The Think Inclusive Podcast

Season 10, Episode 21

Alma Zaragoza-Petty | Unpacking Intergenerational Trauma and Healing

Audio Transcript

Tim Villegas
From MCIE. Reclaiming her power and healing her community one chingona move at a time.

My name is Tim Villegas from the Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education, and you are listening to Think Inclusive, a show where with every conversation we try to build bridges between families, educators, and disability rights advocates to create a shared understanding of inclusive education and what inclusion looks like in the real world. You can learn more about who we are and what we do at MCIE.ORG.

For many years, “chingona” was a derogatory term used to describe Latina women who are seen as too aggressive, difficult, or out of control. It's a word that is meant to keep young Latinas in their place while the male version, chignon, is used as a compliment.

On this episode of Think Inclusive, I speak with Mexican American activist, scholar, and podcast host Alma Zaragoza-Petty who is helping women everywhere claim their inner chingona – or “badass.” In her new book Chingona: Owning Your Inner Badass for Healing and Justice Zaragoza-Petty shares about the chingona spirit she began to claim within herself and leads us toward the courage required to speak up and speak out against oppressive systems.

Here's what I cover with Alma Zaragoza-Petty in this episode:

How the term "chingona" has been reclaimed to honor the Latina experience.
Uncovering the root causes of intergenerational trauma and pursuing healing.
The power of mentors and educators in inspiring under-performing students to pursue college.

Before we get into today’s interview. I want to tell you about our sponsor, Together Letters. Are you losing touch with people in your life but you don’t want to be on social media all the time? TogetherLetters is a tool that can help. It's a group email newsletter that asks its members for updates and combines them into a single newsletter for everyone. All you need is email. We are using Together Letters so Think Inclusive Patrons can keep in touch with each other. Groups of 10 or less are free and you can sign up at togetherletters.com.

Thank you so much for listening.

And now, it is my pleasure to introduce Alma Zaragoza-Petty.

Let's talk about Chingona.

Alma Zaragoza-Petty
Yeah.

Tim Villegas
Who is your target audience with the book?

Alma Zaragoza-Petty
As I was envisioning. And when I started writing this book, I really wanted to talk to like younger me, I think a lot of book writers sometimes do that, right, because of just very big or pivotal moments that they've had and that they learned from. And one of the things that really motivated me was that I have always been a big consumer of like personal development, self care, self help, because I've just kind of how I've learned, I come from a family with a lot of trauma and intergenerational issues. And I didn't really have a spiritual mentor or someone who could mentor me in that. And so I think because of that, I ended up going into psychology as an undergrad, because I wanted to just learn more about the human brain and behavior and why we do the stuff we do. And I also, as I read some, a lot of these books and theories and just different kinds of oncology's and how we see the world and view the world. I didn't find a lot of stuff that resonated for me, like I always felt I was reading like a white woman's perspective, or a white man's perspective, or a brown man's perspective. And those are needed, and they're great, and they've helped me so much to grow. But I also just wanted something that resonated with a Latina experience, someone who like self identifies as that. And yeah, for the most part, that's who my target audience is. But I would say that if you know women or brown women around you to like, this is a great book to read or to give to them because it's really centering like my experience as a brown woman, going through a lot of personal healing.

Tim Villegas
So let's unpack that title. Sure. What is the story behind the term chingona?

Alma Zaragoza-Petty
So it's evolved when it first was used, it was used for mestizo children to basically it's the equivalent of bastard that was the term and what he meant chingona/chingon. It's like these little fatherless children, that the Spaniards didn't want to honor and claim because they were born out of rape. They were it was from raping women, the indigenous women in the Americas. And so that's where the term chingona comes from or chingon. It, that's what it means, historically, over the years, it's come to mean, especially for men that you're just a badass dude like, you're an amazing dude, or just super, someone to look up to, as a man. And growing up, this is what really, you know, what I heard a lot was my cousins being coaching gone in a positive way. But then when I was being unruly or loud, or just wanting to have my own thing to say, I was gonna use that term, the same term, I'm gonna was used more to, like, you know,

