

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

Rheeda: Hi, I'm Dr. Rheeda Walker, I am professor of psychology at the University of Houston, I am a licensed clinical psychologist, and I'm also the author of the newly released *The Unapologetic Guide to Black Mental Health*. And the word that comes to mind for me when I think of rest is "no."

Tony: I'm Anthony Burrow, professor of human development at Cornell University and director of the Bronfenbrenner Center for Translational Research. And when I think of rest the word that comes to mind is "healing."

Rachel: Our conversation today cannot be totally separated from our context so I feel like we should say that we're recording this on June 8th, 2020 amid ongoing protests against police violence and other manifestations of anti-Black racism that have been happening across the United States and began after George Floyd, a black man, was killed by a white police officer in Minneapolis. These protests are happening months in to the Coronavirus pandemic and its devastating impact on many people's access to work, safety, and human connection. How would you describe your relationship with rest in recent weeks?

Rheeda: Well I wish you could see the look on my face as I'm thinking like, ooohh um, I'd love to get more of it and I am having to, literally it feels like at times, fight to get more rest. Which you would think is counterintuitive, right, like the mental energy that it takes to not apologize for declining invitations and declining requests takes that much more. Yet I realize, and I am very clear about the importance of taking time to reset and renew, and how much it takes to do the work that I do and that so many of us do. And I'm a parent also, oh my goodness, I was already needing more rest given homeschooling, that's all whole monster. I have been happy, for the most part, to have conversations about the psychological well-being of persons of African descent and the impact of racial trauma while at the same time trying to be very intentional about doing what I'm advising other folks to do and just how challenging that that has been.

Rachel: Yeah. I have complicated feelings about my desire for rest right now. As an American in the middle class, I work one job, I'm able to get all the financial resources I need from this and I'm able to, you know I have leisure time, time when I'm not working that I can use for rest. And I feel like as a white American right now, I feel guilty about wanting rest. Sometimes I feel like I want to take a break from the news coverage about or thinking about systemic racism in the United States and the fact that a break like that even feels like an option for me is, you know, a manifestation of my white privilege. Someone recently reminded me that there is a balance between my short-term actions and long-term action, so, yes I am a white person, I am also a human being who has physical and emotional needs that require attention and if I want to

continue being someone who's involved in long-term efforts aimed at dismantling existing power hierarchies then, then I need to acknowledge that I have those needs.

Rheeda: I was posting on Instagram yesterday this quote from James Baldwin that the person who "finds no way to rest cannot long survive the battle." And I'm going to stop right there go ahead, Tony.

Tony: Well I'm glad you mentioned that, I actually think it's sort of a window into this idea that it is required, even for those prepared for protest, that without rest you're not going to survive long in that regard and resonates with me. When I think about what you both have been sharing here, when I think about this current moment, I can appreciate people willing to put themselves in that kind of proximity to police, especially those in heavy duty armor - they look like soldiers, like wartime soldiers - and people who are standing up with signs and their voices and their bodies. But, but what's really interesting, sort of a thought that I have every time I see those images, is that that kind of proximity and confrontation and distance between them is what it feels like to me as a Black man in my sort of everyday life. So, so the antithesis of rest for me is seeing a police officer in my rearview mirror, let alone in front of me in combat armor. The moments of rest in my life that are the most needed and profound and sort of sought after are sort of the private moments away from, as far away as I can get, from the reality of that kind of authority or force. So rest for me is a way of preparing, so going back to the Baldwin idea is, is like there is a battle and the rest is sort of a kind of preparation because tomorrow I'm going to be back in it. It's not a nicety, it's not something trivial, and I'll also just add because I think it's related to this is that, also the either imagined but, but I think sometimes real, and think Rheeda spoke to this but for me there's this kind of guilt, and I think, I think Rachel you spoke to this around like, you know should you do, the guilt you might feel about whether you should be looking for rest in moments like this, but I feel that too. Like there's this guilt they can foment when you really need a rest, but if you don't go do, you know nobody else is gonna do it. Or you know that won't get said, it won't get observed, it won't get shown, it won't get discussed, and so it's, it's a guilt when rest gets pit against actual meaningful action that you know is important.

