

# Book of Fundamentals Episode Five:

## *“The Third Conversation: Critiques and Creating Conversation”*

### Summary

In the third and final conversation episode, A.D sits down with Xela, a small-town Minnesotan whose experiences contribute yet another perspective to this broader conversation. Xela’s parents are both adopted, one from Ecuador and the other from South Korea, causing her own self-discovery process to be all the more difficult. In the face of both societal and personal pressures, Xela discusses her frustrations with the expectations she must daily address. She criticizes the discrimination she faced in her school years and the inclination of people to use terms like “immigrant,” “assimilation,” and “incorporation” without first having a thorough conversation about what individuals understand those words to mean. Please join us for our final conversation with a small-town Minnesotan before our ultimate podcast episode.

### Key Points

- The difficulties placed on children of immigrants to fit both the mold of their parental cultures *and* the expectations of society make the personal self-discovery process even more frustrating and complicated.
- Access to different clubs or sports teams is in part determined by the income of families. In other words, the richer (and often white) families are the ones who can afford sports fees. This only serves to deepen the racial divides in communities and the schools.
- The most important thing is to remember and *recognize* that everyone is a human being.
- We must continue to *undefine* terms: Not avoid the use of them in their entirety, but actively discuss what they mean to each individual: “...checking in with the person about what they think the meaning is so that you guys are on the same page... Otherwise there's definitely gonna be a big misunderstanding...”

### Episode Details

#### **Hometown / Saint Louis Park**

- Majority white; the BIPOC students were often tokenized
- Racism in the school systems

#### **Generational Pressures**

- Parents both were in the international adoption system, thus there was a familial search for any sort of cultural heritage, provoking self-resentment in Xela: “I couldn’t really be a part of the Latino culture, and I couldn’t be a part of the Korean culture because I didn't have anything to latch onto.”

### Social Pressures

- Income differences between families only exacerbated the racial divides in the community, especially in schools.
- Ethnic ambiguity– The difficulties that individuals face because of their mixed backgrounds in part only exists because society demands an answer.
- The tendency to make assumptions about individuals, in any respect, only serves to make everyone’s lives more difficult.

### **Conversations, words, and context**

- There is a general tendency to make arguments about the economy and jobs when discussing immigration, but this reduces an individual's worth to their possible economic value, thus dehumanizing them.
- "Incorporation," "assimilation," "(im)migrant," "refugee—" all of these words fail to accurately and without-bias describe an individual. While some see these imperfections as allowing for productive grey space, Xela struggles to see a positive side of these terms.
- To encourage / create a productive space and eventually find a positive side of some terms, conversation is *crucial*.

## Episode Five: Transcript

A.D: Welcome to another episode in the Book of the Fundamentals podcast. My name is A.D Banse, and this episode I will be interviewing—

Xela: Xela Gunvalson.

A.D: This conversation is meant as a way to engage with our audience by learning more from individuals about the context of words, language, and communication, specifically in regards to understanding immigration issues. We want to include different perspectives of individuals from smaller communities in Minnesota as part of this conversation to give an example of how people may understand each other, and where there are differences in understanding, and why those differences occur. Thank you for joining me today, as I told you off the record, I sincerely appreciate this time. And yeah so, first question is, tell me about yourself, you know, where you grew up.

Xela: I grew up in a more, I guess rural area, definitely becoming suburbia as a lot of the farmland is becoming single family homes, and they just like recently created an elementary school, and like the only sort of like retail options we even have out there is like an agricultural store and a gas station. But I grew up there, fortunately there were some kids on my specific street, families that were Asian, but basically everybody else was white, and so, going to school, all my friends are white. All my sports teams was white. And I was like always like the token, like, BIPOC student.

Then I went to 7 through 12 at Benilde St Margaret's, which is in Saint Louis Park, right outside of Minneapolis. The sports, probably, that I chose, which is very specific white-dominated sports, so again I was like only the person of color on them as well. And then I didn't really do any sort of like, cultural things. Or like, specific cultural things to myself. And I think that's why I like, coming to St. Olaf, I really like, sought out *ASU*, and *Presente*, because I wanted to have a more tangible source of my identity. Cause that's kind of a like, a crisis I was dealing with.

