

"I" Statements podcast – Episode 15 – Vulnerability
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Rachel: This is "I" Statements, a podcast where complexity, vulnerability, and curiosity collide. In this episode we're talking about vulnerability. My name is Rachel, I use she/her pronouns, and a word that comes to mind when I think about vulnerability is "precious."

Chelle: Hi, I'm Chelle, I use she/her/hers pronouns, and for me a word that comes to mind is "courage."

Jeff: Hi there, I'm Jeff, I use they/them pronouns, and a word that comes to mind when I think about vulnerability is "empathy." So basically I come from a role as an educator, I've worked in housing or housing-type settings I guess for about like seven or eight years now, and part of my role there is to support students. And so I think of times when we're connecting maybe for the first time and also that connection - there might have been something that's, that's just happened that's bringing them to meet with me, so maybe, you know, some sort of crisis or a conflict that someone is dealing with - and so it's a really vulnerable space. And so I think of opening spaces to be vulnerable in the moment, it's really hard if you've never met that person before so I spend most of the time that I'm talking with someone actually talking about, learning more about them, maybe what they're studying, what they're passionate about, things they're involved in. And I think kind of listening, asking questions, connecting really to the feelings that someone's sharing, also inviting some of the feelings that are coming up for me. To build that trust and to allow that vulnerability, I need to share how I'm feeling kind of in response to maybe something that's happened that affects both of us sitting there or just ways that I can, again, go back, going back to empathy, can empathize with the situation that's just occurred that's sort of bringing someone to meet with me in the first place.

Rachel: Yeah.

Chelle: I actually resonated with a lot of the themes of what Jeff was saying about allowing yourself room to be vulnerable and modeling that so that you can kind of get that in return. 'Cause when I was thinking about that I thought about how, for me, I feel like a lot of times the greatest like barrier or like pathway for me to be vulnerable is in some sense the environment and the situations I'm in. But ultimately I feel like sometimes an even bigger barrier to being vulnerable is myself in some senses; just kind of me second guessing myself and second guessing what I'm opening up about, second guessing if me sharing something is a significant contribution, if it will actually like further a connection or just end in no connection or divide. So I feel like in a lot of ways I kind of internalize my own fears about being vulnerable and what the outcomes can be and once I sort of get in my head about that it kind of just becomes a cycle of, 'I don't know if I want to open up because what if XYZ?' but then it's like, what could be the rewards, like what could happen if I opened up and shared how I was feeling with somebody about things that bother me? Things that excite me? Things that make me

passionate? What if I just kind of let go that fear of judgment or even just not getting that vulnerability in return, like to let go of my fear in those moments and just be vulnerable and be present and just kind of stop worrying about like the 'what if it goes wrong?' because there's also a sense of 'what if it goes right?'

So I feel like growing up with parents that are from Ghana, they're from West Africa, in that environment, in that setting that they grew up in it was very common to show more restraint in being vulnerable about certain things to anybody who wasn't immediate family. Just like that sense of being wary of like opening up to the wrong people and having that turned against you, or like people like knowing the family business and having that be too much, or like a sense of privacy and just the sense of like inner emotions and like personal feelings going on and those things just being things that should be kept to yourself and family. Just kind of having that stigma of like being strong, I feel like is something that I've taken from like growing up in that setting just because that was so intrinsic to the culture there and to the culture that was brought into my household of being strong and kind of having, putting up that emotional barrier and being able to like face the world head on and kind of just pull those emotions back and let those be at the background and not necessarily open up so much about those things. Like I think that's taught me to be purposeful in what I share in certain settings and how those dynamics can be used when you share certain things and the risks of that, but I also unlearned in the sense of like seeing the rewards and being vulnerable about certain things and opening up more in certain relationships so I feel like that's something that's intrinsic to me just because of the way I was raised and then also just even in my own life being a Black woman, I feel like there's a stigma there's been a stigma around my life of being strong and kind of just holding everything in, just holding everything down and just kind of not allowing your emotions to come forth and so that you're not seen as weak. Those are messages that I've internalized that are kind of tied to my social identities and how I was raised so that kind of just changes my relationship with vulnerability and sharing.

