

**“I” Statements podcast – Episode 14 – Curiosity  
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Rachel: This is “I” Statements, a podcast where complexity, vulnerability, and curiosity collide. In this episode we're talking about curiosity. My name is Rachel, and a word that comes to mind when I think about curiosity is “generous.”

Janani: My name is Janani, I use she/hers pronouns, and a word that comes to mind when I think about curiosity is “growth.”

Stephen: Hi, my name is Stephen, I use he/him pronouns, and a word that comes to mind when I think about curiosity is “questions.” I studied English and because of that I think a lot about sentences and for me, like, if I had to characterize curiosity as a sentence it would be an open-ended question.

Janani: So I had this friend in college who was constantly asking questions, right, and some of his questions people would just dismiss them and laugh about them because they were, like, ‘oh this is a silly question,’ like, ‘everybody knows the answer to that question,’ you know. Like, he would question why is the name of the city pronounced in a particular way and why don't we pronounce it this other way which is the way in which we write it, which is a great question but, of course, we were in college and we were like, here he is again with his questions, right. So it's just funny when I think about that because I'm realizing that there are some questions that are OK to ask and are touted as these brilliant pathbreaking questions and some questions that are not and that are either dismissed or, I don't know, devalued in some way and I wonder how much that has to do with not just the question itself but the person the question is coming from.

Stephen: So I'm thinking about people who are, who are questioning the status quo, sort of just like, ‘why is it that this is the way that things happen? why do we do things this way?’ And, yeah, I guess like, whether they brings up like discomfort or sort of just uncertainty, at least I know I've had the response of being like, oh that's just the way that things are. And then now I'm thinking like, OK those instances where I'm sort of quashing someone's curiosity, maybe that is a way in which I'm perpetuating the status quo, sort of like choosing not to question it and choosing to feel annoyed, I guess, or act on my annoyance when someone else does.

Janani: I'm just thinking about the point at which curiosity can turn into chaos, because I remember when I first moved here there was so much I didn't understand about the American university system and academia in general. And I had, I wouldn't say I was curious even though I had so many questions. I was overwhelmed with the number of questions I had and the amount of curiosity I had. Sometimes it was really, I don't know, now they seem simple: so when I first moved here I didn't realize that graduate students had offices and mailboxes or mail slots assigned to them, and no one in my program told me that was a thing, for some reason we were expected to know that and as someone coming from a different country I didn't. And I would just attend classes, go work in a library or go back home and work, and the first time I found out that students - other graduate students in my program - had access to these facilities I was very, very curious, but also had no idea where to even start asking questions, right. So I was curious about how can I get that, because that seems amazing; I would like to have an office, I would like to have a workspace, I would like to have access to a printer, all of these things sound amazing. How do I start? Who do I talk to? I'm being shunted between different coordinators and different administrators who all answer my question with different responses. So yeah, just, I think, having so many questions but

not knowing where to begin because my foundational knowledge was just so different from everybody else that I was interacting with led to that feeling of being overwhelmed.

Stephen: When we're talking, I guess, about, like, sort of the dark side of curiosity and then just that kind of ov- for me it's not as, the thing that comes to mind isn't as much overwhelming but it's sort of, it's more like when curiosity pushed me to, sort of, ask questions that are beyond the boundaries about, like, what someone would want me to know about them. And then those conversations are super uncomfortable. Like I remember one time I - I was old, I should...lots of emotions - I was like in high school and then I, like, just publicly asked during class at one point, like, one of my teachers, like, "So how much money do you actually make?" And then the room just fell silent and then I was like, oh this is not a piece of information that maybe I should have felt the right to ask, or this is also, *and* this is also not the setting, the context in which I should have asked it. And I was just like, whoa I did, I did a bad, and I don't, and I'm like, I don't quite know why at that moment.

