, yes.

And the local authority said, well, if you do it, it's on your own head and the family said if you're gonna do it, then we give you our total blessing to adopt the. And which it was like, oh, wow, this is transformative sort of information. And So what happened then was we, we we went with every sort of like, ageing mate. We went to Charlie chinks every three months and we would visit them. We would go to theme parks to this sister and aunt and. And then it was like, well. It why are we doing? Why you just eventually we got to like, why do you just come round for dinner couple of times 3 or 4 times a year and then it be a Long story short is over a period of 18 months, two years, three years, it became that she would come round on a Monday night for tea.

And say.

And so it was. It was like our Monday night. Auntie and sister would come, and it was what the amazing thing was that then. And I I don't want people to think that this is like this benign relationship because there's there was there's people in my children's life who, you know, the police sat down and said you must never see these people. So it's not like this we're living like the Waltons but this hand.

Yeah. Yes, yes. Yeah.

Was amazing and they're able to hold that. And my Paul was at the shops one day and asked her and she bumped into Andy June. She went, oh, June, how you doing? Ohh, right. Fine. Yeah, right. And you shall. You'll never guess what. I was pregnant again. And and he said, would you have the baby? Paula went. Yeah, of course we would. And that was like, I mean, I tell that story. And I mean, there's a lot of other things needed to happen. And so it wasn't that, you know, the baby was smuggled in the back of our car, but then we then just we poked our head up to social service and said we would, we would be willing to do that and.

Yeah. The code, yeah.

Then. So I as I was in my final year of qualification. My final placement 100 days social work placement. I was being assessed. And we were being assessed and then I saved up all my every hour I could. I worked extra during my final placement, you know, doing essays and placement and and and did introductions whilst I was still as a student placement. So I was like, I was like, oh wow, this is fried my noodles. And the day that I had it in my final portfolio on.

Yeah. Let me go ahead, yeah. Well.

The day I finished my degree. She moved in my, my, my little girl. And what was wonderful was I literally my diary was empty. There was nothing.

No.

And so we just spent. Like two months together, three months together, which is the exact opposite of my earlier experiences where I've been working.

And that's how you do cocooning.

Well, yeah, it was just. Well, what, what was? Well, again, the question we said, you know, people going into this and this and we said what you're talking about.

Yeah.

We're. A household because there's an not mention, but there's another adult who's lived with this all the way through that period. We've Paul is a carer for another adult, lives in the house. So. So you're a household of eight.

Yeah, you've got a function, yeah.

Yeah. Why are we cocooning? But we made it really clear it was like, OK, well, we will do all the feeding and we will do all the all the kind of the, the intimate personal care for for my

daughter. And but the rest of you can play with it and you can spend time with her. But when anything need like that, we need to happen. And so that's that worked really well for us and and that got us to that.

Yeah.

That was to six. That was Nat, 2013.

Was that that 2013 was it?

Yeah.

So the youngest 1 is now 11.

At 13, because she was 2, she was 18 months. She was.

The family got, yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah. So she's my only child at the moment. If you know me, she's. All the rest are young adults. Yeah, she's great and quite old adults.

Yeah.

30s.

And and children still at times, probably.

Well, now might listen to this. So I couldn't possibly comment.

I've got 20 things. I know what 20 somethings are like.

Well, because I think that often I reflect, I look some of my children look at my children, all my children, I see the the shadows of that experience. That is is.

Yeah.

It it stretches long into their lives and. And I heard someone.

Absolutely. And it's it's still there and it's it's maintaining that balance, isn't it and and and building your own family and adding to this, but you can't take away the stuff that's gone before and is is still there. And I just wonder, you know, looking back now, what if if you've got people who were going to what, what would you say to them, you know? Go for it.

Adopt 6.

It's a really, really interesting question, because I think that you need a level of absolute mad naivety, but that is that's the nature of parenting, isn't it, that you you start with

overwhelmingly optimistic views and you get the child you're given. That's true of every parent.

Yeah. At the very day. Yeah. Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

So there's, so it's the temptation is to think that I think that we probably have more informed, we have more awareness of risk and I think that the challenge is as well is that we've, we've we've condensed down the the. Children all of the children that we care for will be children who have experienced adversity. I'm cautious, I am very cautious around the language of trauma because I think that. Trauma is trauma is a response to an event, and I think that all children respond differently to the the experience of separation, loss and potentially abuse prior to that separation and loss and neglect. What would I say to adoptive parents? I would say do your homework. I would say.