quiet me to kind of say, like, Hey, you're, you're kind of being a lot right? Now, sit back down, you know, don't, you know, bring all of this energy with you. And so growing up, I was called that you're gonna, because that's just who I am, like, I just had my own opinions and thoughts. And I was pretty vocal about it. But then over the years, I learned to quiet that down, because I started to feel that that was not a good quality to have. And sadly, this is, you know, one of those words where maybe it's not the specific term that maybe you heard growing up, that was like using this way. But I think a lot of brown women relate to this story, and why women, and the way that sometimes we are silenced, or we are asked to tone us ourselves down, because there's this preconceived idea of what like, womanhood needs to look like, or what girls should act like. And so that's the, that's my own personal interaction with that term growing up. And then over the years, there has been a reclaiming of the term, you know, similar to like other movements, like with feminists, for example, where, you know, reclaiming certain bad words, I don't want to say them just in case, you we started calling ourselves chingona, as you know, like, you're badass for just trying to attain your goals. And even though you're fumbling through them, you're like, going for it. That's amazing. That's the chingona move right there, you know, and not letting things stop you and just continuing to just want to better yourself whether that's educationally professionally, spiritually, psychologically, it's all about just being a badass as a woman, and how can we like use this word and reclaim it? To honor that it's okay, if it looks a little different for some of us. And this is a term that across the Latino community, I think it's being reclaimed to a more positive light. But there's definitely like socio economic kinds of differences, where I would say the higher economic status, people would kind of see this as a very vulgar term. And so they might not want to they don't use it or have heard of it. And then there's people that, you know, may have grown up in more lower socio economic statuses. And that's just a term that was thrown around a lot. And so it just, you know, more than, you know, whether different Latinos know about this or not, has, I think less to do that, whether they're like higher income or lower income, or kind of where they are in that social class kind of status. At least that's what I've, what I've seen a lot of people that get, I guess, a little shocked by the word are people that are maybe a little more of like higher class or higher income paths?

Tim Villegas
I guess I'm not I'm not in that. sphere.

Alma Zaragoza-Petty
Yeah, I mean, first of all, this is just means badass, right? Like, it just means like, You're amazing. You're dope. You're doing it?

Tim Villegas
Yeah. So in the book, it seems like you are you relate the reclaiming of the word to healing? Is that right? Or is that my misreading that?

Alma Zaragoza-Petty
No, I think in some ways I do. Like I reclaim it as a way to, to really, like honor, a more bumpy ride to healing is definitely a term that I wanted us as a community of women, brown women,

Latina women, to really start to own and to really understand the historical roots of that term, and why it's such an amazing word to reclaim, because for a long time, it was about the mestiza that was, that was conquered, or that was attempt ed to be conquered and to be oppressed. But it can also be seen as chingona as like the indígenas y afrodescendientes survival. This is why I think it's important to reclaim that term and to also use it as a way to really think about our healing like intergenerational healing.

Tim Villegas
Can you give an example and either from the book or, or maybe not from the book, whatever you want, have like your healing, like when you talk about inner generational trauma, and healing from that. What would be an example for our audience to understand?

Alma Zaragoza-Petty
Yeah, I think for me, it really started, you know, my own journey into healing intergenerational trauma started with my body kind of starting to give up so there were a lot of just body cues embodied cues that I was not okay, panic attacks, having a lot of sleepless nights having a lot of sleep paralysis, that's when you feel yourself hovering over yourself like you're watching yourself, but you can't snap out of it. And surprisingly, this has been linked a lot to people who suffer because of their veterans from PTSD. And we've learned over the years that inter that trauma and general complex trauma and different kinds of trauma that we go through, affects people across the same way. So it's not just veterans, it's people that have gone through childhood trauma that also have very similar experiences. And so, for me, my experience began that way. And so a lot of healing had to come, just kind of owning that like being able to even address it, like one of the chapters that I started off with chapter two is about acknowledging just where you've been and your past, acknowledging what I call the soul loss. So some of that susto that you had the cultural susto from just not only from oppression, but also from colonialism, and what it just did, to the bodies of our ancestors, and how that just has been imprinted to our in our DNA, and how even just acknowledging just that historical trauma, and that social trauma is one of the ways that we can start to heal, right, because there's a lot of inferiority complexes, complexes, or just like different ways that we see ourselves as less than sometimes because of the ways that just colonialism and patriarchy kind of set the tone in our societies. And so I talk about sort of those steps. So acknowledging that, then going back to where your memories lead, so one of the things that I'm really, you know, what I think this kind of makes it, just my own personal journey, and the way that I see the world is letting visions memories, and dreams lead the way in teaching me about myself, because often we don't see that as knowledge and like real knowledge, and one of the things that I've learned from my ancestors, including my abuelitas, and tias, is that all of that is teaching us stuff about ourselves. And even though in our Western society, we don't really see that as knowledge. It is its knowledge, its knowledge about our bodies, its knowledge about how we're processing things, and how we might need to show up differently in certain places because of it. And chapter three kind of go into like talking about, like, what would it mean to kind of let our memories lead? Like, if we would, rather than just kind of keep them at bay? Or try to suppress them? What did we let them in? What if we explore that pain and figure out what it's there to teach us instead of running away from it. And then, you know, kind of go on in other chapters