A.D: Yeah, you talk about this crisis, could you elaborate more on that and why you felt, sort of, different?

Xela: So yeah, off the record I had mentioned that both my parents are adopted, my dad is from Ecuador and my mom's from South Korea. So, they both grew up with white families so they didn't really have, they didn't at all have any cultural heritage to pass on to their children. So it was kind of like, a struggle together to try and figure that out. But it definitely... I like, felt a lot of resentment for like, specific features of myself and of my identity because I saw like all my friends who had like, a great like family and community, I couldn't like be a part of that.

I couldn't really be a part of the Latino culture, and I couldn't be a part of the Korean culture because I didn't have anything to latch onto. And I wasn't necessarily accepted because I, like sometimes people will put the "whitewash" or like other white people would say to me that: I wasn't allowed to be in those groups. So I kind of just was like... oh, uhm... okay then I guess...

A.D: Yeah no, I definitely understand those feelings, for sure. So, how long have you lived in your town?

Xela: I grew up there like all my life, and that's like all I know. So, like apparently, I'm like learning that we like lived other places, but none that like I remember, so I've been living there since I was 4 years old.

A.D: Since I was four years old, that's awesome... How engaged are you in the politics of immigration?

Xela: I wouldn't say like very involved whatsoever. I mean like I hear about it, but I don't think I really like participate in seeking out any news particularly, or like really taking any action. I kinda more, desire the urge to like, serve immigrants. And be there for like, basic human stuff because that, like, is more my groove than trying to like fight other people that just think that they don't deserve these things...

A.D: Yeah absolutely, you know when you were speaking, it made me think about how— I feel like, with my own self, especially as a political scientist, or becoming one, I don't spend a lot of time on the news, rather, Social media is where... Where I learn a lot of things... Which, can sometimes be misconstrued, but you know... What should people keep in mind about your town if they are, you know, new to where you live, you know, how the culture is, and all that.

Xela: People... I think really keep to themselves, but also there's like, there's like Facebook groups... so it's like, people fight on there and like say different stuff... I knew that it was pretty like... hick-town-like, and I really saw those colors show when they decided to like, board up for like potential— because there was gonna be like, a protest, like a little march... But it was like, 20 people, and we live half an hour away from the cities. So, it was just like: I don't know what you think is going to happen. Like it's a bunch of like, teenagers just like walking around the police station... So, I like, I really don't know what they thought was going to happen...

A.D: Yeah no, I understand. Yeah, let's see, what is the demographic of your population, your town?

Xela: I guess I don't really know the specifics, but I think like both the high schools— it's like probably less than 20 percent People of Color, but there is a pretty high Somalian population because they just have like, good housing, affordable housing options in our town. I don't know where it was, but there was some sort of like a little newspaper statistics thing, because there's like a lot of like racist stuff that goes on in the high schools, and I'm grateful that my parents did not send me there... But they like, went over the statistics about how like all the students to get the certain violations are like— less than 20 percent of the student body— are like People of Color... but then they're like over 70 percent of the violations... so then they're like: "Mm, why is that happening?"

A.D: Yeah, yeah. No, no, I- A lot of the things that you said resonate with me because, growing up in Denver, attending MLK early junior early college— that school, definitely, I felt like we were the targets for sure... So I

definitely understand that feeling. Are there distinct groups of people, and if so, what are the groups based on?

Xela: I think that it's pretty wealthy, and I think something army high school, like closer to the cities, it was especially– the hockey boys. In my like, affinity PLC groups we would always specifically bring them up because... It's very like, consistent, even people who graduated many years ago from the high school say that they had issues with that specific group of people... Because I really think that, even though our team like, isn't that good, but they just have enough money for them not to be scolded because otherwise like, their parents will stop paying tuition, or these donors will stop doing this, and like... There's... a lot of like drama that went on with the school because as soon as George Floyd was murdered, our school like, posted a picture of a black student, and just like, didn't even mention anything about George Floyd.

