

Rachel: This is "I" Statements, a podcast where complexity, vulnerability, and curiosity collide. In this episode we are talking about imagination. 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 imagination is "transport."

Bert: I'm Bert Odom-Reed, I am a multimedia producer in the Cornell Broadcast Studios, and a word that comes to mind when I think of imagination is "self."

Janani: My name is Janani Hariharan, I am a PhD student at Cornell University where I study soil microbiology, and the word that comes to mind for me when I think about imagination is "possibility." This can go both ways, I think this can be both positive and negative. And it's positive because a lot of the things I've done in my life, for example as an international student, I moved halfway across the world to pursue a graduate degree and it took a lot of imagination to be able to do that because most people around me weren't shooting for those goals and they weren't imagining that kind of a life for themselves. But I did and I made it happen, and I don't think this transition would have happened if I hadn't had the ability to imagine it for myself. But then on the other hand, as someone who is prone to anxiety, imagination can also work against me sometimes because my tendency is always to imagine the worst possible outcomes whenever I hear of a challenging circumstance or a new development in my life. But I think there's so much possibility that my imagination provides me in all of these different scenarios and that's why I chose possibility as my word.

Rachel: Yeah a lot of, a lot of that resonates with me, Janani, around the anxiety-prone mind and what imagination - where it goes. For me I think, like you, it goes to sort of, 'what do I need to maybe be ready for or worry about?' It's often been a thing that sort of takes me away from the present and my experience of myself which, like I said, with anxiety can be a bad thing but I think also in boring or troubling situations, you know, being able to imagine things that keep me entertained or that make me feel hopeful about a potentially different future or different situation have also been, like, adaptive and helpful. So I think it's interesting, it sounds like we have - there's some commonality in the way we experience or think about imagination and it also sounds like there are some differences.

Bert: I think there are some differences but it seems to be at the same heart of the matter. Here's a question just generally: did all of us grow, like, up in the country or have a significant part of our lives in the country? Because I think when I was - initially I was in south Louisiana in a parish with 1500 people maybe in the entire parish, my older brother got into horses so we had some quarter horses and - a whole lot of work - but in the country you have to imagine, well you don't have to but I imagined, all types of possibilities. It was country enough where the military bases would fly supersonic and every now and then you hear the big boom because, you know, they don't do that over cities, they do it over the country where nobody lives, but yeah, we lived there. And I think, I'd use my imagination to imagine myself in the cockpit, imagine myself with wings when a hurricane would come through. So I think it helps if you have a, a life that is not grandiose or made out for you, it does build your imagination.

Rachel: Yeah I, I certainly grew up in a rural place in western Massachusetts, and I think you're right that there's something about both the unstructured nature of many childhood days and also there not being a lot to do... I read so much. I, I remember spending a lot of time at the public library. Books were a major source of filling in the otherwise empty space of rural America. And I think also I was, like, a crafty little kid, I would like look at what I had in my house and figure out what I could make with it. We didn't have a lot of money when I was growing up and so I do think there was a little bit of, 'OK great, Rachel, you have access to the things that are in front of you and that's it - what can you do, you know, how can you use these to make what you're imagining?' And I remember being really energized by that creativity and having to problem solve and figure out how to how to do what I wanted.

