

"I" Statements – Episode 8 - Listening

Stephen: And on the one hand it's like, yay, I know myself better and I know what my values are and I don't necessarily want to entertain this kind of conversation. And on the flip side, I don't know, it's like, I'm wondering if I'm being, in a way, if I'm not giving people enough chances if I'm not willing to listen to them.

Rachel: This is "I" Statements, a podcast where complexity, vulnerability, and curiosity collide. In this episode we're talking about listening. As you listen you might hear some of our pets because we are all recording in our homes today. My name is Rachel Sumner, I work for Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project, or IDP, and the pet you might hear in my apartment is my dog, Daphne. And a word that comes to mind for me when I think about listening is "valuable."

Natasha: I'm Natasha Steinhall, I also work for IDP. Joining me in the studio today we have Finn the pitbull, Sasha the cat, and Noodles the cat. A word that comes to mind for me when I think about listening is "obedience."

Stephen: My name is Stephen Kim, I also work for IDP, and I am a new cat father to a cat from the Tompkins County shelter named Bori; he brings us much love and mischief. And the word that comes to mind when I think about listening is "all-consuming."

Rachel: So this may seem like kind of an odd question given that, I think, in some ways listening is a thing that we naturally do or that we do without thinking, but how did you learn how to listen?

Natasha: I think this question is funny because it, it assumes that I know how to listen. You know, I might know how to ride a bike and once you know that, you know that and you're done. Um but for me I think I'm still learning how to listen. So when I think about how I first listened I think about how I learned how to listen in school and it wasn't because it was something that was taught - we didn't have listening classes - but because I was interested in the material that was being taught and for me listening was just how, the only way, you know, to absorb that material and to learn from my teachers. But I don't think that I learned how to listen to people in a deeper way, where I'm trying to listen for understanding, until taking an intergroup dialogue course in my senior year of undergrad. And for me that was the first time that I learned how to listen, I think, just with more intention, more actively, with the intent to try to understand where somebody else is coming from. And sometimes I'm still an awful listener, my mind wanders a lot, and not maliciously or because I don't care, but because it's so hard and I want to make sure I really absorbed what you said, so I just, I ask people to repeat themselves a lot.

Stephen: Thank you for sharing, I guess, about how IDP really was the first time listening was encountered, you encountered listening in an educational context. And that's the same for me,

I don't think I really had any class that focused on listening as opposed to some kind of producing, whether it's like a paper or like some, like, vomiting answers onto an exam or something like that. Um, the thing that came to mind though when I thought about this question was something that happened outside, I guess, of an educational context, or an explicitly educational context. A friend of mine was catcalled on the street when we were in college and she treated it as an awful but everyday occurrence, and I remember I was just shocked and then I went, 'How does this happen? This is awful. Can we get the license plate of the car that drove by?' and then she just looked at me and she said, 'Maybe,' and then later I got this email from her and then it said, pretty much summed up, 'good of you to think this is bad but bad that it took you so long to think about it.' And then I went, wait this is something that happens to her almost every week, and that's when I started thinking that there's first so much about people in the world that I was somehow not getting, and part of it was I'm not getting these things because I don't have to experience them, and that led to 'how will I get more of an understanding of what's going on?' I just needed to listen more and I made it a point to deliberately, especially in my interactions with women, to listen more and talk less. And that's actually how I started learning a lot more about feminism, patriarchy, and yeah, all of it was just done through this very, in a way, active listening and this very intentional listening. And it was hard because so much of the way that I was programmed, especially as a man in this world, is to speak and to take up space and to push back against that was, um, difficult and I was not always successful. But then as I started doing it more and more I started learning through trial and error: what are the things that I can be doing to signal that I'm listening, what are the things that I can be checking in my own head to make sure that I'm not interrupting with my own experiences. And it's through that that I figured out how not to let myself get in the way of other people's story so much and not feel the compulsion always to add and, I don't think, harkening back to something I think Natasha said, um, I wouldn't say that I'm a very good listener right now but then I think I'm continuously learning how to listen and how to be a better listener. And it's because of experiences like those where, um, people who have less power than me were generous enough to point that out to me, point out the need to listen more and then for me to sort of adopt that as a daily practice as opposed to - because I think there's also a way of making a show of like, I am going to listen to you now! and then, I know when that has happened to me it's like, when people are like, 'as a person of color, I want to hear what you think about this issue' and then for me I'm just like, oh there's a lot going on here that I don't necessarily want to interact with. But then sort of just everyday interaction, making it a point and then, yeah, that's sort of, I guess how I'm learning.