But.

I would if if I could do any if I could change one thing, I'd say go and get someone who gets spanners on your head because. Who's unpick all that really complicated stuff about your own? What your expectations are, what your hopes are, what your aspirations are? Have you put to bed all of the reasons that got you to this point have? And I think that so often in the work I I mean now I work predominantly with, well, I work a lot with parents who've got with children, with complex, challenging, violent, aggressive behaviour so often that then that is a catalyst for showing all some of this stuff that hasn't been resolved in terms of what people's expectations were for their children also you. Often get this phenomena where you get the adopter and the one who went along with it.

Absolutely, yeah, yeah.

Which in normal if everything's. Kitty Boo. Then that you ain't gonna see those. Cracks. But the minute you get you get this friction, you get one parent who goes. I'm. I'm out. I can't cope with this or this is this is much beyond what I have the capacity for and.

Yeah, that's not what I signed up for.

Yeah, and and I think assessing, assessing social workers, I think it's a really difficult job and I think that the challenge is that I know as an adopter that you tell, you know and assessing social worker says, what do you think about diversity and you say it. I think it's blooming great because you're not gonna say what you really think. Are you? It takes a really. Strong, self confident adopter to do that knowing that.

I don't know. Hopefully you would unpick that a bit more now. I think. I think we've got better at unpicking those things. I mean, when I look back now at some of the assessments

I did, I don't think I challenged people enough on those things. I think I accepted what a doctor's told me a lot, whereas now I think I would. And pick things a lot more.

Yeah, yeah, I mean, and that's not a criticism, but people are again, we've even since from when I adopted the roots to the the roots through infertility are huge. I mean people spend a decade going through fertility. They put themselves in a terrible debt, but this this roller coaster of.

Yeah.

IVF, which is, you know, it's grief and loss, hope, grief, loss, the impact on people's well-being is.

Yeah, yeah. Absolutely resolved, doesn't it?

It's.

Yeah. And you may never resolve it. It's unresolvable.

Yeah, it's not. Yeah, don't mean resolve. But I mean, I'll do. I mean resolve, I mean reconciled or accepted or you're not gonna solve it. It's not gonna go away. But but you live. You've learned to live with it on an even you know it it doesn't eat away at you, but then until you're challenged you sometimes.

Reconciled.

I don't know that that's going to eat away at you, do you? So there are things. Even with the best will in the world, if an assessor and assessing a doctor really does their their work with you and triangulates everything and unpicks everything and challenges everything, and there's a really good, robust assessment, there are things that that we don't know because we don't know how we're going to react as humans sometimes. 3.

Absolutely. And but I do think that, I mean I'm I'm a social worker. Like you're a social worker. We've done assessments and. I do think are we necessarily equipped to do that, that assessment in terms of we can do a lot of it, but there is I think there's something else beyond that, maybe a psychologist that would maybe even pick in a way that is beyond our skill set.

Yeah, yeah. I mean it's that self motivational interviewing stuff, isn't it? It's that. And and I think I did a lot of that before I started doing adoption assessment. So I think half the time I would kind of get my adopters to go on that journey, you know and kind of kind of see it themselves and kind of begin to dig into themselves and then they'd ring me up. And go. Ohh, I've just thought about all this stuff and now I'm thinking this and now I'm gonna have to go and see my parents and. Talk it through with them. I'm like, fine, I'll put you on hold.

Go for two months. Get them. Talk to your parents. Ring me up. Come back when you've worked it through, you know? And they would, you know? But. But there is that need and I think.

Yeah.

You know it. It's the balance between ensuring because we need a doctors, we really need a doctors. But what we don't, we need a doctors who are prepared for the job and and and as robustly prepared for it as we can help them to be, don't you? I'm afraid I'd come back on when the doctor's go. It was a really hard, stressful process.

Yeah.

I go. Sorry, it needs to be these are really vulnerable children. These are some of the most vulnerable children in our society. We need to make sure we get it right for them, you know, and and it and it rightly needs a robust process, not to say that we put them off because it needs it. It's a fine balance, isn't it?

Yeah.

Yeah, I'm. I'm not sure it's that. Fine, I think that. Well, I think that.

I'm being I'm being kind, yeah.

You're being generous. You're being like you're being generous and I'm not being flippant or contrarian, but I do think that. The experience of caring for children with challenging, violent, aggressive behaviour, which often the root cause of that is is early adversity, trauma, neglect, and that will test you beyond or to a point of breaking and. And you know with, you know.

