

"I" Statements podcast – Episode 18 – Love
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Rachel: This is "I" Statements, a podcast where complexity, vulnerability, and curiosity collide. In this episode we're talking about love. My name is Rachel, and a word that comes to mind for me when I think about love is "active."

Jazlin: Hello, my name is Jazlin, I use she/her pronouns, and a word that comes to mind when I think about love is "generous."

Jeannie: Hi, my name is Jeannie, I use she/her/hers pronouns, and a word that comes to mind when I think about love is "uncomfortable." So, Diane Ackerman in, I think, I wanna say it's the *Natural History of Love* - although I'm taking this as it was quoted in bell hooks' *All About Love* so I haven't actually read the *Natural History of Love* but - Ackerman had this quote that really spoke to me, she said, "as a society we are embarrassed by love. We treat it as if it were an obscenity. We reluctantly admit to it. Even saying the word makes us stumble and blush...Love is the most important thing in our lives, a passion for which we would fight or die, and yet we're reluctant to linger over its names. Without a supple vocabulary, we can't even talk or think about it directly." And this quote, I think especially that line about "we treat it as if it were an obscenity," was something that really stood out to me when I first read it. I think I'm still puzzling out exactly why it speaks to me so much. I think it's uncomfortable to, like, look this very human thing in the face, too. I think it's also that I want to love and to be loved, I want it so badly. And there is love for myself and there's stuff that I can do on my own that is about love, but also a lot of love requires other people and it requires other people to sort of participate too, and so I think to sort of give myself over to this idea that I want to love and be loved also means that I have to accept the fact that I can't just do things alone in this world and that I need other people and that's kind of hard. I don't know if I grew up with that message, so I think that's why it's uncomfortable for me.

Rachel: Jeannie, I'm struck by the fact that you brought up bell hooks' *All About Love* 'cause that is, I feel like, the number one source of my learning about love, which is interesting that, like, what comes to mind for me is a book and not my own experiences. But I think some of the way she talks about how, like, we get taught that love is a feeling and she kind of talks about it as things that you do, which is why for me "active" was the word that came to mind when I thought about love. I don't recall anyone ever explicitly sitting me down and being like, 'This is how you love,' right, I

think of people in my life have shown me what love means for them by the way they treat me. And so I'm curious what comes to mind for you when you think about how you've learned about love?

Jazlin: It's funny when you were saying that you don't remember someone ever sitting you down and saying, 'this is what love is,' I grew up in a Christian, non-denominational but pretty Evangelical household, and this was, like, a regular thing to say, 'This is what love is, it is God's love, here's the definition, and you're, like, lucky to receive it.' But then also so many of these messages about what it means to love as a woman and it's very selfless and I have to, you know, the biggest shows of love are how completely deprived the women around me were in how much they were caring for us. You know, like, that my mom loved us a lot because she didn't sleep and she was working so much and trying to spend time with us or things like that. And I think that was tied up in, in the religious thing too, is the biggest love ever is this huge sacrifice. And so, you know, messages that I now, you know, can understand where they were coming from but really, really push against in my own life. Seeing that to love doesn't mean that I don't have to exist, in fact, I can love much more fully when I'm taken care of and when, when I'm acknowledging where I'm coming from and my own experiences and not, and that, that isn't self-centered to say, 'here are my boundaries, here's what I need,'" and that there can be care and generosity from that place too without - I want to say, like, devastating is the word that comes to mind. 'Cause I just see what, like, especially the women around me - and again rooted and this religious belief - who completely dismissed themselves in every single way for this idea of love as trying to fulfill their expectations. So I don't want to do that.

Rachel: Yeah, yeah.

Jeannie: I'm thinking about, Jazlin, what you said about this idea of who is worthy of love, and it reminds me a lot about Sonya Renee Taylor's book, *The Body is Not an Apology* and, specifically, my own experience of these messages I internalized about who was worth loving. Thinking about my queer identity, I don't think the queerness itself was so scary; I was really scared about not being queer the right way, and how what I saw as the sort of worthy queer person was really the only representation of queerness that I saw, which was this, like, cis, white, thin, sort of androgynous queerness. And that didn't, like, fit my experience very much and I felt like my queerness wasn't right. And then spending so much time where I got to hear about the lives of people who are different from me, and over and over again with all these different people I was able to connect a piece of myself to them, and I came to this understanding that there were all of these ways of being different and that it was OK, it