Rachel: I think a thing that both of the stories you just shared have in common is this idea that, like, curiosity kind of needs somewhere to go and someone to be your partner in it. Like, Janani, you talked about I didn't quite know where to go to get these questions answered or, you know, the people I was going to or giving me very different answers and so they maybe weren't all effective partners in, in your curiosity, and Stephen, you talked about realizing that this was not the right context to ask this, this cur-, to indulge this curiosity I have about my teacher's salary. And so it's not I'm, I'm sitting here wondering, like, when and how I'm curious by myself and, and if that's possible or fulfilling. And, like, I'm really curious about other people and so I do ask a lot of questions and I think part of why this is fulfilling is 'cause then I know more about them, but I also haven't had to disclose a lot about myself. So I'm thinking about, like, that one-sided or one-way curiosity and how it's actually much more fulfilling and, I think, leads to deeper connections and understanding when it's reciprocated.

Janani: That's, that's a really good point and now I'm thinking about the fact that I, I think do something similar because I'm a very curious person I tend to ask a lot of questions. And I've always justified that impulse by telling myself that, oh it's sort of win-win because I'm learning so much about this other person that I'm talking to, but I'm also learning a lot about myself because I find that the sort of questions I ask help me understand a lot of times how this other person's world is different from mine and the differences in which we perceive things and feel about things. But you're right, I don't know that that's necessarily a benefit that the other person is deriving from the conversation and now I'm just wondering if I'm a curiosity vampire, just sucking information from the conversation but not contributing.

Rachel: Well we've never had merch for this podcast before but now I'm envisioning Curiosity Vampire t-shirts, maybe toothbrushes...

Janani: Amazing

Stephen: It sounds like a band.

Rachel: Nice, yes.

Stephen: I mean I also, I think, fall sometimes into this, into the situation where I'm just like asking questions to learn more about someone else. And then I'm wondering what kind of power dynamic does that set between me and the other person that I'm speaking to, because here I am sort of, like, amassing

all of this knowledge about this person's life and they might not have anything about me. I, yeah- like, I'm the vampire then.

Janani: We're all vampires.

[laughter]

Rachel: I'm really struck by a thing that you said, and I forget exactly how you phrased it, but in asking about your teacher's salary like, why did I think I had a right to know that? Like, I'm asking because I'm curious and because I would like you to tell me. I think there is something generous in that and then I think it can also put people in an uncomfortable position where they feel like they have to answer; I have been in this situation. A story from high school that haunts me to this day: a student, I think in the year above me, decided that he wanted to know the bra sizes of various female students in the school and so he would just ask. And I had heard that he'd collected all these bra sizes and so it was like, oh well other people are telling him. And I remember when he asked me I did not want to tell him my bra size, I was an adolescent girl, like not any of his business, and I definitely felt, like, social pressure - even though, like I know, I can't even remember, I don't think this was explicitly articulated - but I do remember feeling social pressure to answer this question. And I think I did. And, like, that's, that's a time when I clearly remember feeling like I had to answer a question that I did not want to answer. And I see so much power there, right, he was older than me, he was a boy I was a girl, like, this idea that other people had done it really made me feel like I should too, even though I did not want to.

Janani: Yeah. So listening to what you both are saying I'm just thinking about curiosity as this entitlement to knowledge, but at what cost? And I'm just thinking of, just, medical ethics, scientific ethics, right, where people - the most common refrain that I've heard people telling scientists is, like Jurassic Park is a classic example: just because you can do something does that mean you should?