Rachel: Stephen, you talked about some of the things that happen when you show up listening intentionally, some of the ways that your interactions are different either because you are paying attention to different things or you're learning different things. What happens in your interactions with other people when you listen intentionally?

Stephen: I found it really remarkable how much more other people say, and also how much more I say, when they or I get the sense that someone is waiting for them to continue. So much of conversation, I've been trained to sort of think of it as, sort of, almost like a tennis match: a

volley goes back and forth back and forth back and forth and there's the expectation that the other person is going to say something immediately after I say something. And when there's a pause, there's no indication that the other person is going to add, I think that gives both me and other people (based on my experiences) space to really delve into experiences, to reflect, to be more vulnerable. And that's why I try not to think of conversations as those tennis matches anymore or even just, a the thing that flows from one thing to the next like a river; I'm thinking it much more of as something that's really, in a way, like tightly folded up, almost like a very intricate piece of origami, and the conversation is us trying to unfold the thing that we're looking at together. And as more and more folds come undone I get, I can get a better sense of how wide and deep the other person's experiences are and they get a sense of how wide and deep my experiences are. And then as we sort of unfold that together we, it just looks so much more differently than when we first started. And these moments, I have to say, even though I aspire to have many of them per day, are actually, for me at least, quite rare. Which is why I know how I need to continue working on this. If I'm, a good day is when I have one of these conversations where it felt like we're really unfolding something together and then I can, that's usually when I say, OK I had one conversation where I think it was a decent listener, and that's a good day.

Rachel: Yeah, Stephen, so much of what I hear in the way you described that is a really shared experience so, so you and this person working on something together, and understanding each other better, and the like, I think you mentioned vulnerability and just the depth of connection that can be fostered there. I have felt similar things when I listen in this way so, I think that's very, very rewarding and it's also been very surprising. Um, it's shown me that it's possible for me to care about people who, before I started listening in this way, I don't think I would have cared about, I think I would have immediately written off as being someone I couldn't possibly connect with. The most striking difference of this for me is, is the time I dated a libertarian. We have very, very different political views, very different views of the world, but I, you know, would listen to him in this way where I was I was not judging what he was saying while he was saying it, and I really did pay attention to, sort of, the emotions underlying what he said, and it just felt like, oh, I do care about you. Like, even though we don't see eye to eye on basically any issue, there is the possibility here for me to actually care. And that was shocking to me. Like, I think, you know, like I said, had I not showed up listening in that way, I think as soon as he said "libertarian" I think I would have walked away right then, but because I was willing to show up with curiosity and just really interested in trying to understand, that I did not walk away in that moment and I let myself be surprised by, by who I could feel connected to.

Natasha: I appreciated what you said about how listening shows up in your relationships, your personal relationships. For me, I think about when my current partner and I started dating and we also have very different viewpoints, we've had very different experiences growing up, we grew up in different parts of the country. Having those conversations and, like, just listening to one another in the same ways that you described, like really trying to understand where the other person was coming from, I think, opened me up, so, in a way that when I, when I think

about myself 10 years ago, like, I don't think I would have seen myself dating someone who's so different from me. And here we are five years later and, uh, I guess I'm just a different person.

Rachel: Yeah, and Natasha, it sounds like you and your partner do a lot of reciprocal listening, right, it sounded like you're really open to hearing each other, and for me that's when it works best. When I listen in this way I do give so much of my time and energy and it does kind of all become focused on the other person. And I think that's OK occasionally, right, I think, I think, sometimes, you know, when it's been true that a friend is going through a really hard time or something like that, right, I'm totally willing to set myself aside. But I think in a relationship or anything that's unfolding over time that reciprocity is so important, and this is how I see, sort of, power and listening being connected because when one person is always the focus and one person is always doing the listening, ugh, that just, that imbalance is, is so upsetting to be in - it has been for me. But I see this same pattern in, like, even national conversations, right: we get told there are certain people worth listening to - whether they're academics or politicians or people who have verified Twitter accounts - right, there are some people who have easy access to a platform where they can share their ideas, and I think the implication is that we should be listening to what they say. I don't know, it's a very small subset of people and I see those people being people who have had access to formal education and people who tend to be better off in terms of money, they get held up as worthy of our attention and when there's a lack of reciprocity, when there are only some people who get to be the focus, like, I've felt my own resentment, um, and so I think in some ways that helps me understand people who feel left out of a national conversation.