about just retelling your story. So a lot of times, I think in our communities, we often are told a story. And I talk about this through the example of the hometown that I grew up in Huntington Park here in Los Angeles, being dubbed one of the most miserable cities in California by a business article. And some of the factors that they were using, were the state of people, as it is currently, but there was no admission of, well, what happened? How did we get here like, Well, what was going on in the past that, like, we're all uninsured, unable to buy homes, to do all the things that would equal to having a successful kind of community? And none of that was addressed? And so I kind of did a revisiting of like, what didn't Huntington Park actually get there? What were some of the like, the redlining practices, the racist practices, against our communities, that kind of even led to that. And so to me, all of that is intergenerational healing. Because when we ignore the roots of why we are, how we are where we are, it's very hard to move on and to find true, psychic level kind of healing, and not to not see ourselves as unworthy. Or that's just how we are we just don't do what with finances. No, that's not because you just don't do it. It's all of us might not. There's a lot of historical reasoning why this happened. And so I kind of invite folks to go back to that. And also to rethink, I think, often to a lot of us who are born natural leaders, or just even have those kinds of skills. Growing up. We don't necessarily see them as that because of our communities. Not really having a lot of models or having representation. And so sometimes it looks a little different. And sometimes it does look just like a rebelde they're like, well, that we you know, the idea of being a rebel in the, in the hood, or like being in gangs or doing things. Yeah, on one hand, it's like very toxic and not a good path to go down on because there's a lot of things that can happen from that right like incarceration and like just mental health stuff. And so, we, there's definitely that, but then there's also these are opportunities, the only opportunity sometimes that youth have for leadership, or that the youth have for just be feel, to feel seen to feel known by someone or to fill in poured in. And so I use my examples of just kind of having the head of my set, because I was had a really brief Chola gangster kind of stent growing. If the hoops and make a didn't give it away, you know, I had a really brief stint with being in a gang. But a lot of that I talk about why that was like some of the factors happening in my own life, some of the just not having supervision, because my parents had to work a lot and just being out there in the streets. And that's just the reality for a lot of us. And it doesn't mean that there isn't hope for us, right? Like, there's also redemption in a lot of those stories. And one of the things that I was really motivated in my own journey talking, my own healing journey was to normalize that to say, hey, there's a lot of us in the 80s and 90s, that weren't gangs, and that sadly, ended up in jail, or sadly ended up dead and, or maybe in other like, precarious kinds of situations. But that doesn't mean that we also don't deserve healing, and that we also don't deserve to kind of have a fulfilling life as adults. And how does that look like for people that didn't grow up in the suburbs? Or whose parents owned a house and got to go to the lake every summer? We just some of the self care books that I read, but those are like the cultural markers that they talk about, and I can't relate to that. I got.

Tim Villegas
Yeah. Yeah. It seems like there needs to be Yeah, there. There's a void there that needs to be filled. Yeah. I think so. So are like the majority of our audiences. They're educators, and they're all over the country. So we have people who listen from California, Georgia, and New York, all

over Midwest, and a lot of them. Well, I mean, kind of the reason why this podcast exists is because, you know, our educational system is inequitable, to a lot of people, right? A lot of learners. We primarily focus on learners with disabilities. But we also understand there's intersectionality, between learners with disabilities and people of color and LGBTQ i plus and every, you know, so there's a lot of marginalized groups that are not being served in our educational systems. So the people who listen to this podcast are very interested in equity, very interested in creating inclusive schools. So as you think about that, kind of who is listening, do you have any advice for people who, you know, want to push against those oppressive systems?