Stephen: Yeah and that's just this right to or feeling entitled to go about seeking knowledge in a certain way. Since we're on the train of medical ethics, I mean, the history of medicine is just chock full of people in power and science - usually white men - experimenting on other people's bodies, like women's bodies, bodies of color, queer bodies, poor bodies, disabled bodies. And then, sort of, just the entitlement to exercise that curiosity in a way that is violent upon somebody else. Like, this is an extreme example - or I would like to think it's an extreme example - but maybe there is a violence to seeking knowledge, whether it's, like, sort of like breaking some kind of boundary or trespassing. And, like, there are occasions where I think that can be really valuable, um, sort of, for someone, like, for example in a student group was asking, like, 'Why is it that everybody in this group looks like each other?' Like, that's sort of, like, a kind of trespassing a social norm that feels necessary and important, but then, Rachel, in your story the social norm trespassed there about asking women about their bra sizes that seems like one that for, if I'm being, like, that shouldn't be crossed while the other one felt like, feels like it should be crossed and now I'm here, like, where is all this should-ness and should-not-ness coming from?

Rachel: Yeah

Janani: I just wanted to add on something to that which isn't exactly what you were talking about but recently I've seen a lot of instances on Twitter where white-presenting people will be in the replies and it seems like they're making a genuine effort to understand the talking points of the Black Lives Matter movement or any other sort of, you know, statement that is connected to race and society that the original tweeter might have been talking about. And I see that a lot of times the response is usually, 'go

google it,' you know, 'go read this book' or 'go read this article, don't, don't ask Black people to do the labor of satisfying your curiosity. And you don't, you shouldn't be asking them to sort of relive their trauma just so you can get your questions answered.'

Stephen: I'm surprised. well maybe I'm not actually that surprised, that we've, like, moved into thinking about, like, if there's, if there's an ethics of curiosity, like, this seems to be, sort of like, where we're sort of, we're exploring right now. And curiosity for me can be a really heartwarming experience sometimes where it, like, when sort of exercised, exercised respectfully and thoughtfully it can really form connection with other people. So like it's not like through asking questions sometimes, like, I'm curious about, like, my friends and sort of how they have, like, hobbies and passions that they dedicate themselves to, and then I'm sort of curious, like, how does this, how did this sort of just like influence the way that you sort of walk through the world and see the world? So what I would do is, I did this in grad school, is I would like do long-term curiosity experiments where I sort of like tried on my friends' hobbies. And this meant that, like, for example, like I tried playing Dungeons and Dragons for the first time because that was really important to one of my friends, I took a modern dance class - like the kind where you hold your body in uncomfortable positions, leap across the room and roll around on the floor - like, I have very little dance experience I like tried that. I tried drawing, all these different things and that was in some ways it felt lovely even though I was usually flailing, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively, because it just, it provided a, such a, another meaningful point of connection with a person that I really cared about. And it was sort of just, like, knocking on the door -because vampires can't be let in unless they knock...

[laughter]

Stephen: ...and just being like, hey it's like it seems like this is a really important part of your life and I was, and like I wanted to try it as well, and then it's like, can we make this kind of like, I guess, like in retrospect serious long-term commitment of like exploring this passion of yours together?

Rachel: That is heartwarming.

Janani: Yeah.

Rachel: A time when curiosity, like it totally it took me in a direction that I was not expecting: so, I was in the car with my dad and we had been driving all day for whatever reason, and so I asked what I thought was just a throwaway question like, hey what was, what was the name of that border collie you had when you were growing up? And he gave me the answer and then he proceeded to tell me about every dog he had when growing up and then talked about, like, the dissolution of his parents' marriage and what precipitated that. And it wound up - I learned so much more about my family by asking this one question about the name of a border collie, you know, it was fun. I learned a lot. And I don't remember that border collie's name so maybe I should ask again.

[laughter]

Stephen: For a lot of the conversation we were, we've talked a lot about sort of what it's like to be the curious person and so I'm, like, curious as - I'm curious haha - as to, sort of like, how we feel about being - when I say the object of curiosity that brings back all the questions from the curiosity ethics conversation, which, haha- but then yeah, it's like, what is it like to be on the other end of curiosity? I'm wondering if there's anything that comes to mind when I pose that question.

Janani: So I was thinking about this when we talked about our little curiosity vampire bit...