Jeff: Yeah so going, going off of that piece around second guessing or like mental gymnastics, for me a lot of that I think comes up in some of the work settings I guess that I talked about earlier: there's a, a weird tension for me of being in a position of authority and trying to create a relationship that, that like pushes out that sort of dichotomy of being an authority figure or, or whatever that looks like sort of in a moment where I'm just there too be in this connection of support. And so really going back to that that sense of trust and that sense of connection is kind of how I push aside some of those feelings of shame or embarrassment or self-doubt, allow myself to open a little bit more and really connect across to someone else.

Rachel: You both have mentioned - Chelle, you explicitly mentioned your identity as a Black woman and Jeff, you were talking about this being in a position of authority or power in some of these situations, and so I'm wondering how your experience of your social identities is related to the way you experience vulnerability?

Chelle: I think for me the biggest message I've got about my social identities like surrounding vulnerability is just like kind of in some situations just not having the room to be human and

show my emotions. Like I've been in settings where I - because I was either the only Black person, the only woman, or both - I've been in meetings with others where I've spoken up about certain issues that I'm passionate about or certain things that I feel like need to be changed and I've been written off as an angry Black woman. Like so for that stereotype of being loud, being rowdy, feeling like I'm being told that I'm being too loud or I'm taking too much space up whenever I say anything or whenever I react to everything or weather like I *emote*, in a sense, being told that that is inherently intrusive or disruptive to an environment or being made to feel like I'm being angry, I'm overreacting, anytime I share any sense of emotion. Having my identities and having the stereotypes around my identities being casted into a caricature has been like a barrier to me to be vulnerable and that's something that I'm trying to unlearn everyday, like trying to unlearn the fear of being vulnerable and speaking up and being casted into the stereotypes and allowing myself to just be, in a sense, just allowing myself the room to be in spite of all those stereotypes that often get casted upon me.

Rachel: Yeah it sounds like, you know, when I think about being vulnerable it's like trying to let the world see something true about me. And, and Chelle the way you just described that it sounds like in your experience is trying to be vulnerable you're not seen as yourself, you're seeing as this - like you said - a caricature of an angry Black woman. Other things also, other feelings have also gotten twisted to fit that stereotype and not actually fit how you've shown up in a vulnerable and honest way.

Jeff: Also yeah, also relating into Chelle what you mentioned about unlearning, unlearning like assumptions around vulnerability has been such a core sort of space in, in where it comes up for me and in connection to identities too. Identifying as queer white person who doesn't also identify as any, any particular gender depending on the day, there is like an interesting like tension I think between some of those. So for me when I think about my whiteness and ways that essentially that I've had difficulty connecting with what feelings that I'm actually feeling, I think I've been taught over time, both as someone who's perceived as a man but also as a white man, to completely disconnect with my feelings and so there's a huge wall there I think with breaking through that wall in order to be vulnerable. Also going back to some of the things that we talked about earlier about like second guessing myself, and again like I mentioned before waiting for that right thing to say, I think back to this was - this sort of like dynamic and this thought process was really kind of core to my graduate school experience since a lot of our class work focused a lot about identity. And like specific moments of time when I'm, I'm sitting next to my best friend at the time and there's some problematic stuff going on in that class and I can see her like struggling of what to say as a queer woman of color and saying something and me just sitting there in total silence wanting to say something and trying to figure out what to say and then you know talking after like, 'why like why didn't you do anything?' In that situation my lack of vulnerability was, was so damaging that now doing the work to show up really, really focusing on how I can escape some of those feelings of shame or perfectionism and really allow myself to be vulnerable. So I think that a lot there's a lot about how I've tried to unpack kind of some of my white identities and then the whole like gender question really complicates that even further of like, you know, being told my whole life

like 'boys don't cry' and just other various versions of that, and then like internally being like, 'well I don't know if I actually identify that way but I'm not actually going to like really discover that until like my late 20s' I think has been a lot of the practice as well to like, I think, really own my vulnerability and not have someone put it in a small little box that I'm not allowed to open. Yeah.