Janani: So I am the odd one out here because I've always grown up in bigger cities. It's funny because regardless of that, it seems like imagination had such a huge role in my childhood because I was an only child. And so most of the time, you know, my parents or my grandparents or my cousins were busy with their own lives and I had to entertain myself and amuse myself and so imagination was really big for me. And, like you, Rachel, I remember reading so much. I remember at one point when I was a child I really wanted to be a librarian because I loved books that much and I collected the 20 or so books that I had at home and, yeah I was so organized, I had a little sheet of paper with details where my family members had to check out the book officially, we had to sign and put in the date and time and everything, nevermind it was going from the bedroom to the living room, right, but it had to be done. And yeah, this is this is one of my games that I played as a child. But, you know, listening to you both talk is also making me examine the kind of things I imagined and the kind of life I imagined for myself and I'm realizing that I absolutely had an obsession with medieval history as a child, which sounds really, sounds like a really weird thing for a child to be obsessed with. But I grew up in India where you have monuments and pieces of history just sort of littered everywhere honestly, because we're such an ancient country and such an ancient civilization, yeah you, you cross the road and there's a monument, you go to the next street and there's a plaque symbolizing something, you know, there's something always going on. And yeah, it's funny because I'm realizing how much of the things that I imagined and romanticized for myself were in fact untrue things that just seemed like an escape from reality and just seemed like they were better than my current life, but they really weren't because as an adult when I grew up and I'm thinking about, oh, I used to think it would be really cool to be a medieval princess and to live in a castle but um, they actually didn't have great sanitation, they actually didn't treat women very well in the middle, in the Middle Ages. If I got sick I probably wouldn't have had access to the kind of health care that I have now, you know, but I learned so many things and I disabused myself of so many of those ideas that I had as a child as an adult.

Bert: Well I will, I will call myself a little bit wrong then: you don't have to be country to really to be really, really imaginative. And it, maybe that's just a childhood thing. Janani, I, I'm wondering if, did you also imagine some of the statues or monuments coming to life?

Janani: I don't know that I imagined coming to life, but I definitely created little one-act plays in my head. Because I was always curious about who these people were, so I would go home and read up about them or ask my parents and my grandparents about them and then I would sort of visualize what their life would have been like, but not quite literally imagining them coming to life.

Rachel: This point about how what we imagined as kids is so informed by what's near us, right, Bert I'm thinking of you saying you imagined being in the cockpit of those planes and Janani, this example of creating sort of imagined lives for the people who are depicted in monuments around you - I'm thinking of, like, the responsibility that adults have to expose kids to things that shape what they imagine. And when I was growing up I did some reenacting, so I grew up in, you know, America is a much younger country than India, but I grew up near this town where there had been a raid in some war where Native Americans came through and, and kidnapped a bunch of, of settlers, white, white colonizers. And I would get dressed up in like early 1700s clothing and I learned how to spin wool and I just thought it was so fun! We cooked over the fire and I had this little doll made of corn husks, like, there was a lot of both concrete and abstract ideas to play with like, 'Oh what would it be like to be alive in the 1700s?' Now I feel kind of mad at the adults who didn't tell me, I feel like they didn't tell me the whole story. So I definitely remember being told stories about violence that was perpetrated by Native Americans against the white people. I do not remember being told any stories about the violence that white colonizers had perpetrated against Native Americans. And so now as an adult I look at these pictures of myself in my little 1700s clothing and I think like, you didn't know, like, you got a very incomplete and biased story from the people around you, and the things I was imagining were not depicting Native Americans with the same amount of humanity as the white settlers that I was sort of pretending to be. And so I just think it's very interesting that it sounds like, as children, we all took what was kind of around us and used our imagination to put ourselves there or make it feel more connected to us or play with it a little bit. And so it really matters what goes in because that really affects what comes out.

Bert: But I don't think your, you have to worry that much about not having all of the information as a child because it sounds like, I know at least for me, you can change those - whether you see them as core values or core thoughts - to what reality is, and I think people with strong imaginations can do that. I know I, - my cousin Pearl, who is a transplant to Ithaca from New Orleans, her home was damaged and destroyed in Katrina so she moved here, and she was in the hospital and I'd gone in our car down to get a sandwich from a local place to bring back to my wife who was sitting with cousin Pearl in the hospital. I went in, got the sandwich, came back out, and there was a woman who came up and said, "You hit my car with your back door," and I said, "No, I didn't." She was really upset and she, I said, 'OK um fine,' so, I had started to back out and that's why they stopped me, so I pulled right back where I was and I said, "I can't have hit your door because we have sliding doors in the rear." So in that moment I saw that she was upset and I should have been upset but I didn't because I was trying to imagine, well something has happened in her day that it's just, it's offset her in a wrong way so I said, 'OK let's just try to be calm through this' even though my initial internal emotional

reaction was, 'no, what are you accusing me of?' And I'm like, 'OK let's just, let that go' and so using my imagination, I can imagine what her day was going like and then, becoming more empathetic, we were able to talk through it and it calmed the situation and then I got to take off and go bring the sandwich to my wife. So you know, I think my imagination helps me to get through difficult situations both in the present and those that we'll have to deal with in the future, uh, even in this moment in time that we are where things continue to happen, I have to imagine something better.

