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Rachel: This is "I" Statements, a podcast where complexity, vulnerability, and curiosity collide. In this episode, we're talking about joy. My name is Rachel Sumner, I work at Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project and a word that comes to mind for me when I think about joy is "unpredictable."

Natoshia: I'm Natoshia Spruill, I'm an associate director for leadership programs at the Johnson Graduate School of Management and the word that comes to me when I think about joy is "peace."

Tony: My name is Tony Burrow, I'm a faculty member in the Department of Human Development at Cornell University and when I think about joy, the word that comes to mind is "worthwhile."

Natoshia: So joy's a core value of mine and so this topic of joy was really exciting for me 'cause when I think about joy, I think about it in the biblical sense. There's a scripture in Psalm 30 that states that weeping may endure for the night but joy comes in the morning and it very much drives how I live my life and how I see my day to day. So no matter how hard things are, no matter how low I might be feeling, I know that tomorrow the sun is going to come out. And fun fact, I named my daughter joy, so there's that.

[laughter]

Rachel: That is a fun fact!

Tony: Seems important and fun. The scripture passage that Natasha you just mentioned, someone told me that once. I was sharing some experience, hardship, or something and somebody responded with what you just said and I didn't know. They didn't cite the source, so that's fascinating to me that that's actually... and now we're having a conversation about joy.

Natoshia: Yeah.

Tony: When I think about what joy means to me, uh, it's complex. I actually think of joy in the same sort of bundle of ideas that I think of the concept of homeostasis and I mean by that, that um it's sort of a set point emotional experience for me. It is evidence that something is worthwhile. So I offered the single word "worthwhile"

because that's what comes to mind for me when I think about joy or its defining characteristics. And even when it's inconsistent or rare, its appearance in a particular experience or episode or relationship is just the nudge that I need to say that this is worth continuing to go and so I don't put a lot of stock in its maintenance or abundance. It's just sometimes it can just sort of peak around the corner and say "it's possible here." Good, that's all I needed to see.

Rachel: Yeah, that peeking around the corner is really consistent with how I experienced joy. My word was "unpredictable" because I feel like this is an emotion I don't have any control over or I have minimal control over. Times when I can recall feeling joy are things like cooking dinner or something, right? If I really pay attention to what I'm doing. I can put myself in that situation and sometimes joy emerges, and sometimes it doesn't.

Natoshia: It's really interesting because I view, like, I view joy as a conscious choice. Like I'm making the choice to live my life and, not in pursuit of joy, but just being aware of that joy is happening all around. I used the word "peace" because for me, like right at the peak of joy, there's just this calmness of like, this feels good, like laughing with friends, or I will have 2 toddlers and watching them play, it's like I'm laughing at them but then there's this quiet little moment of peace and quiet where it feels good. But it's also because I'm making a conscious choice to be in pursuit of those moments where that's constantly and consistently happening. Prior to having children, I also lived in a state of, not seeking joy, but trying to live my life in a constant state of joy. Like an example of that is sitting around with girlfriends drinking wine or not drinking wine and cackling hysterically. There's no children involved in that and those moments are just, here are a group of us sitting together catching up or talking about a television show or just being in the moment present. To me, that's an example of being in a high state of joy.

Tony: Being a parent, being a father is an important part of my identity, right? It's a role that I'm playing but it's also a source of meaning and a rich source of responsibility. And children are interacting with this world and part of what induces a sense of joy for me is, they can play with anything. So the things we've learned to seek and pursue, the toy I just bought you is now in the corner and you're playing with a pile of dirt and making out of that a little town or whatever. And it's observing this entity that you have ultimate responsibility for, or perceive some ultimate responsibility for, deriving excitement, joy, happiness, meaning and there's joy just watching a person interact with the world around them in a way that isn't what you would do with that object and you'd clean it up and throw it away but they're playing

with it and so I think children just provide a glimpse into a very different system of meanings than the adults in our lives and so we can find return to a sense of what gives our life joy just because they're playing with the world in a very different way than we might.

Natoshia: They also don't have bills.

Rachel: That's true. That's real.

Tony: That helps. I think that helps.

Natoshia: Or a mortgage.

Tony: Maybe they should. I never thought about that.

Natoshia: There'll come a point in time when mine will be contributing, that's for sure.

Tony: Sooner rather than later.

[laughter]

Rachel: Tony something you mentioned was this idea of, I forget how you phrased it, but you said something about the way we learn to experience joy or the way we learn to seek joy and that's very intriguing to me because I think a lot about this, of the kinds of joy that I see represented in the world. In the United States, right, this comes through advertisements or things like that, right? People are trying to sell us salads or cars or whatever it is by showing people having a good time and I see people like me represented in a lot of those things right as a white lady, what are the messages we get about what it takes to find joy in our life, maintain joy in her life. I like this idea of finding genuine expressions of joy in our lives even though we are in this context where we're told that joy looks a certain way or you need certain things, like certain objects, like you need to buy certain things to have joy.