Rheeda: So but if you know that the meaningful action is undermined by your fatigue, does that motivate you to make a different decision about getting the rest and not apologizing for getting it?

Tony: Yes I think it does. I find I, I probably gravitate to those sources that remind me - those friends and, and messages that remind me that rest is vital, is necessary to survive the long battle. And so when I'm reminded of that, it is very helpful and if I can take folks up on that opportunity, I pursue rest. I also don't like the polemic, I don't like the forced choice, and I don't want others who come behind me to be confronted with that. So it's like this, this is the system that is reminding me that it's not OK to rest, and so maybe if I push a little bit further somebody else can rest without having to question that. And so it works both ways, so personally I deeply appreciate reminders to rest and the space that gets created for me to rest,

and therefore I can try to do that for others say like, you really need a break from this and go do whatever it is you do. But in those moments where it's very salient that this is something that demands attention because if we can get this right this time we won't be back here next week vying for rest. What about for you? I mean it - certainly as somebody who's thought deeply, written eloquently about these ideas - do you think the nudge to rest is an effective one?

Rheeda: It is. It's, it's a choice. There is there is so much of all of it that is choice and I do get frustrated because, you know, trying to find that balance between, OK I need to rest now versus I need to help solve world problem later. But the reality is that these big problems have been here, you know, for generations and whether we talk about, you know, challenges of - well, parenting challenges and being, working full time and all those things have evolved over time - racism has been here since the beginning. But these are really big issues, and the really big issues take minds that are fully intact. That's one part, and the other part is, because I do know that, you know, for me sometimes I will just hit a wall. I know what it feels like when I hit the wall and I don't want to get there and so I will take a time out now and maybe, maybe part before even when I was still in my graduate training, I remember a very wise Nigerian American friends said to me that you know, the person who fights and runs away lives to fight another day. And there are so many people of African descent who have died prematurely of health related problems and health conditions and we know that it's stress related. You know, the doctors say they were otherwise healthy. And I am very cognizant of that knowing my family history that I have to be intentional and I don't necessarily have, you know I have some wiggle room, you know and obviously as an educated person who, yes gets to work from home and can go and walk in my neighborhood and not, you know, feel necessarily endangered on most days, or who can sit on my, you know, back porch and relax that I am very privileged and I have to use that privilege intentionally, and I think I just lost my train of thought but it was probably really good. Um, but I have to be intentional um because I do know that they are there are, yeah I did lose my train of thought. I don't know what's going to happen there but I'm gonna turn it over, turn it back over.

Tony: We can edit it.

Rheeda: Or leave it in! You know it's, it's real, right? It's real. I'm tired.

[laughter]

Rachel: Um Rheeda, you mentioned, you know, taking, taking time out and Tony you mentioned spaces that become available to you for getting rest. What are these ways in which you carve out or maintain space and opportunities for rest in your own life?

Tony: If you kind of take the pieces of the conversation were having and put them together, I think it should be obvious why a space like this would afford rest but, in spaces in which I feel a sense of community I'm much more likely to sense the opportunity to rest. Spaces where

researchers, faculty, professionals of color talk with one another about that experience is definitely a space of rest for me. Even though the amount of conversation, the depth of conversation, the difficulty of unpacking certain experiences can be very real, my mind is entirely rejuvenated through those conversations. I experience them as synonymous with rest, because I think they're both preparing me to go back out again, they're allowing me to use different muscles, to let down the masks that I've been carrying around all day. And so communities in which I can unpack my racialized experiences, which is synonymous with my experience, are the most obvious places of rest for me.