Janani: I'm just trying to process everything I'm hearing and it's fascinating because it sounds like we get information from our environment, so the facts, but then our imagination sort of fills in the gaps for us and really helps us make sense of that information. And I was hearing you talk earlier, Rachel, about imagination maybe also helping us reframe some of those narratives. And it's interesting because I think that's, that's so essential to doing allyship work, right, or antiracist work, is that you need to be able to take the facts you have and be able to imagine an alternate explanation or an alternate reality because we all know that history is written by the people who had the power to write the books. And so I think it's really interesting, I had never thought about this, right, what is the power of imagination if you want to challenge social structures and if you want to imagine a world that isn't governed by the same rules and norms that we live in right now? I'm just sort of summarizing my thoughts and throwing out that open question.

Rachel: I think that - hierarchy is the example that comes to mind first for me, so people who hear about feminism and say, 'Oh, well feminists just want to flip the hierarchy, they just want women to have all the power' or people who hear about Black Lives Matter and they think, 'Oh, they want Black people to have all the power.'" And I think that just reflects, like, they're taking the same structure that exists now where there is a hierarchy based on gender or hierarchy based on race and, and they're not imagining a world without those things, which is what I think feminists and people in Black Lives Matter are doing, they're saying, 'No, I want to radically reimagine the world to the point where we're not having hierarchies based on these identities.' And so, I remember the first time I encountered that idea of it's not just about taking things the way they are and reshuffling it, it's about imagining new ways to be, like new ways to structure society, new ways to connect with each other, and it is, it's very, it's, I think, profound to engage in that kind of imagination and try to not take for granted aspects of society that - like hierarchy, and bring those into an imagined future, right? We can imagine something better and more equitable.

Bert: I say often when, when someone is talking about, you know, 'Why does it matter that Black lives matter?' or 'Why does it matter that children matter? Why does it matter?' Each one of us are so totally different and you never know what you may have missed with each life that was marginalized or lost. Was that little child who was hurt in a car accident, were they the ones who cured cancer? Were they the ones who walked first on the Mars? And you never know what you miss if you marginalize anyone.

Rachel: Bert, your comment about children, for example, and how we look at them and don't know what's possible is making me think about, um Janani's comment earlier about how imagination sort of fills in the gaps, and I'm thinking about how stereotypes are sort of lazy imagination, a way of filling in the gaps. And I'm thinking, your comment about children in particular made me think of Tamir Rice and how this is a child and it seems like the police officer who shot him, it was easier to imagine that child being a threat than, like, an innocent child who's playing. So what is the overlap between or what is the relationship between imagination, which is hopefully taking what we've been exposed to and reconfiguring it in new and exciting ways, and stereotypes, which are taking misinformation we've been given about the world and each other and just applying that? Like both sort of fill in the gaps, but one fills me with hope, you know, imagining what is possible for this child's life, what are the magnificent ways they're going to contribute to the world, and one fills me with sadness, sort of not seeing children as full of possibility but as, as you know, stereotypes only.