Rachel: Yeah I just, I'm thinking back to the fact that Chelle's word at the beginning was "courage" and it sounds like you know your example about being in the class and not, not saying anything feels like, you know, it takes courage to be vulnerable in that moment and put yourself out there and support your friend or question things that are happening in the class and then also question these, these big ideas about gender and who gets to be vulnerable or who gets to have feelings and who gets to be what gender and what that means. Yeah I'm just, I'm just thinking back to courage in both of those.

Chelle: And I also really, Jeff, the lens that you went into with kind of talking about vulnerability in the sense of having, in terms of your identities which may give you access and then also identities which don't afford you as much access. I thought that was a really interesting interesting lens to go on in terms of that conversation and how different sides of it perpetuate different messages but there's so much overlap in them.

Rachel: Yeah and like Chelle pointed out, you reflected on experiences of sort of having an identity that gives you relatively more access and one that gives you less and it was hard to be vulnerable with both. It's not that one made it easier to be vulnerable, and what I'm thinking about now is how scripts or stereotypes that we're given about identities, ways that were socialized into these, like does that socialization or the these ideas about who we should be and how we should be always interfere with our ability to be vulnerable and connect to our authentic selves? Or like what are the ways in which socialization makes it easier to be vulnerable? Some of these identities we've talked about are pretty static overtime and others, other social identities, like the one I'm thinking of is age, like really change over time. And, and you know when I think back on myself as a child it's like, oh my God I was *only* vulnerable. I, I needed other people and didn't have a lot of control over my life or, or for a long time you know any control of my life like when I was a baby, right? And this idea that like I didn't have a choice about being vulnerable, that's just the position I was in, and now as an adult it is a choice to be vulnerable, and so what do I do with that? Like it means something for me to feel like I want to be vulnerable with another person, right it means that I feel safe or that I feel like I have control over what I'm sharing or I'm anticipating that if I am vulnerable it is going to lead to more trust or a stronger connection and not ruin the relationship. This experience of vulnerability has really changed throughout my life and what does it mean to be in a society where some people just are vulnerable by virtue of their social identity of age?

Jeff: Thinking about the connection between power and vulnerability: when I was in grad school is when Dr. Brené Brown's TED talk called "The Power of Vulnerability" came out and it was super popular. But at the time I just remember being this maybe hypercritical grad student

and listening to it and, and really kind of echoing back a lot to what Chelle, you were mentioning earlier, of like who has the power to show up and be vulnerable in a space? Like I think that that whole, that the whole talk that I'm referring to kind of centers around by being vulnerable kind of - the way I perceived it is gives you some social capital. And reflecting on that it looks really different if I show up with my visible identities and share vulnerability in ways that builds social capital in that space and the ability that I have to enter into that and do that looks very different from someone who might not look like me. That's where like all these, these conversations around identity and power and vulnerability kind of really intersect with me of the question of who has the power to be vulnerable, but then also who can empower themselves or who can be empowered through vulnerability? So going back to that control piece or that choice piece is so like I think central in this, in answering this question of ways that vulnerability can be weaponized as power or ways that vulnerability can be weaponized to take power away from folks. And that's really why for me going back to that first word in the beginning, that empathy piece is so important because I feel like that's like the vehicle that I need to use to really sort of find that patience within myself where it comes from that authentic connection and not kind of that maybe sort of performative power.