A.D: So just a poster face and that's it?

Xela: Yeah, and they like, made some sort of other comment like: “Peace to the world” or something, and then people call them out, and we're like: “Stop that” and they're like: “Mhmm I'm sorry we won't do it again.” And they kind of like, continued to just like, disregard...

A.D: Wow. That sounds pretty terrible to me, I'd be pissed too.

Xela: Yeah, and he, he spoke out on it too, like the person who the picture was of...

A.D: Oh! So he goes to the school, the one in the poster?

Xela: He, yeah, he did, yeah yeah yeah.

A.D: What!? Oh my gosh. Wow. I really wonder how... Wow. That's terrible. So, if you could please elaborate more on, you know, you focus on high school, you bring yourself back to school a lot– I'm wondering if you might have a little bit of an understanding of the different groups that existed? And if so, were there some sort of hierarchy as you mentioned, you talked about the wealthy individuals, what about the poor individuals, where were their demographics, and middle as well as all that?

Xela: It was definitely hard to like... Mask your income. Because people would expect certain things of you. So like, if you hung out with the wealthy people: Did you have a car? Did you have money to like, go out to eat? Could you sleep over? When are we gonna host at your house? Or something like that... So it's definitely like, a big thing, and I think some of the like, poor people in our school... obviously like, none of us like really paid like a lot of tuition, and I think some people thought that like: “Oh, we're here on a sports scholarship, like for high school...” I mean, that can exist to some extent... And that's kind of something that you had to like, battle the guilt with yourself, is that the hockey boys weren't getting in trouble, but like, alums who are part of the hockey program like, are donating... and they're donating to *your* tuition... so it's like, I don't know, a morale battle.

It was definitely the sports, because you had to have a lot of outside training and participate and do offseason stuff to like, be in the sports. And I think a lot of the lower income families like, didn't do as much sporting things.. so they didn't do clubs, like speech, or math, or something like that...

A.D: Just a little bit more in depth, would you be able to classify the race of these different groups?

Xela: So definitely things that like, took a lot of equipment and time were all basically, all white teams. The exception of some individuals, and even some of those—like a lot of people like use the term “whitewash” like I have already, and it's like a very like, generalized term, but like people or students who are like, mixed, kinda assume that identity because some are raised in a white family. So then they're already like, I don't even know if like, you would consider them like as a part of the BIPOC community. And they would be a part of those athletic teams. But, definitely Latinos and Asians were like, a part of the other like, clubs and stuff, but it was already like, such a small amount that is just like, a few kids...

A.D: Yeah, wow... What does it mean to be a part of your community in your town?

Xela: Like, in what way? Just saying like— Like have pride for your city or something?

A.D: Yeah, like, do you feel like there's a way in which you feel connected to that town, and where you grew up, and are there memorable, enjoyable, things you've done with the community? Is like... anything at all that you can recall?

Xela: Like elementary school, that's the only thing that I attended, really, and then I like, moved on to the one in Saint Louis Park... We did some pretty decent stuff, like activities, and like, had engaging lifestyles and things like that, went on field trips... But I guess, I— I mean, I didn't really do a whole lot to like, get involved... There's some like, quirks about our town I guess, that I enjoy... But, I guess it's not like stuff that's too favorable, because I do feel like... Hated on... Because of the way that I see that they deal with issues at the public school... So I don't like, want to give them too much... But I am a big supporter of like, our lacrosse, our girls lacrosse program. So I had coached for them for the past 2 seasons, and it feels like, very empowering for like, all these like— I know it sounds very strange, but like, to see like, all these white little girls and white parents like, have like, a brown coach... And I'm just like: “Yeah, I like, I know my stuff and I'm like, I'm telling your kids to do...” And like, I'm about to coach in Northfield too, and it's like, a bunch of like, white girls and their white parents and they like, see this like... Brown coach, telling their kids how to play.

A.D: I like that, I like the role reversal. I appreciate that.