Janani: Yeah I, I really like that you phrased stereotypes as lazy imagination or, you know, the ugly side of imagination. The other thing I'm thinking about when we talk about stereotypes is the importance of representation because, you know, sometimes my imagination needs a little boost, it needs something to work with sometimes, uh. And I'm thinking about when I first started out in Graduate School in my PhD program, and I didn't think that academia was a really viable option for me because, honestly, I wasn't seeing a lot of brown women, a lot of South Asian women in the fields that I work in, and I've only ever worked in research intensive R1 universities, and I just couldn't see myself, right, imagine myself fitting into these environments. But then as I progressed through grad school two things happened: so one was that I learned that there are, there were other types of institutions besides research intensive institutions that really focused on closer student interaction on, on training students to be scientists, and on actively mentoring them, which really sounded like what I really wanted to do with my career; but then I also got on Twitter, science Twitter, and I learned that there were actually women, women of Indian origin, of South Asian origin, who look like me, who had the same accent that I did, who were in fact tenured professors in their field, and I saw them actively doing not just research but also actively speaking out against racism, against xenophobia and all of the forces that shape our society and affect our students. And that's been so huge for me to visualize myself becoming an expert in this field and in terms of imagining the possibility of all the things that I could do.

Bert: Janani is that, was it more powerful as you saw the examples of what was a possibility that they needed to look like you and be more like, like you or could you also see it with others who may, maybe were not a visual mirror of yourself?

Janani: I think seeing it in people who looked and sounded like me was the most powerful experience, but it was very validating just to hear that I didn't have to swallow my opinions and my aspirations of actively doing inclusion work and equity work in the academy if I wanted to be a professor in the academy. But, yeah, I think the issue there was that I recognize that there are specific costs borne by people who look like me in the academy, and I'm speaking of

women of color, who tend to get penalized more than white women do for speaking up about, about the same issues, for example. And so seeing people who shared identities with me continuing to do those things and yet being on successful career trajectories felt really empowering.

Bert: Yeah, I as, I, as we do think about those who can influence us, I do have a fairly wide range of 'I can be like that,' and maybe because, in my experience, I'm seeing more, um, non-Black people than Black people and I, even some of my heroes like Isaac Asimov, science fiction writer, Gene Roddenberry with Star Trek, where I don't see the world or me as black and white: I am a huge range of gray. And when I hear an idea, the idea is just an idea that comes from that person's gray matter, or see someone doing something so important, I mean in, uh, the little girl who during this pandemic is selling things to raise money for families that need food, you know, it's, I can see where those strengths I can add to my own because I - a good idea is a good idea, it doesn't matter who comes up with it. So you know, and that says a little bit more about me where I am, I'm a team-focused person, that's why I became a multimedia producer because with my little industry, you really can't function by yourself doing it, you really need a team of people to, to create; that's why you see the list of people at the end of the movie goes on forever, it's a huge team of experts in their very tiny portion of field as they create this great thing. And I like having that great thing being created in a team. So just bringing it back, it's, as a team person, I feel empowered to just ingest whatever it is I see as, as a another piece of me that it can be.

Rachel: Your comment about large groups of people working towards a common goal is reminding me of the state of the world right now where we are in the midst of this pandemic, and in some ways people are navigating it alone and then there are other ways in which it's really brought people together, whether it's working to find a vaccine or working to support people in the community who need additional sorts of support to get through this time. So how has imagination shown up for you in the midst of this pandemic?

Janani: Yeah, imagination has been personally very important for me over the last few months because I live alone, my partner lives on the other side of the country, my family lives in a different continent altogether, it's, it's been stressful, which is an understatement. Sometimes I really have to lean on my imagination to be able to get up in the mornings because I think we can all agree that time doesn't mean anything anymore so having meetings or having appointments is, is just, you know, what does that even mean?

Bert: Amen

Janani: So sometimes I, I have to give myself a little imagination boost or something to look forward to when I wake up in the morning. But you know, on a larger scale I, I'm thinking about things like increasing accessibility for students or, I know that a lot of universities have come up with virtual campus tours, right, so that students don't have to fly or drive down to campus, you can just sit in front of your laptop and explore different parts of campus. And this is very

