

SHELVIS PONDS: In this episode, we sit with Anglie Collie from the Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity at Duke University to discuss how he navigated his transitioning experience in light of opposition and struggle.

SHELVIS PONDS: It's good to be with you, Angel, today. Thank you so much for agreeing to be a part of our Just Space podcast. The word identity often comes up in your work. Could you share with us what you think the word identify means?

ANGEL: Yeah, when I think about identity I think it can be the parts of how someone shows up in the world, who they understand themselves to be, I think there's a constructed part of identity, some that we may identify with those things, it may be things that have been assigned to us, or society has made meaning of and they impact our experiences and how we show up and how with the expectations are for us in the world.

SHELVIS PONDS: Thank you, thank you. I really think it's a salient point to think about identity that one self-identifies as as opposed to one identity that one is assigned. Could you share about that difference of identity that I live into because I self-identify with that identity versus a identity I made just naturally be assigned by the outside world?

ANGEL: Yeah, I mean I think about that a lot in terms of the identities that I hold. I think one of the salient, one of my salient identities would be my identity as a trans person. I was assigned female at birth, I was expected to conform to expectations associated with that sex assignment whether that was being forced to wear dresses and there was a whole line of expectations and limitations and restrictions that came along with that. Down to the activities that I wanted to engage in or what my family and my community wanted me to do so it's kind of a general example, but growing up I always wanted to play football, I wanted to be in taekwondo, martial arts, my mom wanted me to like go to dance school and she always really wanted a girl so I think I got a lot of that - those hopes and yet that never really fit for me, there was always a way in which I had this internal sense that I was male, I am male and so I've had to come out as trans, I've had to like align my gender expression and how I communicate my gender into the

world to reflect my gender identity to reflect my gender identity because it wasn't what I was assigned so that's one example. I certainly hold other identities that are impact my experience and how I show up in the world and the access I have and the places where I don't necessarily have access, so I think about my racial identity as a white person what does that mean and the privilege that it carries and the responsibility I have to be undoing that privilege. I think about my social-economic status growing up in a working-class family, I think about my faith as a Christian in a society where Christianity has been predominant religion for a long time and has at times caused a lot of harm for communities or have been used to cause harm - I think about that in relationship to my queer and trans identities specifically and for me my faith is also the thing that gave me the strength to be who I am so having to reconcile the Church I grew up in and the type of Christianity as a part of with who I need myself be and had a pretty difficult journey doing that. When I came out, I was raised in a southern Baptist church in rural North Carolina, so I think that my grandfather was this beacon, I was in Church every time the doors were open, Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night. I'd be dragged along to women's auxiliary meetings, where I learned a lot about other people in the church, but not necessarily a lot about the Bible, that's where the news was spreaded. So you know I think having to reconcile all of those parts of my identities and make meaning has formed who I am now and has really formed the work I do and the work I hope to do, I think it's always interesting navigating those identities.

SHELVIS PONDS: Thank you for that, Angel. Has there ever been points of conflict with others as you have negotiated your identity? I know you mentioned that were challenging times as you begin to negotiate and navigate your identities.

ANGEL: Yeah, I mean that I think that coming out in a small town in rural North Carolina was pretty difficult. I got kicked out of my church, I was told I was making a mockery of the church by praying on the altar with my piecings and homoesexual colors. I was 14 at the time, and I didn't have family support, it took a long time. I think when I first came out, my mom found out she said, "You know you're going to hell if you're gay". It was a pretty tough time in my life, I had a youth minister whose wife was really kind of a driving force behind the youth programming at the church I was at and she convinced my mom and the sheriff and the church to put me in handcuffs and take

me to a private religiously-affiliated inpatient clinic to be hospitalized and I would have been - I wouldn't say I was necessarily suicidal, but my faith was such an important part of my upbringing, my family that it was really hard to be told that God hated me at 14 and not having the tools to reconcile that or to process that in emotionally healthy ways and so they would have hospitalized me had I had insurance and I did not have insurance at the time and I often joke that not having insurance saved my life in some ways because I can't imagine what would have happened in that conversion therapy very much have been indoctrinated with that ex-gay mindset and in the name of theology and in the name of a God and of a Jesus that I had a strong relationship with. When I didn't get in there, they took me to a state psychiatric hospital and they laughed at my youth minister and congratulated my mom for having a normal teenager and that's when my mom began to wake and up and see that she was causing harm, and maybe there were other ideas aside from what the church was encouraging her to do so she began to learn a little bit about P flag and begin to let me get involved in LGBT youth communities - there's one here in Durham that really was transformative for me. They introduced me to MCC, which is a Christian church that was founded by and reaches out to the LGBTQ community and I think that was a time when I realized I didn't have to give up one part of myself for another part of myself because I couldn't choose between who God made me to be and like the God that had always been a part of my life. I have a tattoo now, it's like God-shaped hole in my heart so that's what it felt like so I was able to find an affirming faith community that offered different ways to an interpretation of scripture and theology. I wasn't out as trans yet, I don't think I had the tools or information to even know what trans meant or that was even a possibility for me and being involved with a queer youth organization, I remember when we did a workshop on Trans 101 and it blew my mind because there was a stranger up there talking about his story and he was verbalizing some of the - putting names and words and terms to some of the deepest feelings that I had not been able to articulate for myself. It's interesting, when I was in middle school, I went out for the football team, and I tried out for the football team and everyone else around it made a big deal about it and a part of me didn't understand why, and looking back with the tools I have now, what I came to understand is that I always had understood myself to be a boy and to be my gender internally had always been male and so when you're young and you're a tomboy it's cute, and there's not the consequences and at some point, you're not so