Alma Zaragoza-Petty
Yeah, that's a really good question. I'm actually also an educator. My background, isn't in teaching, but it's in advising counseling scholars who are first generation from low income backgrounds, a lot of them also have mental health issues are things that they're working through. And a lot of learning differences because of the lack of because of the lack of just access to health services growing up that, you know, a lot of them are undiagnosed until they get to college, for instance, or realize, like, Oh, hey, I get really anxious about deadlines and tests. And then I'm like, Have you ever thought about maybe getting tested to see if you have testing anxiety, like, that's a real thing, you know, and I also work with adults. So you know, mostly with adults, and then I also teach at USC, a class to working adults who are already in their professions, and I talk about equity. And I think one of the things that really impacted the way that I see the role of educators was my own lived experience, but also some research that I did as a in my doctoral work, as you might know, from just studies, a lot of times who gets attention are the people that are succeeding, right? So a lot of research of college students, or people that are making it are on those really high achieving students that are doing really well. And we're trying to learn from them. How did were they? How did they become this anomalies that made it right out of the hood, and were able to be successful? And what was the secret sauce and that sort of thing. But in my own research, I decided instead to see how what were some of the experiences that Latina girls went through in high school that made the difference in whether they went on to college or not, given the fact that they were actually low achieving students. So students that were like are, you know, not gonna go to the UC private school elite schools or Cal States in California, but that were actually thinking about going into a straight into a job or community college. And the difference between those that ended up enrolling in college and that didn't even though they did not do well in high school. Who by just grade definition and test scores were, one, whether they felt, and you know that they can retry something that they failed at. So having that mindset that, hey, just because I failed doesn't mean that I am inherently stupid, bad or not meant for this, it means that I need support, I need to retry, find out why I'm not getting it, some of them had that kind of mentality. And I would argue that a lot of times, that's probably because someone told them, right, because it's not, it doesn't come out of nowhere. And that's exactly what we found that actually those that have had mentors and that had had teachers, counselors, anybody, literally any adult in their life that took an interest, and like truly show showed that they cared about who they were as people, is what makes a huge difference to people who are in those kind of more precarious kinds of life trajectories where it's not expected that they're gonna go to college, right out the

gate. And so a lot of them recalled, like, yeah, you know, I had this math teacher that told me like, I could, you know, I could try again, and that it's okay, if I failed ones, or, you know, have these ideas about themselves, that were that someone really just kind of came alongside them and told them like, hey, like, you don't have to believe those lies that maybe like your you have about yourself, or that society might be telling you about what it means to be successful or not. And actually, you can change that. There's resources that you can access to change that. And so the main thing that I usually say, whenever I get asked this question is, there just isn't enough hours in the day for a lot of teachers to have individual kind of give individual attention to every single kid in your class. It's just not set up that way. But those sadly, those are the things that really impact students, it's that personal relationship beyond the content beyond the classroom, and just seeing them as human beings. And sadly, that's just not how our education system set up. So if I think the best teachers, they find ways to be that mentor in a student's life, but it also leads to a lot of burning out turnover, because it's just a lot of work. And a lot of these kids need a lot of attention, because they might or even just that support, because it's not that they don't, they can't, they won't get it from home, it's that sometimes in those homes, people are busy trying to survive, they're just trying to have a couple of jobs to get through to make things make ends meet. And so even if they have supportive parents that want them to go on to college, or you know, kind of do well in school, they don't have that time to be told that and to do that kind of work. And so, I'm always gonna, you know, I think that's always what I say, and I'm gonna keep saying it until proven and proven wrong, or because I really believe in the power of just mentorship. Yeah, I think especially in the teenage years, I think it's so important to have other adults besides your parents tell you that you're awesome. Because we expect it from our parents. What are they gonna say? We're not sure there are some maybe like unhealthy kind of dynamics sometimes where we might also be called names. But for the most part, we know they mean well, right, or they're trying their best and, and but sometimes, if that's the only kind of interactions you have with adults, that's kind of rough, you know, like for that person to kind of grow up that way and not have anyone else in their environment. It doesn't have to be even like a full you know, mentorship, you know, designed program that someone may need some sometimes it's just about having the right person tell you kind of the right thing you need to hear at a certain moment of crisis of just Yeah, being in a in a really hard situation.