[laughter]

Janani: ...and I realized that one of the reasons I feel more comfortable asking questions rather than answering them is because I think I have this impression that there's nothing in my life to be curious about. I recognize that's not true, it's just an instance of familiarity breeds contempt: I know all about what I do from the time I wake up in the morning to the time I go to bed so it just feels like why, why would anyone be curious about my little life? So there's, yeah, that's an interesting question because it's making me think about what we consider worthy of curiosity and what we don't.

Rachel: I really like those questions that, like connecting around questions that I couldn't get the answer to by Googling. Like, Janani, you're the only person who can tell me what it's like to be you and you're the only person who can tell me, you know, what's making you feel excited this week or, you know, what you're worried about. And so the only way that I can learn that is by talking with you and, I don't know, there's something so lovely about that. And I'm wondering what's on your mind, either lingering questions or thoughts?

Janani: I have a question and a comment. The question is kind of silly.

Rachel: Great.

Janani: A couple of my friends just moved cross country with two of their cats and I'm just wondering how the cats are doing? This seems like a very stressful situation: they drove 12 hours cross-country, they're in a new home now, I just, I don't know. I have an emotional attachment to those cats, it's fine.

Rachel: It is fine.

Janani: My comment is just that, so, I was diagnosed with depression a couple months ago and I started taking medication for it. And I'm realizing how much my capacity for curiosity was diminished when I was depressed, just lack of interest and my usual curiosity about the world around me. And it's one of those things that, you know, I only started noticing after things started to change. You know how you notice the absence of some things after they stop being absent? And so yeah, I find myself so grateful for my curiosity, really, at this moment because as a scientist, but also just as a person, I've just always been the kid who had a lot of questions and who would stay behind that after class and annoy her teacher with her endless questions, and I'm just so grateful that this medication that I'm taking has helped me get to the point where I can regain that part of my personality. It's just been so great.

Rachel: Yeah it sounds like your curiosity is a real, not only core part of how you understand yourself, but how you interact with the world and having this diagnosis and medication is helping you, yeah, reconnect with that, that part of yourself. And whether it means asking questions about your scientific endeavors or your friends' cats who recently moved, yeah, it's easy for me to understand the gratitude you expressed for feeling like you have that curiosity back.

Stephen: Can I ask one more hopefully quick question?

Rachel: Yeah.

Stephen: Do you think the opposite of curiosity is apathy or is it resistance?

Rachel: Stephen, can we make this an open-ended question of “what is the opposite of curiosity?”

Stephen: Oh yeah, I like that better.

Rachel: I only say that 'cause earlier you said that curiosity is an open-ended question, so. What is the opposite of curiosity? I think certainty. Like, I think feeling like I know something, so whether that's my estimation of another person or an idea, and I stop wondering about it because I think - because I feel certain that I already know.

Janani: I like that.

Rachel: What were you thinking before I said certainty?

Janani: I was still grappling with apathy versus resistance and I couldn't find a good answer, but I like certainty.

Rachel: Stephen, what do you think?

Stephen: I think I might go with boredom. I guess for me curiosity is something that feels like such a motivating factor to sort of, to push myself in a certain direction, and when I'm bored, I think when I'm bored, too, I'm making the assumption that there's nothing to learn in a given situation. And then that's also, like, not going to make me curious.

Rachel: Well this is a situation where I have certainly learned a lot. I'm grateful to you both for sharing some of the things that you're curious about and some of your experiences with curiosity or thoughts about curiosity on this episode of “I” Statements, a podcast from Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project. This podcast is edited and produced by me, our cover art is by Bryan Garner, and our music is written and performed by Evan Wilhelms. Listeners, I would love to know what you're curious about so if you have questions, if you have thoughts, if you have feelings I would love to hear from you. You can send us an email, our email address and other information about our program is available at our website [www.idp.cornell.edu](http://www.idp.cornell.edu), thanks and bye.

[music]

Janani: What about toast? Someone saw a baked good and then they decided to slice it and cook it again?