wasn't something I needed to be afraid of. And so when I was able to understand that for other people I was also able to sort of understand that for myself and understand that, you know, it's OK if I am not stick-thin, that is not the only way of being an Asian American woman; it is OK if I am, you know, if it's OK if I have ADHD, like, that's not the - being neurotypical isn't the only way of being a student or just having a good brain or whatever it is, right, whatever that means; and that there are all these ways of being queer and that my way is also OK too. So radical love, for me, is about, it's not just, like, loving myself and, like, treating myself and doing all of these things and, like, boosting my self-confidence, it's understanding that I was worth loving all along and that I was taught how not to do it and in learning how not to love myself I also learned how not to love other people, right, because if I can be queer the wrong way then other people are queer the wrong way too. It's not, it's not ever just about me, it's understanding that I am a cultural being who is, like, woven into this world with other people (which really challenges the whole rugged individualism thing that, that western culture is so fond of). And so that has been huge for me, this radical love, this understanding that when I think about myself as wrong in some ways I'm also thinking about other people as wrong in other ways too. And I'm thinking about, I used to be really uncomfortable with men who dressed more femininely, and not in like a conscious way where I would ever say anything, it was this, like, internal thing that made me uncomfortable. And I knew that it didn't align with my values and I knew that this feeling it didn't make me feel good, I was like, why, why do I feel this way? And then as the years went by and I started learning more about gender and I started just talking to other people who express their gender in different ways and I also started just letting myself express my gender in the sort of way that I wanted to - sometimes it's more feminine, sometimes it's more masculine, sometimes, right, it's whatever in between or outside - and all of that is sort of this related process of unlearning that there is sort of one way to present, present your gender. And now I don't have those, like, weird feelings about, you know, men who dress more feminine and I don't have weird feelings about me and how I dress. By and large, it is this process of unlearning. And so that's, that's radical love for me.

Jazlin: This, this concept of self-love, this is the part that makes me uncomfortable. I was so excited to talk about love today and was like, 'oh we're going to talk about, like, how we spread love in the world and it's going to be great, and maybe we'll talk about our relationships,' but as soon as Jeannie, you started bringing up self-love I'm like, 'oh, I shouldn't have signed up for this topic, I don't wanna do this anymore.' And I think, yeah, I'm thinking of the times in my life when I have been least loving to other people, least generous, or least curious about understanding where other people are coming from or trying to see their true selves, and it's been the times that I've like,

hated myself the most, you know, and been, like, so absorbed in my own problems that it's been hardest for me to connect or to be loving to other people. So I guess the inverse must be true, right, yeah. I've seen that in myself, like the times where I do feel most at peace with myself and most kind to myself, I think I've been able to be most open for others.

Rachel: This is not exclusively related to understanding oneself, but you both have kind of talked about curiosity and generosity, both towards trying to understand yourselves and trying to understand others. And because this is apparently the bell hooks fan club podcast, it's making me think about another quote from her book *All About Love* where she says, "Being aware enables us to critically examine our actions to see what is needed so that we can give care, be responsible, show respect, and indicate a willingness to learn. Understanding knowledge as an essential element of love is vital because we are daily bombarded with messages that tell us love is about mystery, about that which cannot be known." What are your thoughts or feelings about this connection between love and mystery?

Jazlin: The very first thing that came to my mind was the show *Love is Blind*

Jeannie: Oh God

[laughter]

Jazlin: OK we don't have to go there too much but this whole, like, "the less you know about someone the truer or more authentic the love is" or this, like, yeah, kind of, I've had this conversation so many times with people in my family who I know will say things like, 'Oh well I don't, I don't see color, and I, I just, I love people,' you know. And, I think, really coming from a place of wanting to have these equal values or connect with people, but seeing this version of love as not understanding difference rather than "let me deeply see and appreciate everything that you've been through." And I think of meeting a stranger: I feel like I still have the choice to be loving to other people, you know what I mean, even if I know nothing about them. I notice how different it is when I like, like you said earlier, Rachel, make that active choice to, 'I'm going to see you as a whole complex person who has a lot going on' even if, you know, maybe this one moment that I'm interacting with someone doesn't leave me with the best impression, right, making the choice to to care anyway.

Jeannie: Thinking about, like, momentary loving acts, I'm thinking about the peer counseling work that I have done and a lot of what we talk about is how when you are