Tim Villegas
I think there's a lot of misunderstanding between what kids lives are like at home, right? Because there's this disconnect, we live like sometimes we live in completely different worlds. And so even the stories that you share in your book, it's like, maybe somebody will read them and be like, Oh, I cannot relate to that. But then there's also people that are like, oh, yeah, absolutely. That was my life. So I think it's so important to read and to listen to and to experience, other people's perspectives, because how else are you going to know what's different? You're going to assume that every everyone's like you.

Alma Zaragoza-Petty
Yeah, I've actually had a couple of mostly white men and women reach out and say how impactful the book has been for them to learning a different experience and just learning from

someone else and They have also walked away with a lot of feeling very seen. And notice, because I also talk a lot about just the human condition, just a lot of issues that we deal with just internally and that we've grappled with. And that's just going to be universal. And that's part of what you know. And that's exactly what I wanted. I wanted a book that, like, similar to the ones that I read from white women who I could not personally relate to, I could still gain so much wisdom from in their own experiences and what they had gone through, right. So yeah,

Tim Villegas
yeah. Yeah. Something you said earlier about healing. I think it was that you can't move on, or try to heal unless you deal with how you got there. I'm paraphrasing you. That sounds about right. Yeah. And I think that's super scary. Very scary. And also, I don't know, maybe this is a maybe this is more of like a, like an American type of view. Point. But sometimes it's we don't want or people. They don't want to hash up all of the old stuff. Because they feel like it's just, you're just going to be reliving trauma, as opposed to, I'm just going to fix myself now and move on. But so what would be your response if I if I were to say, I don't want to, I don't want to relive all of the stuff with my parents. And my dad was born in Juarez. And he emigrated he had a ton of trauma, a ton of trauma that he carried. Then, my mom who was born in in, in Los Angeles, they got married in high school. A very unhealthy relationship. They got divorced in when I was like an adult. And now I have, I have a lot of time, a lot of stuff. I don't want I guess I am, I guess this is me talking, then I'd say I'm not sure if I want to. I'm not sure if I want to hash all that stuff up. Yeah. Can I just fix myself and move on? What would you say to me?

Alma Zaragoza-Petty
Well, your friend, I'm just kidding. I mean, I would say one, like, you are not alone in feeling that way. In, no one goes into like self healing and therapy be like, Yay, I can't wait to see my therapist today, we know that we're going to talk about things that are so uncomfortable, that are going to bring up a lot of stuff. And one of the things that I often tell, even the the students that I mentor, is that, unfortunately, when they're finally ready to start dealing with some of their stuff, I tell and I tell them this, because I don't want them to get blindsided, I'm like, just so you know, it's gonna get a lot worse before it starts to get better again. And it's because if you've never brought up a lot of your issues, or dealt with a lot of your scars, and you've just been acting out of them, or just went on with your life, and just tried to make it as best as you could, when you finally come back and revisit some of those really painful memories, to try to heal from them. Like one of the things that I for instance, when you do that, if someone doesn't have somebody no one's ever said, Sorry, if you still feel like it's a trauma, or it's something that kind of happened to you, right? And so, learning how to forgive without an apology is so hard. It's, but it's possible. We don't need people to ask us for forgiveness to forgive them. That is separate from like, the pain and the hurt that was inflicted on us. That's for them to deal with. Reckon with our only like, goal is to heal from that. And so how do you heal, it's by forgiving if an apology never came, for instance. So that's an example of something that you might have to do, which is not comfortable, because you might not even be ready to do that. Right? You might be like, No, I don't forgive them. I don't want to forgive them. And I think a lot of times, it's because we confuse forgiveness with being okay with what happened to us or saying like, Oh, it's not that bad, like, or, you know, kind of dismissing that it wasn't impactful. And that's

