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Rachel: This is "I" Statements, a podcast where complexity, vulnerability, and curiosity collide. In this episode, we're talking about connection. My name is Rachel Sumner, I work for Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project, or IDP, and a word that comes to mind for me when I think about connection is ineffable.

Jeannie: Hi everyone. My name is Jeannie Yamazaki and in addition to being a student at Cornell University, I'm also a facilitator for the Intergroup Dialogue Project. When I think of connection, I think of the word trust.

Owen: Hey everybody, my name is Owen MacDonnell. I'm a student at Cornell University studying Environmental Science and I'm also a facilitator for intergroup dialogue. Um, and a word that comes to mind when I think about connection is hope.

Jeannie: I'm glad that you said hope, because it, it's kind of reminding me of, I don't know, like it was hard to pick one word for this answer and so I'm happy you said hope so that we get to talk about it too, and um, I said trust because, I think for me connection is this emotional thing, and it's kind of risky and I think for a long time I also felt like hope was risky too, like that's in there for me too. Right, and you hope for connection, you hope for like that sense of like being human, and belonging, and for a long time I was really afraid of hoping for that and really afraid of connecting with other people, um, and a lot of that was because I didn't trust myself to like, be able to be vulnerable, or I didn't trust myself to be able to, like, survive a lost connection, or rejection, you know all those things. And so, I mean ultimately that's why I went with trust because I think there is, you know, there's risk inherent in trying for connection, and there's also risk in not trying for connection, and it's the less obvious one, I think because for a long time

Owen: Yeah

Jeannie: I think if you just isolate yourself and not trust anyone then you just sort of shut down. Oh wait! Then I just sort of shut down- 'I' Statements the podcast, where am I?

Rachel: [Laughs]

Jeannie: And I think for me again, like I said trust because learning to connect for me is an exercise in learning to trust myself and trust others, and I think in that is hope also. Hope that it, you know, it's worth trusting so-

Owen: Yeah

Jeannie: -those are my thoughts on connection.

Rachel: Jeannie so much of what you said really resonates with me, and this idea of it being scary, that disconnection between hope, and loss, and I felt that too, this nervousness to let myself imagine

or hope for what I actually want when it comes to connecting with other people, because what if I don't get it? And how bad I would feel. I appreciate that you also highlighted the way that this lack of connection, is, in my holding myself back, is also a loss and a risk. And speaking of loss, you know we're recording this during the coronavirus pandemic, which has caused the loss of physical connection. The three of us are recording remotely in separate spaces right now, and I'm wondering, you know during this time, what do you feel most connected to?

Owen: Yeah that's a great question. Right now, I think I definitely feel most connected with the people I'm living with. Um so, fortunately, when the quarantine and everything came into effect, I was already living with a couple people, so I think I'm really feeling connected to those people especially right now. We have spent a lot of time together, and I think I've definitely learned a lot more about these people. You know many of whom were already very good friends of mine, but I think this very unique time has really enabled and facilitated an even deeper connection that I wouldn't have imagined.

Jeannie: Yeah, um it's definitely been an interesting, interesting time in terms of friendships. This is something that my professor said in one of my classes, but they mentioned that, you know they were reaching out to people who they had never talked to in years, and they were having kind of a hard time connecting with people who they had known for a long time, like their closest people. I'm feeling that in myself too, and so it's interesting to think how oh in your physical space, and like the physical sort of immediacy that you have with your friends from living together, how that facilitates connection with people who you've known for a long time. Whereas once where, I don't know, once I'm separated from my friends I've been finding it a little bit harder. Yeah, I don't know, I don't have an answer to that one.

Owen: Yeah

Rachel: Yeah, these are unusual times. Um, when things are more typical, in your typical life, where do you find yourself experiencing connection?