Xela: And that's why I like, really enjoyed... Like, I guess I didn't even know I had some of these qualities about myself when— My senior year, I was the captain of 3 sports, some based of like, the team's votes, but also like, the coach's decision and that really like, showed me that like, I am out here to like, support these people, and kind of just like, show my worth through my actions. So, yeah...

A.D: I really like what you said... But yeah, what qualities do people from different groups need to have to understand each other? Based off everything that you've mentioned so far, like what attributes would you say are important?

Xela: I guess probably just like, the mindset of like, a human being, and like just, putting *that* as like, the highest value... And I guess like, sometimes there's like, ignorance when it comes to language. Whether it be

like actually a Not English language, or like the verbiage that they use... Because I really like, despise having to like, correct people that I meet when they say like: "Female." Like, that is like, one of my like, top words that I hate. And I have to like, sit there and explain to them like: "'Female' is like, a word that can be applied to like, any sort of organism or species, whereas like, 'women' or a like 'a woman' is like very specific to humans."

But things like that... I've had like, my experiences in my town of people like, assuming things to me because I think like, I looked a little different than I do now... But they're very like... My friends and I will joke like: "Oh, ethnically ambiguous—" and so then people like, try super hard to like, put a label on me, and I'm like: "No. No. No." And I like... They'd always— The question is always like: "Where you're from?" Well like, I was born in Saint Paul, and then I'm like now I'm here.. Like? What do you mean like? I— What?? "No no no, like where are your parents from, though??"

A.D: Exactly. That question— no... (laughs)

Xela: (laughs) Please Stop.

A.D: (laughs) Yeah, I understand that question, because we get it too often, too often. And I'm like: "Just ask it. Ask what you're trying to ask instead of beating around the bush." You know, what is it that you're trying to say.

Xela: Oh! That's another thing too, is sometimes people be like: "Oh, what's your nationality?" And it's like, like the— Weren't we in the same Spanish class, where you like, learn that like, nationality is like 'your residency,' not— and not like, where you live, not like, whatever else you're trying to ask?

A.D: Absolutely, I'm like— I think they're like. yeah people... Really don't understand the differences between those different terms, which is again, why you know, it's good to have these conversations, because like: Well, even if you don't understand what it is, you shouldn't shy away from having those conversations. I think it's important, right, like, say if, you know, I didn't understand what nationality was, then I'd ask: "Okay so, what is it?" You know? And then I think then the conversation can progress. Or if I wanted to know something about you, first off I would, you know, approach you very calmly, in a way that respects you, and then proceed onwards. I wouldn't you know, come at you and say: "Oh, blah blah blah, I think you're this," you know, making assumptions. I feel like people come in and make these assumptions, and you know, *that* is where the faults is applied... Yeah, you know... So... Yeah, I definitely agree with that...

Is immigration one of the hard conversations that you've, you know, probably had to talk about as of late, or prior?

Xela: I wouldn't say so, like, at all. I think like the only sort of like, conversations I really had are like with my like, friends parents, because like, one of my friend's parents is from like, both her parents are from Mexico... And then my other friend's parents are— one is from Guyana, and so like we, kinda talk about some stuff like that... But otherwise like. I never really have conversations like. about my parents. and like my mom had gone back to Korea for the first time ever... And I think there was some sort of scare that we had like, with her paperwork, and I was like... How!? Like, you've been living here this whole time like, and something gets

messed up, and you're gonna like, get deported?? This seems like, really like, silly... But things worked out, I don't know exactly what happened, but yeah it's kind of strange...

A.D: In terms of these conversations, how would you approach it with somebody else who is different from you?

Xela: I guess it depends on, I guess, like what the specifics are... I think a lot of times people will like, use arguments of like, jobs, and the economy, and stuff like that... And I just really don't like the way that they're trying to like, make it more practical about like, people coming here, but it's just like, I don't think that you can like, put some sort of value on someone's life like that... As well as like, I think it's a little ridiculous that you're trying to argue their worth, verses like, the other people that are currently here that like, don't even like, deserve citizenship... And that they're just like... I mean sure, they're doing maybe bad things in their life, people who are citizen,s but like... And that's like, something that I like, talk to my friends about... Like the foster care system: People can so easily just like, have a kid, even if they aren't like, fit to be parents... But then it's really hard to like, adopt kids.