not true. You know, it could have been an awful, horrible thing that happened. And you can also forgive them for putting you through that. And also you might realize, one of the things that I talk about to is I also realized how sacrificial and selfless my mother was, despite some of the stuff that I really wish you would have shown up for. It makes me realize like if once I forgiven her for that it made me see her as a more full human and realize, wow, she really did that. Like she really came to a whole other country when she was a 20 year old. Would I have ever done that? Probably not. That sounds way scarier than they get an emotion. And so I think that Just, it's gonna get worse before it gets better, there's also going to be, the better is going to be so much better like it's going to open up parts of you of your heart that you didn't even realize you could understand in a different way, or even just view in a different light. And it just gives you the capacity to just feel joy that much more. And to just be able to not get stuck in grief, a lot of people that go through healing. In the beginning, it's really hard and dark. And there's a lot of grief that happens. And that's why it gets really hard because you need to grieve things that you didn't even know, needed to be grieved over like, for instance, the loss of your innocence. That's something that some people don't realize, like you need to grieve that sometimes. And, or the loss of your childhood, the loss of your 20 Sometimes, like the loss of your health, if you are not able bodied person, things that we didn't realize, oh, yeah, I guess that it was a loss. That was something that I never grieved. And if you've never grieved one thing, when you start to grieve one thing, you start seeing all the other things that you do never grieved. And that's why it gets really dark, don't pass. But like I said, there, there also are in a lot of examples and like motivations to tell you like, hey, but after that there is going to be light at the end of the tunnel, so to speak, where you are going to experience such an abundance of joy and abundance of just the awareness that you've never had. And that will help you grow as a human being and really start to see a lot more of your own potential to be a leader to show up, like just authentically in your communities. And to me that's worth it. So I don't know if I sold it to you. I think those are the things that, that it's not all just pain. And it's not all just grief, there's also these amazing rewards and these amazing successes that maybe we haven't seen as that but that are nevertheless there. And that we're going to experience because of all of our hard work in courage and showing up for our grief.

Tim Villegas
Yeah, I Do I Do you want that. And I know our listeners want that. So thank you for the pep talk.

Alma Zaragoza-Petty
Yes. You know, something else that really helps me too in those moments in case anyone decides, yeah, I'm gonna do it. Because that lady that wrote that book she's gonna talked about it is read stories of Holocaust survivors, and people who have survived, like, really horrific kinds of things like Desmond Tutu, that's where I learned a lot of my, this idea of forgiveness. And he talks about how do you forgive people who have treated you like, you are not a person, like as a black man in South Africa. He, he was jailed for many years just for standing up for what was right and last, like decades of his life, being jailed. And he forgave everyone, He forgives everyone. And he moved on and just talked about just his own process. And reading stories like that have really helped me to put things in perspective when it's been really hard. So even if

you want to just read my book as a way to put things in perspective, you know, like I talk about pretty painful stuff. That's something that you can do as well.

Tim Villegas
Well, everyone should go out and get Chingona. And read your book.

Alma Zaragoza-Petty
Thank you. Thank you.

Tim Villegas
What's one thing that you'd want to leave our audience thinking about?

Alma Zaragoza-Petty
Well, I think for one, I think it's important to, for us that are really motivated about seeing justice and living in a better world to start working on ourselves. Because one of if there's nothing else that you take away from this podcast, is that we are extraordinarily externalizing our insides out onto the world. So what that means is, the world is as effed up as it is right now. Because that's how effed up we are in the inside. And it's not until we start working on ourselves that we're going to start to see this kind of world that I talked about in terms of just loving one another community showing up embracing difference. Because if we can't even embrace our soft parts of ourselves, how can we embrace others, it's very hard. And so that's the main takeaway of my book. It's also the you know, the main takeaway that I take that I hope you take today that the world is as healed as we are. And so if you want to see things change, start with yourself.

Tim Villegas
That's powerful. Thank you. Dr. Alma Zaragoza-Petty, I really appreciate your time.

Alma Zaragoza-Petty
Thank you so much for having me. Really excited to be here.

Tim Villegas
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