Jeannie: I think my answer to that, um, is less a place, but more of a feeling. Specifically in moments of laughter, I love being able to experience that. I think it crosses a lot of, I think, boundaries, borders and it's this sort of feeling of, you know like, I don't know, it's such a shared thing you know? When we're all in the office together, the Intergroup Dialogue Project office, when we're there and we're laughing, when I'm with my friends and I'm, and we're laughing over you know whatever joke that we've created and re-created and re-created, it has just become part of that community we share. Although the laughs that Owen and I have had, um

Owen: [Laughs] So many

Jeannie: Right they're these things that are these like, like you're just yeah, you're together. And it's also, I like that laughter is loud, usually. It's usually, you know, it's uncontrolled at its best and I think there are moments in my life, and my sort of personal history that tie to times when I felt the need to keep myself so controlled and so tight. So when I was like in high school, later on, I struggled with

my mental health a lot, with eating a lot, and a lot of that as I reflected, I mean it's tied to a lot of things, but I think a lot about my gender, and the way that I saw what it meant to be a woman and what it meant to be an Asian American woman, and a young Asian American woman on top of all that, and wanting to be this perfect version, this perfect daughter, this perfect student, and how a lot of that was to sort of keep myself contained. And so I think as I've learned to let that go, and you know pierce my nose and bleach my hair, and I've learned to, you know hold an opinion, and ask for what I need, I've learned to let myself laugh and you know, let it be ugly or snorty or loud. And I've learned to really enjoy the laughter of others, and so I think it's become, like, yeah a really beautiful thing, and just like, reclaiming space. And sometimes it's not that deep, sometimes it's just a chuckle and it's still great. Yeah, so, those are my thoughts on where and when I feel most connected.

Rachel: Yeah. Jeannie my answer to this question would also be a nonplace. I heard you talk about the connection that comes when you're sharing the experience of laughter with other people, and for me, it's really about sharing food. I get such a feeling of connection when I can, for example, invite people to my home to share a meal, or-

Jeannie: When you bring cookies to the office.

Rachel: Yeah, when I bake things and share them with people I care about. This is such a profound way of expressing my desire to connect with people, and in the context of my own life, this ability to provide food for others, has not always been there. I grew up in a house where food insecurity was not uncommon, and I think that probably connects to why this idea of being able to be generous, being able to provide something that I put time and energy into, you know that we can really enjoy together. I think that's why that's so meaningful. And when I think about my favorite moments with family members, I think about like, when my dad discovered risotto, I remember him describing it as perfect for when you're having people over for dinner because it gives you an excuse to like stand in the kitchen, and stir the risotto for 20 minutes, but also talk to people. Or I think about my grandmother, who, she would make this thing called four fruit pie, and it was never actually four fruits, it was whatever fruit she had fresh, or frozen in the freezer, and it was my favorite pie and I remember asking if I could bake it with her one time, and it's such a special memory, because she has Alzheimer's now and can't bake, and you know when I think about some of the times I felt most connected to her, or other people in my family, it's really been in those times of preparing or eating food together, that's really where I feel like I've experienced so much connection.

Jeannie: How do you- how do you feel that as your relationship to your family has changed, you know like as you became an adult and as your SES, has like changed as an adult, how do you think that has affected the way you experience connection through food and otherwise?

Rachel: You know, like I live away from my family now, most of my family is about 5 hours away, and so I think making recipes that I used to make with my family, as a way to remind myself of that physical proximity that we used to share, that's probably one way, and I think being able to take advantage of this as a source of connection, now that I have more financial resources, just feels, I

don't know, like a really welcome part of being an adult for me. I'm not sure it would have felt this important to me if I had grown up with it, and maybe taken it for granted, but I do feel very grateful to have the resources to be able to cultivate, and maintain this as a source connection in my adult life.

Owen: Yeah, that's really beautiful and it reminds me of a similar sort of thing in my own life. I'm the oldest of four brothers, and so growing up I would always help my mom in the kitchen, and that really led to me sort of picking up a lot of these recipes, and actually, yeah learning how to cook them, and sometimes I'd step in for my mom and just cook for the family, I do it a lot when I'm home. But recently, actually, the other night I found myself just starting to, I started a Google doc with all of the recipes that I could remember from my mom.