Yeah. And.

The temptation is to. Look at what we've like, you know, I've got six children now. All of them talk to me and they're all doing OK. We're not the Waltons.

Yeah.

And the temptation is to.

But you said they all wish you a happy birthday this year, and that's that's a positive, yeah.

But it's the first time in five years.

Yeah.

And if we want to be really frank, that you know the if we want to be absolutely frank is that there's been times where we've had to call the police.

That's a bit. Yeah.

Now that is outside of normal parenting. And and we've been to some, you know, and you know and and I look at actually I do look at some of my children to think that actually adoption wasn't the right thing for you. You didn't need a parent. You didn't need a replacement dad because of your experience of dads. You didn't need a replacement room because of your experience of mums, and I don't think anyone was really.

Yeah.

I think that's hindsight. I don't think at the time anyone would have been able to kind of Polish a crystal ball and see that. And so it is, it is really complicated and I think that that that is one of the the the peculiarities of adoption is that. You. You are the custodian of a child's story, but the make comes a point. Like with all of my children. Where they've gone umm. Who are these other people in my life? And they've? And it's well within the right to go and make and and make sense of that. And some of my children have wanted to do that, some less so some not at all and and so that's that is a peculiarity. Really. I mean, I I have one sort of story when my eldest 3 had sort of reconnected with their family at them when they were sort of late teens, young adults Christmas evening. They said, oh, we're gonna go off and see our mum now. And so they did, and which I kind of went with my blessing. Absolutely go. But sitting in your home on Christmas night going. Ohh. This isn't this is not a feeling I was expecting. I feel really jealous and I feel really concerned and anxious, but my children must that must not. If I lean into that or I let that take.

Yes.

Take a grip on my actions and my words and my deeds. Then I will lose my children forever. So that's something that's that's so peculiar for to adopt us. I think that.

Yeah, but you have to manage yourself, yeah.

Yeah, and. And they came back. So it was fine.

I think you said at a conference and I don't know whether you remember saying this, but you said even if you've never met your child's. Birth parents. You're still Co parenting with them throughout throughout their life. And I thought, wow, that's really profound that is. And I now tell people that and I think I think all the doctors should be made to sit and think about that.

You know, eventually if you talk enough, you say good things, so you know, I'm not taking too much credit for it, but Paula often mentioned it. She articulated it as this idea that sometimes you have ghosts in. Your house.

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

That.

Yeah.

And sometimes that's good, and sometimes that's terrifying.

And you don't know where they are.

For the children as well.

Our unconscious that we're coming to the end of time and we could happily do a Part 2 and talk about everything else can we is there. Is there anything that we haven't covered? I wanted to talk to you about, you know, do you feel the the need to represent I mean you know when you look at coming back to motivations to. Stopped. There's a shift from people who've gone through that infertility. There's now 2025% who are same sex couples. We've got and a growing proportion who are doing it for purely altruistic environmental reasons as well, which, you know, brings with it its own. Challenges as well and and do you feel pressure to try and represent all the different ones or do you just just do your own bit?

Well, I guess I inhabit a really peculiar space, don't I? In the in the sense that I've yeah. And that was partly informed by my experience with my children's special guard, my Children's Sisters, Special Guardian and my children's aunt, and just really seeing that actually. We have a system that is.

It's.

It's got its feet firmly in a different time and and all, but also I think as much as there's move to change, I think there's this scope within the legislation to kind of influence that and and to accommodate the new time. I think the challenge is we've got a culture, we've got a, you know, like a common, the common narratives.

Yeah.

Around adoption, you look at every Disney film, you look at almost every children's film you look at, even some adult films, you know, like the recent film The Joker, where the kind of the, the, the revelation at the end is that this deranged mad individual tragic, you know, is that. And you kind of got UM.

Ah.

An amazing film, but actually. Compounding these narratives of.

This is wrong in so many ways.

Well, yeah, it compact we we've got the narrative of happier rafter or the narrative of you you had arranged and and. And I think that I'm really keen that we that we build a system because that I do also believe that there are children who need to be removed from their parents permanently.

Yeah.

Yes.

Yeah. Absolutely.

I and there for some children. Well, I think that this is shift. I think it's shift. So I think I was having this conversation with one of my children, my little one at the moment, and she was like, up until about the age of nine. She was really proud. She was adopted, would tell anyone.