Stephen: Yeah Rachel I'm thinking to something that you said about who do we deem as worthy of listening, and that idea of worth is really interesting to me because there's a way in which I think I've been taught to think of listening as something that's transactional, like I need to be, it's, someone is giving me something and I am getting something out of it and if the thing that I'm getting out of it is not worthwhile or valuable enough then I shouldn't be listening to it. And I'm wondering is, do I, is that transactional mentality of listening sometimes something that gets in the, gets in the way of some of the other kinds of listening that we talked about that can be deeply affirming and deeply eye-opening? Mostly because I think I've, as I've grown older, my ideas of what's worthwhile and what's not have really started to solidify. And I think both for better and for worse in that I have a better idea of who I am and what my values are and then also that means I'm foreclosing myself to listening to a lot of different kinds of people. I'm, I'm really struck by your dating across difference story with the libertarian person because it's just, I don't know, I would not, for a variety of reasons - some of them being that um I currently have a monogamous partner um who would, he would be very upset if, I think, if I were to sort of start questioning that right on the show, but then, yeah - it's just I don't know if I would have been in the place to be able to, for example, go on, even go on a date with someone who holds very different political views from me. And then my feelings towards that are really mixed, um what I about, about listening to this person, on the one hand it's like, yay I know myself better and I know what my values are and I don't necessarily want to

entertain this kind of conversation. And on the flip side, I don't know, it's like I'm wondering if I'm being, in a way, if I'm not giving people enough chances if I'm not willing to listen to them or if I deem them not worthwhile to listen to. Which sounds terrible when I phrase it that way but then, that, those are sort of the mini judgments that I'm making every day.

Natasha: I'm thinking about this idea of listening being transactional, I think in some senses it is, it can be. I also think about the times that I make an active choice to listen to someone and when I do that I feel like it is intentional and it is me knowing that it's my time, it's my energy, it's my emotions. For me in, in that way it doesn't always feel transactional. And then other times I think about when listening is something that is expected or demanded of me, and so when I think of listening and power I think that this can be the dark side of listening. And as Rachel mentioned earlier, this is, you know, listening without reciprocation or thinking about like listening and obeying, taking orders. I worked in the hospitality industry for, um, quite a few years so I, I've worked in many different roles, um, in catering and bartending at restaurants and bars. And when I think about listening in the hospitality industry I think there are very positive aspects of it, uh, such as having, you know, regulars who come to your bar. My, my regulars have enjoyed, you know, being listened to by me and I've, I've enjoyed being listened to by them. You know, I ask them how their kids are doing and I know their drink orders and, you know, their favorite items on the menu, and they'll ask me about how's school going, how's work going, and it's nice to have those relationships where, where listening is reciprocated. And then I've also been in situations where there's this mentality that the customer is always right and it doesn't leave space for, for me to be humanized; I'm there to, to listen and obey and in those situations, I'm there to make sure you get your dinner as fast as possible and the way that you want it and that's it. And I, I have felt like I'm not seen, I'm not a person in those situations. And so I think there's definitely this, this dark side of listening in the hospitality industry that can be very harmful.

Stephen: Yeah. I mean, since we're on this topic of listening and power, I, on my good listening days, when I do have those good listener moments, um, a lot of people are honestly surprised when they see me really trying to listen to them. And some of it, I think, it comes because um people are surprised to see a man trying to listen and I have a lot of emotions associated with that. Some of it is, I think, a fairly useless little bit of pride that I don't find useful for making the world a better place because it's coming from a place of like, well I'm not one of those like ordinary men, I'm a good man, I listen! And then that really just only gets me a one-way trip to complacency and I'm not interested in going there. There's also a lot of sadness really both for, like, what women and nonbinary folk have to put up with, sadness also for men who are missing out on a lot of the richness of life because they're not used to listening. There's also a twinge of guilt, a twinge of shame - if I'm being honest actually much more than a twinge of both of those things - of just how much have I not done in the past. And then, so there's that bit of surprise that goes there because they see me as a man listening, but then there is also this other dimension of seeing an Asian American person listening. Some of that surprise, and this is - I think I'm making fewer assumptions about this when it happens because usually after I say something, rather, when I'm listening to something, someone will offhandedly remarked

like, Oh my gosh it seems like you're really understanding what I'm saying! I haven't met many people like you who seem to really have a grasp of English and social nuances and sort of emotions - and they don't say it as bluntly as that but then that's what the message that I get is, and then that falls right into those racist stereotypes of the English-deficient, unfeeling Asian person and that's, yeah, and then the emotions that I have associated with that are much less mixed, they're usually just a bit of anger. And so it just, so the surprise comes from both that like I have privilege as a man but then I'm also experiencing oppression as an Asian American person; these things just all exist together and it's sort of something that I have to work on figuring out what to do with, um, but that doesn't I don't know, I don't, but, I don't want to cut myself slack and saying that like, I can just let it sit for a while; I feel like I have to be very actively engaged with it, yeah.