Rachel: Yeah it's, it's clear to me that for a lot of reasons - some of which are explicitly linked to social identities some of which are sort of more tacitly linked - that the three of us have very different experiences with vulnerability. And what I want to ask is you know when was the last time you were vulnerable? And I feel weird asking this because it does feel like a question that puts you on the spot a little bit and so I want to explicitly say you do not have to answer this question or you can answer this question in whatever way you want to. For me it was, in my work sometimes we tell candid stories reflecting on our experiences with things like privilege and oppression, so a couple weeks ago I was going to talk about my experiences with socioeconomic status and whiteness and these were all things I'd shared before and feel pretty comfortable sharing. And I went off script a little bit and shared something that feels less solidified in my mind, it's a thing that I'm sort of actively processing now and, and it's really personal: it was about my, the way that I feel about each of my parents and you know how that also connects to social identities. And I did, I felt really vulnerable. But you know I made the choice to share it in that moment and it really landed with people, I think. Those who were in the group and heard me share that commented later on how that was the part they kind of remembered the most from what I shared and so that for me was the last time that I felt vulnerable.

Jeff: I love this question. For me it was about like 15 minutes ago... [laughter]

Jeff: ...during this recording. Yeah, no for me I think coming, coming here and just talking about this topic in a really public way I mean even though it's just the three of us right now knowing that like other people will, will hopefully be listening to it at some point.

Rachel: Yeah

Jeff: You know for me talking about my gender identity is something that I openly talk to with like people who are in a room with me at, at that point in time or put in and in some ways as my pronouns in my email signature or my zoom name but never in a space as public as this. So that, that very most vulnerable recent moment was, yeah, about 15 - 20 minutes ago.

Chelle: I would say probably the last time I was vulnerable was when I was talking to someone that I hadn't seen or spoken to in a long time, probably not in the last two years. When the last time we spoke, we didn't end off our friendship on the best of terms and so coming back into that relationship after all that had happened was definitely a weird state that I was nervous about but then over time as we got to talk more about what happened between us and where we are now it felt good to be vulnerable in that moment even though I was scared to at first, just because it was an important moment for me where I confronted my own biases about this person and what happened and allowed them the room to confront their biases about me and just kind of admitting that we both had a lot of room to grow in that moment. Like the last time we had even been friends or interacted was when we were both 18 and I'm now soon to be 21, so in that time just having an evolution of acknowledging where I was at 18 and how I've grown as a person. Just thinking about being vulnerable, about things that went wrong in the relationship that wasn't necessarily in our control but like, more so, thinking about the things that went wrong that we each played a role in, just that kind of acknowledging the role we each played in the demise of that relationship and where to go from there was probably one of the most rewarding interactions I've had in the sense of allowing myself to be vulnerable and be uncomfortable and then having that become something productive and something where I get to reflect back and say, 'I'm, in a lot of ways I'm in a different mindset and a level of maturity than I was when I just became an adult versus now.' So that was definitely a time where I'm glad I was wonderful even though I was hesitant at first.

Rachel: I like any reminder that feelings are not discrete and they can coexist and evolve like that. We've talked about a lot of feelings, a lot of ideas, we're getting towards the end of the conversation about vulnerability and I'm wondering: What is on your mind? What is in your heart? What's sticking with you?

Jeff: What I'm feeling sort of in my heart and in my body is that, that still lingering feeling of nervousness and like hesitancy to share openly during this time. And feeling the release from doing that and like, like you just mentioned of that reminder of the really good possible outcomes of being vulnerable. So it's like feeling, feeling really open and relaxed with like still that tinge of like nervousness. Yeah.

Chelle: Yeah it's- yeah I resonate with that. Allowing different perspectives the room to be vulnerable with one another and listen to each other openly. I think vulnerability is definitely a form of connection that I've seen as more needed in my life especially thinking about current events.

Rachel: Well I have certainly felt more connected to the two of you in this conversation. I really appreciate the way that you have brought this kindness for each other and for yourselves and yeah, been really vulnerable. I want to thank you both for being on this episode of "I" Statements, a podcast made by Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project. It is produced and edited by me, our cover art is by Bryan Garner, our music is written and performed by Evan Wilhelms. If you want to reach out to us we would love to hear your ideas for future episode topics or the thoughts or feelings that were stirred up for you in listening to this episode. You can find our email address and other information about our program at our website www.idp.cornell.edu, thanks and bye.