interesting to me because I can think of two specific groups of students just with these examples who would benefit: disabled students, who have been asking for more accessibility for decades now, and international students, who, I know that when I was applying to universities and I was in India I would have really appreciated these virtual campus tours. And these are just two small examples, but I'm noticing that we're starting to do a lot of things here and there that seem like they're responses to the pandemic but really they're also addressing some of the other issues that people have been pointing out with higher education for a while now. Um, I find it interesting that these measures are being implemented and the cost is not a barrier when they're available and helpful to majority population or the privileged population versus the people who have been asking for some of these things for so long, but you know, it's happening and I'm grateful for that. And I just really, really wish that we can hang on to that and we can hang on to those thoughts of, 'how can we restructure things so that we are making things more open and more accessible to everyone?' and I really hope we don't lose that mindset after, you know, that elusive day when a vaccine is found and we're all vaccinated and able to mingle again.

Bert: Yeah. I do have an experience which I, I think both of you don't have, but that's true of almost everything...So, I am a member of Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity which was formed here at Cornell in 1906, and if it weren't for the racism that was at Cornell back then which did not allow them to join the study groups, it didn't allow them to do - to live on campus, it didn't allow them to do quite a bit, they wouldn't have formed the fraternity in the first place. So you know, and then I ended up at, in my older self, going to an HBCU which was Grambling State University, which my parents went to also and my oldest sister, but it's, it's interesting what hardship also does to strengthen what we do and how we, how we learn. So as you were talking about, we didn't see the inequality until, of access to university resources et cetera, we didn't see that really until we were in this pandemic and this situation where we needed to make it normalized for everyone to have the access that they needed.

Janani: I think the big reason for this is that what the pandemic has done is really highlight and broaden the existing inequities. I don't think Covid in itself has done something so drastically new that's making us all sit up and take notice, but it's really, what it's done is highlighted the existing inequalities which just are widening because of the dire situation and the lack of resources that we're facing as a community, right, and so a lot of us just don't have the option to look away anymore. This is one of the costs of being in a privileged position, right, not being aware of, of things that don't directly affect me and then being put in this situation right now where I'm forced to confront it because I can't look away, it's all around me, it's in the news, it's on the podcast, yeah, I just can't look away anymore.

Bert: But I don't think you're alone anymore. Well, I don't feel alone anymore - going back to my "I" statements - I don't feel alone anymore with tackling the larger problems. In this moment we have a video of George Floyd everyone saw, so we are connected electronically in ways that we never have been before. Uh if you imagine back to, imagine back to when very few people had cell phones, and those cell phones very few had video, and you definitely

couldn't connect to a network and broadcast what's going on out widely. I think it's, it's, you can't look away anymore and it requires great effort to look away and ignore. But I think for the majority of us who are - and I'll say us and the US and the world - we don't want to look away. We don't want things to go back to the way they were. Even, you know, the Black Lives Matter that has hit every country, it has become of a, a call to arms of hugging, to make it equal for everyone.

Janani: I think so far I've been viewing the pandemic as this horrible tragic event that happened to all of us, and sort of made me reevaluate the way I was doing everything quite literally, but then as I'm listening I'm realizing that the pandemic has also produced so much solidarity. For example, I found solidarity with international students because a few weeks ago there was a ruling that would have asked international students who were taking online classes only to leave the country because that was technically, we would technically be non-compliant under the terms of our student visas. And it was fascinating how quickly the community mobilized together and I think it's an ode to the power of technology that Bert was talking about, but we were able to mobilize so quickly and put together things so quickly and, you know, things are better now, but the rapidness and the ease with which we all came together and supported each other even though none of these meetings were in person is just very heartwarming. And I think it's a true testament to the power of imagination and how quickly as human, human beings we've adapted to these new circumstances.

Bert: I have so enjoyed listening to, to both of you in your journeys because it's, it's inspiring to hear that there are individual journeys but here we are on this virtually recorded podcast.

Rachel: And who could've imagined we went we would all end up here on this podcast, made by Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project. If you, listeners, imagine future episode topics that you want to share with us please do reach out by email. You can find our contact information and learn more about our program at our website [www.idp.cornell.edu](http://www.idp.cornell.edu). Thanks and bye.