Rheeda: I like that and I, I think about more than anything I think just the intentionality of it all. And so from moment to moment I try to be intentional about how I'm using my time because if I'm not, you know, overexerting then there is an opportunity for me to get a little bit of rest. so I'm always just looking for those moments. I am mindful of how I feel when I do different things, right, so that I can make decisions about avoiding certain things. I think about how content I have been to not be in faculty meetings as an example and how that can sap my energy. So on the one hand, for me, rest can be just sitting on my porch - well when it's not 90 degrees out but, you know - sitting on the porch in the morning, and even if it's warm, I feel a little breeze and that is renewing and restful for me. Uh so that's one part those intentional things, and also reading fiction so, we're in the middle of a pandemic, right, so I haven't been able to get out like I wanted to and so I've been reading more fiction because, for me, fiction takes my mind away from the stuff. But then the other part as I mentioned earlier is more so avoidance of the things that tax my energy and the things that take away from my, you know, wee stockpile of rejuvenation that I try to hold onto because I know that there are going to be times when more is needed from me just as a as a professional, as someone who comments on things that are going on in our society now, and as someone who is responsible for a child who deserves to have, you know, me functioning as best I possibly can.

Rachel: So much of what I hear in that is you directing your attention towards your own experience of the situations that you're in, and so I'm thinking about the ways in which society is structured to, like, treat time as a commodity, um, time and energy. Like, like I definitely got this message that doing actual work that I'm getting paid for is the best way to spend my time. And then I just can't escape how that's so clearly connected to capitalism, right, in this dehumanizing like, I am valuable because of the things I produce and not because of anything about who I am, and so I also hear some of that tension in like the ways in which it can be hard to get rest because we're just in a system that isn't designed to promote that.

Tony: And, and what happens, what would it do if you understood that by getting rest what you're producing is actually better? So it, I don't mean to pull away from the point you're making that, right, if our productivity becomes what is most meaningful about us then rest would be the thing we want you to do the least, right, it looks like, well you're not being productive in that particular moment. But the irony might be that what I am producing in the moments where I'm most productive could actually be better, they could move us all forward, they could be the most generative if we were allowed to, to rest effectively. And part of this is,

for me, sort of the notion that rest has an invisible quality to it. It's, you know, to your point about what gets sort of manufactured, our view, or sort of our structures, is the conversation we're having a second ago thinking about protests, right. And when you see people protesting you're seeing that action and that looks like productivity, that looks like the agitation, that looks like the movement that is needed to make change. What you don't see is that person resting, right, for them to show up. In the past week it's not a new crowd, it's not a replenished, refreshed crowd every time - those are people who've gone away and now have returned ostensibly because they got needed rest, if not sufficient, at least enough to go back out the next day. And so I think a concern that people have is, what are you doing when you're resting? And even then it's like you have to have a productive rest, right? Like, OK you're not here, so we're always implying that you have to be using this for generating something for the greater good, and so the sort of the toxic aspect of this is: one, a distrust that when I'm not watching you, you're not being productive. if I can't see you, if I can't see you working, I mean even if I'm sitting at my desk, Rheeda is at her desk, if you don't see my fingers typing but I'm just taking a moment to reset my mind, that doesn't look like productivity to people. But I wonder if we could argue for a little bit of a recalibration of what we mean by productivity, it's not just busywork, but better work, more impactful work, you know, more enduring meaningful work may require rest.

Rheeda: Yeah if our society was, I think as Rachel was saying, better set up to reinforce that kind of worldview, then we would all be so much better for it. And there are companies, just based on what I know some of the companies, you know, in Silicon Valley, they build in for their employees, you know, leisure time, you know, because they understand the importance of resetting and how that can stimulate creativity and productivity and how important that is. But I don't know at what point we got into this mindset in our society that you have to be fully working, sitting in front of a computer or whatever for 60 hours a week in order to show that what you're doing is, is meaningful. But it's, I do think it's problematic and it fits more so in, you know, what some of us would say is a more Eurocentric paradigm whereby, yes time is money, and so you have to be, you have to show products with your time rather than being someone who realizes that relationships are important, and who we are and how we show up in a relationships are important, and invaluable. And that's the thing is that, you know, relationships and not focusing on the rat race that many of us are in, that it allows us just to be better people and I can't help but to wonder if we can have a better society until we start to shift some of the larger worldview perspectives about who we are as people and what it means to have a life worth living. I mean, it's a larger issue.