Jeannie: Awww

Owen: It made me kind of emotional, thinking about all of these things that my mom had picked up and cooked for us as kids and really made me miss home. But talking about my family, also makes me think of a lot of the time I spent outdoors as a kid. I was actually homeschooled until seventh grade, which was a very unique experience-

Jeannie: Fun Owen fact

Rachel: Wow

Owen: -for a city kid. But a lot of that was, you know, learning through hands on stuff, going to museums, parks, all sorts of green spaces around the city, which definitely inspired my love for environmental science, and one thing that I was thinking about, where I typically experience connection, um is being outdoors. It really makes me feel connected to myself, which I think is really important in connecting to other people. It's kind of interesting to think about, when I'm outside, I try to not bring my phone, or technology, that kind of connects us in so many ways but makes me feel very disconnected a lot of the time, especially on social media and things like that. So, being outside definitely makes me feel very connected to myself and I think allows me to connect with others even better.

Rachel: Owen, hearing you talk about you know, being in the natural world, and how that's affected the way you experience connection, is making me think of some of the connections I've experienced, some of which feel very natural, and obvious, and others of which have been really surprising. I'm wondering if one or both of you could talk about a connection you've experienced that has really surprised you.

Owen: The first time I remember meeting Jeannie was in the back of a field biology van on our way-

Jeannie: Just packed full of kids!

Owen: [Laughs] We were on our way to some forest to identify plants, animals, whatever we were doing that day.

Jeannie: We were going to count our paces, so we could learn how long our paces were.

Owen: We were gonna count our paces, a useful skill in the field. And I remember hearing Jeannie talk about a class she was in, a certain Education 2610, Intergroup Dialogue Project. It was my first semester facilitating, which means leading the class with another student, and I remember talking to Jeannie in the back of this van, and it was really interesting to hear her perspective on one side of it and have my own on the other side of it.

Jeannie: Yeah and I remember, so from my perspective, I was doing the thing where you try to learn everyone's name and talk to everyone, and I looked at Owen and I said "Hi my name is Jeannie!"

Owen: [Laughs]

Jeannie: And you know, asked about you know, all the things that you do, or that I do, when I'm trying to get to know someone. And I was so excited to hear that Owen was a facilitator for IDP. And so it was someone to talk to about this, and then, so you know we did our labs together, you know we're out in the field twice a week, and then eventually we get to this, the big research project. And Owen and I both came up with the same idea.

Owen: [Laughs] That's true

Jeannie: And the both of the ideas got shut down because they were bad

Rachel and Owen: [Laugh]

Jeannie: Because they were bad ideas. But we were too far along in the course, when they realized this project wasn't going to work for either of us, and so they just put us together, which ultimately meant that Owen and I spent a lot of time together with just the two of us, like hanging out in the woods.

Owen: Six am, cuttin' down invasive species

Rachel: [Laughs]

Jeannie: Mhm. It is some of those conversations that, I mean Owen I don't know about you, but to me, I think were the beginning of me feeling like 'oh this is, this is like a, this is a special friendship, like this is a special person in my life.

Owen: Yeah. I just remember as time progressed, you know, starting to talk more and more about the things that were being introduced in the class that we were both kind of experiencing in parallel, maybe social identity. And we spent a lot of time doing, kind of busy work in the field that would really allow us to connect in a way that I definitely hadn't connected with other people before.

Jeannie: That's a really good point about as the class progressed, I think, the themes in the class were coming into our lives. I remember specifically, we were on, I think we were on the north side of Arnot, the little forest plot, and we were tagging buckthorn to cut down and we had that saw that we borrowed

Owen: [Laughs]

Jeannie: We ended up talking about sexual orientation, and I'd talk to you about like, being queer and trying to understand what that meant to me. And this was, so this is over a year ago now, and this was at a point when, I mean I hadn't told my roommate yet, I hadn't told most of the people in my life yet, and here we were this kid who like I had known for maybe a month, month and a half, on the side of an access road to a forest, talking about this deeply personal thing that, in the beginning, was really fraught for me, because I didn't know where I fit in, I didn't know where I belonged, and I remember Owen, you asking questions really openly, and just sort of like, taking me for who I am and just being okay with it. And it was such a reassuring thing to have in my life, and I think for me that's, that's a big moment and a moment I will, for sure always remember.