OK.

Which is just, you know, if in school. Tell me something interesting about yourself in front of class, she'd go. I'm a doctor and all the kids would go. Oh, that's so cool. Yeah. And now she's me. She's kind of moving into adolescence and she's not in. No way. She embarrassed about that, but she doesn't want to share that because it's private and.

I'm adopted.

That's. Absolutely. You know, why wouldn't it be?

So that bit of her identity is not like at the floor at the moment when they talk about the fluxes in identity. That's a great illustration, isn't it? Because she still is adopted. It's just not part of her identity that she's.

Yeah. Pushing well, yeah. Yeah. And I think it's a, it's an issue of privacy. But also I think she's trying to make sense of in terms of her identity. Who is she? And, you know, we are as as a child. I remember thinking, who am I, you know? Who am I like this person or that person? And that's not necessarily that available to her. She's got a sibling. So she can look at, like, well, a bit like that one and a bit like that one.

Yeah.

It was that, and I think that adoption. We've got a system that meets the needs of very little children, but have we got a system that meets the needs of adolescents? Have we got a

system that meets the needs of young adults and have we got a system that meets the needs of middle-aged and older people? And I don't think we do. And so I've, I find it really interesting when we listen.

Yeah.

To the voices of adopted adults. Really intriguing. And so this is maybe I'm into thin ice and maybe I'll get cancelled for this, but I think, uh, the amount of people, regardless of how they their lives in their 50s, they become really interested in genealogy.

Yeah.

It's just a phenomena. So I think often if you're adopted, that then piques us that, that that's either a blockage or. It's a or it's a an Ave you you didn't know you could follow.

Well, they often. Side with the the the death of your adopted parents as well, which which also.

Yes.

You know, stimulates another time where where they might might want to search.

Yeah.

Yeah, but you're right about that. You're right about the adopted the adoption system being children orientated and it shouldn't be because the the people in their 30s, Forties, 50s are still adopted. You know the, the the issues are still there. They just coped with in a different way.

And and so when we. Yeah. And so you might have grant as an adoptive. As an adopter, you might have grandchildren that are being shared with the biological parents, cause what we also know about parents, biological parents, adults in general, is that the excesses of youth temper.

Yeah. Yeah, so.

So. So you you going in your 50s, you use and adopt A you go and you meet this benign 7 year old and reconciling that with the person who 50 years ago was a a clear and present danger is really complicated. And so you hear these voices that will say, well, you know, I'll look at them now and you know, what was the big deal you could have tried this and you could have.

Yeah.

That and you go. But children don't have time. And so I feel like it a. System, that is. We're we're hitting some of the thing. You know, children want like three children. A child wants to be claimed and belong and she wants them to give them up at at 13. She wants me to bog off.

Yeah. Yeah.

Because she's 13.

Work it out a cell, yeah.

Yeah, she's 13 and 16 and 19 and 20. And when she becomes a parent and when she becomes this, who's there to support her, who's there to support me? I mean, I'm, you know, clearly I'll work my work it out myself. But who's gonna kind of me and we see increasing numbers of groups of adoptive. And who were coalescing when their children reach young adulthood? Because the needs of the children are quite complex. That means that adulthood isn't this Nirvana that we were all hoping for, that actually it becomes it's got a it's a different set of complicated. So I I kind of inhabit this world where, well, I guess the original question was. I feel I feel really blessed because I I I feel like I'm on both sides of the curtain. You know, I'm an adoptive parent. I'm also a social worker. I'm not an adoptee. And I think that. What I've seen is that I've got this. I've created this kind of this voice that is a great place to stimulate conversation and and lots of people get in touch with me. Wanting to talk about their experience and the podcast is. Stories. You know, this idea that I think it's Spurgeon who was a sort of a preacher from 200 years ago, he said. Stories are the windows into understanding and so telling, helping people share their stories makes us understand in a way that we can't. And some of the stories have been, I mean. I remember I've come off so many phone zoom calls for people. Gone my mind is blown, but I know that I need to parent my children differently now.

Because.

That's a really good point to end on I think Al. Thank you so much. That's there's an awful lot in there for us to think about and and and pick and thanks for being so open and honest.

That's great. Thank you. Maybe we'll do a Part 2 at some point.

We're all in the journey. Thank you. Well, thank you. Uh, there's so much more. I could tell you it's been a pleasure. In 10 years, we'll come back. Thank you. No worries. Bye bye.

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