Tony: Your thoughts sort of make me think here a little bit more about what, you asked the question: what kind of structural changes would be needed to see the results that we might prefer to see? And, you know, I think about this notion of rest and you brought up the example of companies. I think the wisdom of some of these companies is that by creating spaces - like literal spaces like lounge rooms or activity rooms that aren't about the work or productivity of a company, they're about the restoration of the employee - and the interesting thing about those spaces is that they're on site, right, so by valuing that, valuing a restored person to do a

better job without going home, right and again I think this taps into, we could debate this, but it taps into this invisibility problem: I don't know what happens to you when you go home but by creating a space here, you're at work longer, you actually may be able to stay in the game longer and eventually be more productive with the time that you're working because in the same space you were here you were, you know, whether it was taking snacks or relaxing or sleeping or getting a massage whatever it might be. And that makes me think about structural changes where, the examples I was giving earlier, what I recognize as most restful or the spaces, are those that are a retreat away from the world that I'm otherwise navigating, so, so for me to stay in the game you, we might want to think about ways in which I can achieve and experience the same amount or quality of rest without leaving. I don't always mean physically – metaphysically, psychologically leaving that particular space - but if you don't allow for that, if the only thing you recognize is my physical productivity ,yeah I'm probably going to leave that space to go get the rest that I need. And so how do we manufacture social spaces for people where you're, we recognize you are as valuable to us while you're resting as you are when you're doing the things that we might otherwise traditionally view as, you know, productivity, generativity. That seems to me to require a different paradigm shift, and to your point Rheeda, even sort of a cultural reframing of who we are as people.

Rachel: Yeah. A thing that I, that I find myself noticing and being curious about is, is the value of rest for rest's sake. Um, you know, we've talked about how rest is important for sustainable engagement in long-term sort of efforts at dismantling racism and we've talked about how rest can make us more productive when we actually are, are sitting down and trying to be productive. I'm, I'm just wondering: what are your thoughts on, you know, rest just for its own sake, not because it gets us something else but because it's may be a valuable thing in its own right?

Rheeda: Hmm

Tony: [laughter] Yeah, I had the same reaction. You know, I, so let me say, let me just talk about that for a second because the space that that question or notion brings me to is unfamiliar, just honestly speaking, like I, I don't really have a space in my mind for what that looks like and so it's hard to just assimilate that into sort of my thinking about, we had been talking about it and I guess I had always thought about rest as being a kind of currency, it's a resource that you expend for what reason. Right, what are you doing with this? But the notion that in itself it has a utility or value to the experience in itself is interesting. In this space, this time, this moment we're in of this, of the pandemic there were a million and one reasons and invitations for people to get rest. The world that we were navigating collapsed, and yet everyone was in this crunch to manufacture a world that allow them to be just as productive as they were but in a different way. So, so, no one said, well yeah let's just take the time to rest. We could have, we could have decided as a group to do that but we didn't and so, because and I think it might be because in itself it wasn't something people knew how to celebrate the experience in itself.

Rachel: Do you think that's true for you? I'm assuming based on the fact that this was a new concept that you yourself felt that, right, and I'm assuming this transition to remote work that you focused your efforts on productivity?

Tony: I did. I, I felt it. I'm dealing with a question about how much this was my own self or the structure that I'm in that asked this of me: I was teaching two courses at the time, it would be hard for me to rest and say, I guess I'm not going to teach those anymore without losing my job, right. And so it came out, up against the backdrop of reality. I had to contend with how much can I get away with resting in this moment versus do I actually want to.