sitting there and listening to someone, how you treat them with respect and empathy and you hold them in high esteem, right: this isn't a person for you to fix, this isn't a person who you are going to give answers to, this is just a person who is here, who you're going to listen to, you know, and makes some space for. And how each one of those times sitting across from people and sort of listening to them, for me those were also acts of love. And those are also the shortest relationship - these are people whose names I don't learn who walk out of that room and who I never see again. And, and so I think it's been very important in my life to have those moments of love and then also have my decades long, well two decades long relationship, like, with my parents and almost two decades long relationship with some of my friends. Yeah, it is, like, love in all of these different forms. I also think love being so boxed into this sort of one definition of love as this, like, I thought of it as just this very interpersonal thing and I didn't understand how it could be the source of this great sort of structural change. I thought it was, like, kind of mushy. Um, and then, I think, over time I learned that that's not the case; love is this very rigorous thing. Again, this idea of love as actions like, it is something you're constantly working at. But something that I think has helped me really in this final semester here at Cornell as I sort of get ready to wrap up my time here and go out into the world is to understand how love has been, sort of, put into action throughout history and how love has actually been very much a part of how people have tried to make change in this world. And love was never taught to me and it was especially never talked to me in History, and it's been really interesting these past couple months taking, like, an Asian American History class also, understanding how this idea of, like, worth and resisting your dehumanization is this act of love, and it's this thing that people have been working on for so long, like it's not just me suddenly thinking these thoughts. To co-opt this corner of the podcast I'm going to bring in another quote, which is from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "where do we go from here" speech: "you may ascend to the heights of academic achievement so that you have all knowledge; and you may boast of your great institutions of learning and the boundless extent of your degrees; but if you have not love, all of these mean absolutely nothing." And I think about, as I leave Cornell, as all of my peers leave Cornell, what have we all learned about love and what have we all learned about our responsibility to act in love to ourselves, to one another, to our non-human others, to this planet? I'm a little bit afraid of that answer. I don't know. I think I have learned a lot and I feel very lucky that I have learned a lot, but it's certainly not a degree requirement.

Rachel: Jeannie, what are some of the things you've learned about love in your time in college?

Jeannie: I've learned how to love. I still haven't learned how to be in a relationship romantically, but that's OK, I'm sure there's time for that. But I have learned to be curious with the things that I don't understand and the stories that I don't understand. I think what you were talking about earlier, this mystery and love, like, who does it serve when we are taught that love is actually not knowing one another? I don't think that's going to do anything for our relationships, also for our collective liberation. This is where I see my responsibility is to the collective liberation, and that is going to demand love for myself and for others. So I think I learned that love is worth learning more about at the very least, 'cause I think I've got one week left in classes, and there's still so much I don't know, so at the very least there's more to learn about love.

Jazlin: I'm thinking about this responsibility, like what is my responsibility to love others or, Jeannie, you're talking about collective liberation which is, you know, on this huge scale but also I think can be so local, right, when we're talking about like finding this self-worth and acceptance. And I think of my responsibility to love students, that should be something that I'm striving for – in, in the definition of love as, like, seeking to deeply understand and know somebody else, right, and, and extending care towards them. I think of the mentors and teachers and family members and so many people who've extended that to me - and students, so many students - and how, how much more I was able to learn when that happened, not just about love or about myself, right, but also about whatever content we were talking about, how much more open and curious I was. So I, that is where I see my immediate responsibility.

Rachel: Not trying to put you on the spot, but I do notice in your answer you talked about your responsibility to love other people and again not yourself.

[laughter]

Jazlin: Everybody has been bringing in beautiful scholars, I would like to bring in a quote. It is from the noted gender and sexuality scholar RuPaul Charles: "If you can't love yourself, how in the hell are you going to love somebody else, right? Can I get an Amen up in here?" Huge RuPaul fan. But very genuinely, this is such a profound statement. If we can't extend that curiosity - if I can't extend that curiosity, understanding, care, compassion towards myself, how can I possibly do it for others? It is something I am working on and will probably always be working on. It's easiest for me to do this work when I'm around people who have little things that I can learn from, who are kind and accepting of themselves. I had never heard a woman talk positively about her body until I came to Cornell and the first time I did it was this larger, very tall woman who, like, put her, like, leg up on a table and was just like,

"Damn, my calves look really good today." And I was blown away, I was, like, 'this is the most revolutionary thing that I think I've ever heard in my life!' And genuinely it was a turning point. (If you're listening, thank you very much for that moment.) But, you know, these, these like, moments that I can learn from people, or people who can support me in this process so that it doesn't feel like I'm, I don't, I don't know if it's possible even to like be all alone doing this journey of learning to love yourself and others; it's definitely not possible for me.

Jeannie: I'm particularly touched by, Jazlin, talking about this as, like, this revolutionary thing that you heard. And, again, this is me on my, maybe my last high of undergrad thinking about huge things as some sort of way to make peace with this, but thinking about, like, liberation and revolution and what do those words actually mean? And so I'm bringing yet another quote into this, the love quote podcast - which, also, meta-level: why in the love episode are we bringing the most scholars? are we just uncomfortable with our own experiences? - and still they're good thoughts so I'm going to bring them in. But in Grace Lee Boggs' autobiography *Living for Change* she talks about the difference between a rebellion and a revolution and how rebellions are important, they are the things that teach us that something is wrong in this society. She says, "a rebellion disrupts the society but it does not provide what is necessary to make a revolution and establish, establish a new social order," and she goes on to talk about how revolution is about more than struggle, it's about making this leap in how we understand ourselves as people and changing ourselves so that we may change the world, and sort of casting off those things that we are told about who is worthy of love. And Jazlin, this moment of you, like, saying this was revolutionary of, right, like casting aside this idea of what kind of bodies we are allowed to love. And so I think that's, again, why talking about radical love and talking about loving ourselves in all of this is part of this bigger conversation of social change and this bigger conversation of collective liberation, 'cause it is also about ourselves in our own bodies and how we think about our own calves and our own brains.