Rachel: It sounds like there's a real sense of urgency for continuing the work of being a listener. I'm wondering where that sense of urgency comes from?

Stephen: I'm wondering that too now. I think this is something that I'm learning, um, and it's amazing how, at least for me as the person being listened to, I learn more about myself as other people are listening to me. I think it's just having the space to, sort of, like, unpack all this really opens up parts of myself for me as well. Very briefly to actually answer your question, I think a lot of the urgency for me at this moment is coming right now because there are a lot of people with a lot of power who are making decisions that are going to influence what the rest of this year is going to look like for us and I wish that those people in power were sometimes better listeners.

Natasha: Stephen, what you shared about thinking about people in power not listening, what's more salient to me is all of the people around me who, who aren't listening, who are shutting down to listening, who don't want to listen to one another, who don't want to listen to people who have different viewpoints. You know, over the years, growing up there were always fights and, and people wouldn't talk to each other for a while, but I've been seeing, like, this new kind of, it's, it's like family cancel culture: family members getting into these fights over, you know, political beliefs, just beliefs about what's happening in our country in general right now, and cancelling each other. They're, they're like, I'm done with you, I'm not, I'm not gonna talk to you anymore. And it's so crazy how, how do you, you know, it's, it's one thing if it's your neighbor or an acquaintance or a coworker but when we're doing this within my own family, when I see this happening that's, that's really troubling to me.

Rachel: Yeah. As we get towards the end of this conversation, having talked about our ongoing efforts to practice listening, I'm hoping to listen to whatever thoughts or questions are on your mind. We've talked about a lot of things.

Stephen: I'm going back to family cancel culture, where the decision to listen to someone is almost interpreted as a sense of agreement or affirmation with the ideas. Sort of, I wouldn't be listening to something unless I thought it was worthwhile and something that, in me thinking

that it's worthwhile it's indicating some kind of assent or agreement. And now I'm, sort of, think- that's something that I've done and now, sort of, spacing that out a bit and thinking about it more in my conversation with both of you, or rather our conversation, that that's something that I'm starting to question now. It's, why is, or I guess why do I see listening in some ways as a tacit agreement of something? And now, and I'm pushing more towards maybe it shouldn't be that way, maybe I should be listening and then I get to decide at the end, sort of, whether I agree or disagree. I think that's the way that I normally thought it worked but now I'm seeing that listening has this almost assumption, for me, at least, built into it and how to sort of challenge that and then to push myself out of that.

Natasha: I think, uh, what's staying with me and what I'm thinking more about is, um, just, I think, the power that listening can have, so what's possible when we open ourselves up to listening to someone that we maybe first assumed, I maybe first assumed, that I, I had nothing in common with or I couldn't connect to. And I, I think it's at the first level there's like I, I'm thinking, oh I can't really connect with this stranger, and then at a deeper level there's like thinking, I could never date someone, I could never be in a long-term relationship with someone like this. Um, you know, thinking about just the possibilities that opening yourself up to listening to others can reveal.

Rachel: There's a, there's a tension between, that I think, runs through what you both just shared which is, as people who see listening as an act of care or an act of curiosity that has value, it sounds like there's a concern that if other people see it that way too, it means something when we listen to them. And so it sounds like there's an impulse to be protective of who we listen to because, Natasha I think you used the phrase, like, oh these people that I didn't imagine I could connect with, but what I also hear in what Stephen said is, these people I don't want to connect with or that I don't want to think I'm in agreement and I'm concerned that if I do listen they might think I agree with them and I really don't. But I think that's an interesting tension between the listener's perspective of, what is the reason that I'm listening to you? And then the person who's being listened to, what is their understanding of the fact that I'm, I'm listening in this way?

Stephen: I feel like your final thought should be the final thought.

Rachel: Ok, great. Well, thank you both for talking about listening and thank you listeners for listening to this episode of "I" Statements, a podcast from Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project. If you have future episode topics in mind please do send us an email. You can find our email address and other information about our program at our website, www.idp.cornell.edu. Thanks and bye.