A.D: Yeah so, I wanna ask more context specific questions, just to gauge your opinions on these.. So when you hear words like “assimilation” versus “incorporation,” “migrant” versus “refugee,” “immigrant,” “new American...” What comes to mind?

Xela: I haven't like, heard “incorporation” in anything... but it sounds very... Capitalist to me, like it sounds systematic in that you need to like, fit in this certain spot... But so does like, I guess the word “assimilation” and there's like history of like, people using it post war as like: “Melting pot, melting pot...” And it's like... Mmmm, that's... no...I think it's like one of those words— people use it in other contexts besides cultural context, I guess, and it just itches the wrong way because it's historically like, used that way...

I've never heard like, “new American” either, but to me that just sounds like ‘someone who just like, recently became a resident or a citizen,’ but I don't actually know like, what it means that's what I think it is...

“Migrant...” That just... I don't know, sounds very like, ‘cargo,’ like, objectifying-sort-of sense... Like, I think there's like, more to these people than just that simple word, although it is like, a part of them, they're more than just that...

I think people are taking note, especially like in the news, the way the media portrays like the Ukrainian or Russian War, there's a lot of refugees, and people were just like, catering more to them than all the other wars going on in the world with refugees, because a lot of the refugees are white, and they're like: “Well these are people just like us that need our help, unlike the other refugees in the world that *also* look like us and need our help.” People think that like, America is like, so much better than the air that's going on in Ukraine, because they're like, stopping like Africans from getting on the trains to leave and such, but it's like, really not that different...

A.D: Just to sort of bring back to our previous conversations that we had, our second episode focused on *undefining* these words, right? With these words, what we sort of talked about was that, we could apply what it meant like within our own context, but the thing is we also have to understand that other folks have different perspectives, so what that means as you, you know, some of the definitions you provided— I didn't think of

when I was thinking about these things before... And so, I think that's what the conversation is meant to be, it's that knowing that *you* yourself have different ideologies and perspectives, and that is *great*. You know? And that is fine, but it's: How do we talk about it? You know? And I want to bring us back to "new American." "New American" to me sounds... (laughs) It sounds pretty bogus, I don't know if I buy into what that means, but... Are there any like last thoughts you have?

Xela: Yeah, well like I said, I never heard that term before, and like this is just what I think it means with like... "New" means like, something fresh, something recent and "American is like..."

A.D: Yeah, so like, how long until you become an "old American?" (laughs) Right!? How does that work!?

Xela: (laughs) Oh yeah, gotta think about it that way too. Yeah I guess I'm not really sure like, how long this exists, I think until you develop a more Americanized accent, I suppose, or have the certain criteria established with the like, the American dream... that's very impractical...

A.D: So, a last question I have for you is: Is context important when defining these words?

Xela: Yeah absolutely, because like, you really can't just like, isolate... I mean, to learn something, there's gonna be a lot of different meanings, but obviously you're gonna be talking about them in sort of, some conversation... And I think definitely like, checking in with the person about what they think the meaning is, so that you guys are on the same page... Otherwise, I think there's definitely gonna be like a big misunderstanding and I think that's... I like definitely see that with like, critical race theory, and people be like: "Oh it means this, it means that, we're banning them, blah blah blah." And like, people don't know what it means, so then they're just like, going off of what they *think* it is... Or like, "defund the police," people are like: "Oh, it means this, it means that..." I think that's obviously like, really big names things that are happening, and I think, just having even these like, other words on a clearer page with whoever you're talking to...and I think obviously, like we said, it means different things to different people...

A.D: Absolutely. Yeah, yeah, thank you. Thank you for this, *very* insightful conversation, I really had a good time talking to you today. you offer a lot of, you know, meaningful perspectives and I appreciated and value[that], and I really thank you again for your time today, so thank you.

Xela: Thank you for having me.