young anymore and the interrogating begins: “Don’t you want to look good for the guys? Don’t you want to get a date to the middle school dance? You really should do this”. I think one of the pivotal moments for me came when I was on the football team and they started making me ride with the cheerleader, so I didn’t get to ride with the team and that was kind of a huge part of being on the team, going to the game, strategizing about the game, after the game like celebrating. So I think what that was about they were really trying to begin force me to identify with the sex I had been assigned at birth and I just never did. So I think for me spending negotiating how to reconcile my faith, which has always been so important to me, with my gender identity, with my queerness, and I think they come in stages, they’re fluid in that I came out as a lesbian and then just realized that it was never about my sexuality as much as it was about my gender identity. And I’d say even now in the last few years when I’ve been passing as male in most spaces I’m in most of the time, people use the correct pronouns for me, my sexuality has even been reconceptualizing what that means to me because that really shifted for me as I was able to be more comfortable and grounded in my gender identity. In terms of talking about how that shows up in relationship to privilege, I also understand that having access to the resources that I needed to be able to transition was a privilege and is a privilege, the fact that I’ve been able to understand how people treat me differently based on how I’m showing up, so how I was treated when I was perceived to be female is very different is very different from how I’m treated now in how I’m perceived to be male. So I call it a conditional privilege in that the moment I’m not passing, I may no longer be safe depending on the context that I’m in and yet I have as a trans man, I work through the world in carrying a lot of privilege: my white privilege, my educational access and privilege, my male privilege and so thinking about the responsibility I have it’s been interesting because I think that I have had access to conversations that I’ve never had access to before and I have to make a decision in those moments in how I’m going to respond and often things going through my head are how am I being treated differently based on these identities that I hold? Is it safe if I overhear if I’m in a space where I travel a lot and I’ve been in situations when I’m in a hostel or when I’m in a bathroom where I overhear sexist remarks and I have to decide am I safe? Because how do I call this out in a way that’s not going to put me in an unsafe situation? And I also have the responsibility to because I have access to this situation that other folks might not. So that’s what I spend a lot of time thinking about

and trying to do better, I think I take that seriously, it's been interesting to kind of navigate those identities and that relationship with privilege and oppression not being cis is a place that I don't hold privilege and yet because of how I'm often perceived I also know that I do carry a fair amount of privilege in how people respond to me differently now so it's interesting to try and navigate that and in relationship to my whiteness as well and thinking about what it means to be showing up as a white person and needing to be doing and committed to racial justice work and knowing that I'm going to mess up and continuing to learn and being apart of those conversations of undoing white supremacy when it's showing up.

SHELVIS PONDS: In n essence you're naming intersectionality. How there are some identities for which we can hold that have lots of privilege, while there are other identities that we can hold that can be very much so oppressed and how in my perspective each identity is sort of on a continuum of freedom and our goal is if you're more free in your identities in a certain context and you see that someone else who shares the opposite identity that's not as free then I think a shared goal of liberation and freedom is to work to get those other identities that you may not hold free in that other person's life and it makes me think of Angela Davis' quote: "Freedom is a constant struggle". How does that quote resonate with you and resonate with your life and your life's story and your work in social justice?