Owen: Something that surprised me about this friendship initially, is just looking at it in, kind of, a bigger picture. I've met so many people in my time here at Cornell, and it's very rare that I find a true friend from just a class project, or something so unexpected like this, that I think really struck me what Jeannie talked about, in terms of having these conversations, with, essentially we were, we were, more or less acquaintances at this point, I wouldn't even of really called us friends, but just having that openness and you know being able to talk about topics that might not be what you talk about in day to day conversation, I think what was very surprising to me, and something that I really really appreciated, you know looking back at it now.

Jeannie: And then from that point moving forward, so we had our project, I joined IDP as a facilitator. I think that's also another beautiful example of, I think how connection begets connection, right? I open up myself for this one friend, for Owen, and it's led me to a whole host of other just really important people in my life. Yeah, and I think there's some chain reaction there.

Rachel: What a beautiful connection and beautiful story about letting yourselves be open to that friendship and the ways in which it's helped you connect to each other, but also other things on campus. You also mention that this connection, something about it felt rare, and maybe unique, like this kind of connection doesn't always come about, and I'm curious to hear from you what makes it challenging for you to connect?

Owen: One thing that I find that makes it challenging to connect with others is just the very competitive environment that college often has. I think it's difficult to kind of break out of that mentality of 'this is a competition, we all want the best job, or to get the best grades', so I think sometimes the competitive nature, just in the place I am at right now can make it difficult to connect with others.

Jeannie: Yeah and as you talk about the sort of hyper-competitiveness, that yeah, I know I have experienced on this campus, it also reminds me of the competitive nature in some way or, excuse me, the competitive nature in which people sort of sometimes see, I think, social connections. Um, and I know that's a generalization there so I'm saying it more as an observation. Like something I've seen I think happen on this campus is the idea of like relationships as transactional, as social capital. There's a lot sort of wrapped up in the idea of relationships, and when I am sort of you know, friends with someone, and what that means, and like for me a lot of it comes down to the ability to be vulnerable, or the ability to ask for help. For a long time, I viewed relationships as transactional, and so asking for help was kind of like withdrawing from the balance, and being vulnerable, right, and worrying other people was like withdrawing from the balance. For a period in my life, for a lot of my highschool years, I was, my mental health was in a really, kind of, poor state, and so my balance would have been very much in the negative, you know. I was not really able to provide like joy or light to anyone's life, I couldn't see how I could provide positive things to other people, and in fact, and so as a result of that I really closed myself off, and in fact in this sort of long really difficult stretch of my life the only person who I was really often talking to was the therapist that I was seeing at that time. And so, I had learned that because relationships were transactional, and because I had nothing I could give to people in terms of like, joy or laughter or light, the only thing I could give was money in return for someone to listen to me. And how right, that even just further, sort of cemented that feeling of, you know I give you this in return for this. Which is also sort of an interesting tie in to being high SES and what that means in terms of the care I received, and I think a guilt complex and a sort of defensiveness that i've built into that because of the way that I've associated like exchange with relationships and closeness. And as much as I've sort of moved on and as much as I've grown from that, I definitely have, like this definitely comes up again and again for me, and it's really only actually in this past maybe couple months that I've worked on trusting myself and trusting others, and seeing relationships more of, more as just like, this is like, this is a thing we're in together, and it's not just about what I can do for someone else, or you know the thing I can exchange so that I can get the help I need or the shoulder to cry on that I need. And so in that way, you know learning to, I think let feelings, and let the ugly feelings, and let the vulnerability into your relationship has been something, something I'm working on. Yeah.