Rheeda: I was teaching two graduate courses and I actually thought that it was important for - and when I say graduate courses, so doctoral students are working on their Ph.D.s and who may be providing psychological services at some point - and so I wanted to model for them, like this is how you dial things back, because my concern is that clinicians who don't know how to rest can't help patients who are really struggling psychologically. And so, I did take it as an opportunity for me to dial back because I was hoping that I could model what that looks like in a society that does not model or reinforce rest in any way shape or form.

Tony: So was that an intentional decision -

Rheeda: Yes

Tony: -so that you were better prepared and they were better prepared? So that, going back to the question, is, is it always in the service of some greater productivity downstream?

Rheeda: Yes. I was, like you I was similarly, um I was like, what? Rest for rest, why would we do that? And I don't even like why questions. Um, but, but yeah for me because, because yes if you're not resting I think our natural human inclination is to be doing something. So yeah I was completely stumped by the question because I know that there is lots to do, right? And so rest for rest's sake, hmm... not in the context of a list of about 30 things to do, like no. If I'm the same human regardless of whether I rest or not, then yeah I'm probably doing whatever the things are that need to be done because that's why we're here, right. Presumably.

Tony: I want to chew on this a little bit more, this idea of rest for rest's sake. It's hard, I think, as an individual who both wants and needs rest but also has a life that demands some level of productivity. I wonder if we could remove ourselves enough to think about, could there be potential benefits to rest that actually have nothing to do with thing you're using it for? So as a parent I need rest so I can better deal with my children, as a professor I need to rest so I can better work with students. But I also wonder if, when I'm resting, my mind is both processing, making sense of my experience, and potentially attending to the world in ways that I wouldn't otherwise if I wasn't resting. So it's not so much that I'm using rest but I wonder if during rest, it's in those moments that there's processing of my experience. So, again, I don't have, I have no data to support this potential but it seems plausible to me that rest really isn't doing

nothing. It is both preparing you to go out for your battles but is also creating new spaces in your mind that would not be there if you had continued on without it.

Rheeda: Yeah I don't see that as rest for rest's sake, though. I still see that as rest for a purpose.

Tony: Still functioning, has a function.

Rheeda: Yeah it still has the eventual outcome that you're able to do, have, create output.

Tony: So Rachel, the answer is no there is no rest for rest's sake.

Rachel: Great, great. Thank you both for rolling with it. Um, we are getting close to the end of our conversation and we've talked about a lot of things so I'm wondering either what thoughts or additional questions are on your mind as we wrap up?

Rheeda: Well I guess my hope is just that -

Tony: Oh please go ahead.

Rheeda: Are you sure?

Tony: Yeah please.

[laughter]

Rheeda: No, Tony you'll have the last word. Um I just my, my hope is that people are intentional about, like I said earlier, the two dimensions. One is avoiding things that sap or take away your energy or ability to be productive because I think that is actually as important as doing the kinds of intentionally restful things. So even for someone who can't just go sit outside or take a time out at least avoiding the other stuff, you know, that takes away energy. Once we figure out that we have a finite amount of energy we make different kinds of decisions for ourselves, and even if it's not, it doesn't seem to be functional, that usually having a little bit more energy about ourselves it does have consequences.

Tony: The mention of somebody who can't rest makes me think about our collective societal judgment around people who do rest, who do take a moment to rest, and it makes me think about who is allowed to rest. And I think this is just worth worthy of sustained consideration, when you both realize that rest is vital, it's ubiquitous, we all need it, and it is likely the case that we all needed to perform at our very best. So what do we make of people who are working on something and we observe them taking a rest? Who, who gets to take rests and who doesn't, I think is something for us to continue to chew on.

Rachel: Yeah, absolutely. Lots to chew on. You've both given us so much to think about and I'm really grateful for the questions you shared, the perspectives you shared in this episode of "I" Statements, a podcast from Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project. If you have ideas for future episode topics or you would like to learn more about our program you can find our contact information and other details on our website, www.idp.cornell.edu. Thanks and bye.