Rachel: Yeah, Jeannie, like you said, bringing in our own experiences and feelings, bringing in our whole selves to conversations like this are important. And it's making me think of your comment about why have we brought in so many quotes and perspectives from other people in this episode about love, and I think you said "is it because we're uncomfortable?" And when you raised that question two things came to mind for me: so one is, as I said, bell hooks' *All About Love* is the first thing that comes to mind for me when I think about profound changes to the way I've thought about and experienced love. Her words feel so important to me that wanting to share them directly and the impact that they've had on me feels like an authentic way for me to

engage in this conversation. And a kind of safe way for me to engage in this conversation - I really, I am reluctant to share publicly ways in which I have felt unloved by people in my life or vulnerable in loving others, like, that just feels like too much. Jazlin mentioned boundaries earlier as an important feature of love and so, for me, I think this is an act of loving myself, is respecting what I feel like I'm willing to share with others in this particular format.

Jeannie: Yeah, I mean, I think what you say resonates. I'm also thinking about, as much as I have come to this place of being full of love for myself and others, I am still in the process of unlearning as I think I will be for the rest of my life, and I am still, I think, very much trying to prove myself. The Grace Lee Boggs quote, at least, I think is definitely tied to that, like, 'look, like, look, I know what I'm talking about,' which I do. And which, the sources are also, like, important for, I think, it is important to remember the people who have done this work in the past. I was really heartened doing all of this reading knowing that, like, OK I'm not the only one who thinks love is important, I'm not the only one who said maybe we ought to talk about this. And so that is really important, but so are our lived experiences and I think it definitely feels safer to sort of bring in this book, and maybe not just as a way to take space away from lived experiences but also to say, like, 'hey look I have the credentials to talk about love'. Which is like, I don't know, if you've experienced love in your life I feel like that's a credential enough to at least share about your own lived experience. But I'm thinking about my, my use of the word "rigorous" also, and how that's such an academic word and I think that's another fear of mine, too, of like not wanting to be dismissed as too young or too naive or too emotional or thinking only with my heart in saying all of this. Because I am so, I so fiercely believe in the importance of love and I think I am very afraid of putting this idea out there because I'm still just learning how to put my thoughts out there and I'm still just learning how to talk to others about what I think is important. So that's my safety blanket.

Jazlin: As you both were talking I was thinking about the things that I had thought were going to come up in this conversation, didn't talk about any of them, right. But something that didn't even, that, like I was not going to surface was the very stable, loving marriage that I have or my relationship with Bryan, right. And I was just like, I was like, 'yeah no one wants to hear about this, it's kind of boring, you know, we, we care and support and love each other and we have for 10 years and yeah that's it. Why would I talk about that in a podcast about love, you know?'

[laughter]

Jazlin: And it's making me think about what do I think other people think is interesting, right, or what expectations do I think others have about love? Do I show up in a way to try to fulfill these or to resist the idea that it's just a romantic notion, so I'm not, I'm not going to talk about that even though that's the most significant personal relationship in my life? Or do I not talk about, like, the specific family relationships and experiences with love that's both really positive and sometimes really destructive? I think I also did the - even though I didn't have great quotes lined up ready to throw in - I think I did my own mode of engaging in particular ways.

Rachel: I am grateful for the way that we've all engaged in this conversation. I think I'm gonna cry, Jeannie, because you're leaving. You are you're a student who's been very easy to love.

Jazlin: I echo this. So much love for you, Jeannie.

Jeannie: Thank you, so much love for you both.

Rachel: I'm grateful for that. And, yeah, thank you, thank you both for being part of "I" Statements, a podcast from Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project. Our cover art is by Bryan Garner, Jazlin's husband who we didn't talk about at all. [laughter] Our music is written and performed by Evan Wilhelms. We would love to hear from you listeners, **give** ideas for future episode topics or you want to share with us, what you think about love, whatever quotes feel most relevant to you when it comes to the topic of love. You can find our email address if you want to reach out and also learn more about our program at our website, www.idp.cornell.edu - thanks and bye.

Jeannie: Thanks and bye

Jazlin: Thanks and bye

[music]

Jazlin: Thanks, RuPaul.