Owen: Yeah, Jeannie what you brought up, something I heard in what you said is this idea of vulnerability, and I think, to me, I've thought a lot about vulnerability, and going back to the question, something that's made connection much more difficult for me is learning how to be more vulnerable and open with my own emotions. I think even saying this now, feels a little bit vulnerable, as it's kind of been something I have been working on. But kind of, when I think about throughout my life I've definitely felt the effect of certain expectations our society has for men. I think a lot of this was learned through how other men have interacted with me. I went to an all boys high school, I have three younger brothers, so I've always kind of been surrounded by a lot of boys. I think that a lot of the impact of this, has been to you know, if I find myself in a situation in which, you know I need to express emotion, or in relationships with partners, it's been much more difficult to express that emotion. Kind of the default is to, just kind of deal with it myself, these are just emotions, kind of invalidating myself in so many ways. So I think this idea of vulnerability is critical to connection, and it's important to kind of look at how, for my identity to identity, you know, vulnerability can look very

different, and how my socialization has affected the way that I express emotion, and in that way, connect with other people, whether it be friends, or partners, or family members. This I guess lack of vulnerability that I've experienced throughout my life, and have been working towards being more vulnerable, and more open and more emotional with other people, it's definitely hurt me and other people, I won't deny that. And it's definitely hurt my ability to connect with others, and is something that, yeah I'm definitely not proud of, but also understand that, is sort of a part of a bigger system, yeah.

Rachel: Yeah. Owen, it's interesting to me that you talk about this way in which you've been taught to dismiss your own feelings, or you know that there's risk in vulnerability, Jeannie, I heard you talk about that too, I felt this myself, and only lately started to recognize the ways in which, I think I learned growing up in a house where there was a lot of stress, often because of financial resources, that as a kid I got the message that I should do whatever I could to minimize the extent to which I was burdening other people. And I don't think this was an explicit message, but I definitely got the message that me having my own emotional experience was maybe going to cause problems for other people. And so I would like, downplay what I was feeling or keep it to myself, and it's only recently, in working with a therapist that I've begun to see the ways in which these old habits have made it really hard to connect with myself, what am I actually feeling. And also to feel like, my feelings are an opportunity to connect with other people, they're not necessarily a barrier to connecting with other people. That's been scary, if I'm being honest. It makes me feel really exposed, when I tell someone else how I'm feeling. It's been hard to recognize that sometimes I'm feeling things that feel strong or negative, and I can still be honest about that, and that I don't have to protect other people from my feelings, and I don't have to protect myself from my feelings, that in fact I'm doing a disservice to myself, my ability to connect with myself and my ability to connect with others, when I separate my like, intellectual or cognitive experience of the world from my emotional experience of the world.

Jeannie: As you're saying this, I'm reminded of moments in which you've shone really bright in my mind. You've expressed you know, your feelings, and sometimes they're strong, and sometimes they're negative, and I think those were some of the most powerful moments that I remember. I think not only in terms of feeling more connected to you, and just feeling this like, honesty and vulnerability coming from you, and in that sense getting to know you, but also I guess, you know, connection begets connection, vulnerability begets vulnerability, and how I've seen you know, how you do that, and then how it enables other people, and you know myself to be like, braver, and to see our feelings as worthwhile, because you're right I think a lot of us are taught that, you know you shouldn't burden other people with your feelings, you should keep your feelings locked down. But they're so important, they're part of how we experience the world.

Rachel: I will say Jeannie, this is not the first time that you have brought tears to my eyes, but I'm grateful.

Jeannie: Awwwww

Rachel: So thank you. I am grateful to you both for what you've shared today about your connection to each other, your connection to yourselves, your connection to other people on this episode of 'I' Statements, a podcast from Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project. If you have ideas for things we should talk about in future episodes please do send us an email. You can find our email address and other information about our program on our website www.idp.cornell.edu. Thanks and bye.

[music]

Jeannie: *singing* I statements

Owen: *whispering* Welcome to this week's episode of ASMR

Jeannie: *whispering* This is ASMR, this is connection

[music ends]

[pause]

Jeannie: *whispering* Owen can you give us an I statement?

Owen: *whispering* I am whispering right now

Jeannie: *whispering* Wow

Both: [Laugh]

Jeannie: Thanks and bye!

Owen: *whispering* Thanks and bye.

Rachel: *whispering* Thanks and bye.