ANGEL: Yeah, I think that when I think about that, I agree with you I think I hold a variety of identities, some that are marginalized and many that are privileged and I think that it means that I have a responsibility in the places that I hold privilege because I have to realize that even when I'm encountering sexism, heterosexism, I'm encountering those things as a white person, I'm encountering those things as a white person, as a person who has a good job, as a person who has not an abundance but the resources I need, and I think it's a constant journey in myself to be mindful. I think that there's a tendency to center the places where we might hold marginalized identities I think in terms of especially doing this work, working in a cultural identity center that is centered on supporting, providing resources, advocating with folks who hold marginalized SOGIEs and for me I know I always have to resist that - I guess it's easy for me to focus on the place where I hold marginalized identities, yet my real, individual, personal work

is that I must be centering the places where I hold privilege and I think that's going to be a constant, lifetime journey of understanding how I show up in relationships with others, how am I a part of reinforcing sexism based on when I'm in a situation where I'm being afforded privilege on the base of my maleness or where I'm facing privilege on the basis of my whiteness so that I have a responsible to undo that, so that to me is going to be something I have to always be doing and learning and growing and being a little bit better and so and I know that I am going to mess up and I'm going to make mistakes and I also know that I have to be, my work is to be mindful of how I'm responding to how I'm messing up, and when people are telling me how they're experiencing me, or when people tell me how they're experiencing our trainings or when people are telling me how they've encountered racism or sexism within the places that I operate. Am I listening to people? Am I believing people when they tell me and am I doing my part to think about the policies of what we're focusing on or the conversations that we're having? I take my responsibilities and work with students very seriously and as someone who has the privilege of access to working in developing students, like I have an even greater responsibility to model what it looks like to and how to show up in ways that are mindful and that doesn't center the identities that I hold that are marginalized, but also is doing that work of the places that I hold privilege. I think that means that shows up in a lot of ways, when we're working with student-staff, and either in one-on-one conversations or group conversations are we modelling what it means how racism is showing up in our office? Are we having conversations about sexism is showing up? Are we holding that in conversations when our students are planning programs? Are we asking when they are putting a panel together, are we encouraging them to think about intersectionality, and whose voices are being lifted up? And whose being asked to do emotional labor and what kind of work are you doing to educate yourselves on places where you hold privilege. I take those things very seriously.

SHELVIS PONDS: I think all your words today, Angel, have been very insightful and I have a final question and before I get to that final question, I think what's on my mind is expectations and boxes. There's this fixation in many contexts of the man who gets married to the woman and has the children and the woman who gets married to the man and has the bridesmaids, and the fairy tales, those things and those troupes that we've all heard of, that we all know and this great tension when we don't fall within

those scripts, within those narratives and how it's pretty brave to push back against those narratives, and it's pretty brave to push back against those scripts, and it makes me think once again the word "struggle". So my final question and I'd like to get your reflections on is: What does struggling have to do with creating just space?

ANGEL: Yeah, I think I resonate with what's on your mind in terms of the boxes, the expectations, the roles and restrictions that are placed on all of us based on the identities that we hold. I think that the bane of my existence right now is gender reveal parties and this trend of gender reveal parties and how we all before a baby is even born, we have this tendency to write this whole script about their lives, and how they're going to show up without even getting to know who they are and how they might identify in relationship to gender and how that is to rewrite those expectations society and people have for you and there are real consequences. I think one of the reasons that this work is so meaningful to me is because when I think about my own story growing up and how hard it was to not see people around me held the identities that I hold or who provided a possibility there or who could be there to help me make sense of pushing back against all of the expectations that were placed on me or to help to be there for me when I encountered the consequences of failing to conform to those expectations and so I think want to be that for our students, I want to be that for folks who are figuring their identities, who've known their identities all along and now have to figure out what it means to come out and what that means to them and if that is something that is important to them, I think coming out is not just something that happens one time. It happens many, many times and often sometimes on a daily basis - kind of navigating how, and when and in what spaces are safe - I think that's negotiated everyday all the time for people who hold marginalized SOGIEs and yet I'm at a place in my life where I can look at the things that were hard for me coming out and the things that were painful and know that they have shaped who I am, that they have given me tools and resources and resilience to do this work. I think that I envision a world in which people don't have to struggle to show up authentically and where we can all show up authentically and with all of ourselves and be celebrated and to have access to safety and security and to freedom to do the things that we feel called to, to show up in the world in ways that we feel called to show up in the world and while also seeing that how far from it we are that oppression shows up in the ways that it shows up in the institutions,

inner personally, and the biases that we hold, that I hold and yet I think there's something about struggling with that ultimately allows me to get a little bit closer to my humanity and to realizing that in the world.

SHELVIS PONDS: Well thank you, Angel, thank you for your time, thank you for sharing your story and we certainly have learned a lot and we appreciate you being apart of our podcast. Thank you much!

Angel's interviewed by Shelvis Ponds. All editing for this episode has been done by Kyle Kubovic. And the outreach coordinator for this episode is Esra Uzun Mason. Today's into and outro song is called "Sayonara" by the artist Adam Enrique Garcia. In addition, this production is made possible by the Division of Student Affairs at Duke University.