Natoshia: Yeah I thought it was interesting you mentioned like media and advertising and representation because it's definitely something that, as a black female cisgendered person moving through this world, how I don't see many representations of myself on TV in moments of joy. There's always characters or who black women are but one saving grace for me at the very least has been black Twitter. I can always count on black Twitter. For people who don't know, it's essentially social

media... what's the word I'm looking for? Influencers who reach a wide audience and are able to find humor in things that maybe people don't sign funny. Social media has provided an outlet, has provided access essentially for people who may not otherwise have access to show moments of joy highlighting black women laughing, making a difference, having impact, being these positive role models that are anti to the narrative that some of us have been hearing our entire lives – the angry black woman stereotype or some other character that they expect black woman to show up in spaces. It's interesting because when I share with people that, like, joy is a core value of mine, some people laugh because my disposition may not show that I'm a stereotypical joyful or happy person, whereas I don't think that joy is a thing that you wear on your face or when you're being. Joy is a feeling, joy is a value, joy is in how I make decisions, joy is how I live my life and that doesn't equate to a big cheesy smile on my face. I can still look stoic and serious while also being in a state of joy so. I think that there are places where people are taking control over the narrative of what joy looks like and my hope is that it continues to spread and people can see that joy manifests itself in different ways, in varying ways for different people.

Tony: I think that's, that's such an interesting thing to notice about the agentic curation of spaces in which to showcase the complexity, the fuller humanity of which joy is one component of that and how it's something like social media where you can own a profile or a platform or a page rather than waiting for some other external depiction of some character of you and as a black male, I grew up having to let go of an expectation that the fullness of who I am and who my friends were would ever be displayed. Even now, there's nothing on prime time television, there's nothing in most movies that even gets close to the accurate depiction of joy that blackness and black men have actually provided to me and I've tried to provide to my close... and so it's instances when a movie comes out where black joy is present, it's the one off. I'll get texts, or I'll get emails, or I'll get calls like "Hey you gotta check this out!" because it is such a novelty for black men to express joy in a way that people recognize as true when in fact my reality is, that is my reality. To that point, when think about social media and technology, this sounds really selfish and probably individualistic but I'm simply trying, in my social media use, I'm simply trying to show other people who've chosen to follow me, sure there's only 7 people

[laughter]

Tony: But I'm trying to showcase for them the handful of things that actually give me joy. Sometimes they're the things that really upset me, sometimes they're the thing that anger me, sometimes they're the thing that just I'm puzzled by, but there is an

equal amount of things that give me joy. I just want to see, what gives you joy? And I also want you to see what gives me joy.

Rachel: Why is it important for us to know what, um, like why is it important for you to share with others what gives you joy and to see what gives other people joy?

Tony: In part, for me because so much of my life is filled with those things. And so if you *didn't* know that about me, I would really question, who do you think I am? So, and unfortunately I think a lot of people don't know that and so I need to both tell my story, which includes moments of joy and the experiences of joy, *and* probably to push back against some of this narrative that I've been talking about is I'm a whole person and I want you to see there what I'm choosing to show that includes, um, a snippet – it's curated by me – but it's going to include the highs and the lows and I hope you see there's probably way more highs that maybe you don't have access to but I'm... our lives in my view are filled with way more positive experiences than negative and so I'm going to showcase in that order the abundance of things that are also positive and joyful to me.

Natoshia: I use social media to post silly photos and videos of her children so.

Tony: Yeah!

Natoshia: But the people that I do follow, their intention is to highlight black people, black women, because that's an identity and that's a, I think that's important for me: doing things that are positive either in the community or for themselves, because that's the kind of imaging that I want to continue to fill my cup.

Tony: Just as an aside to a point you made, my child had a birthday party and we take, we wanted to take this photo of our kids on the couch. To your point, the photo that may have been posted or taken and posted, it hides the crying that was happening and the positioning of all those parents.

Natoshia: For like 15-20 minutes.

[laughter]

Tony: Just to get them on the couch. And then looking at a camera, and so, and there's joy in that. There is joy in the shared experience of being a parent and it's not

because all goes well. It's not because everything was perfect, it wasn't. And it's unfortunate that it's not a video of that moment.

Natoshia: Yeah 'cause we're all sweating.

Tony: Yeah, we're sweating and "just please look" and the people behind the camera and so. But there's joy sometimes in just shared experience even around difficulty.

Rachel: Yeah

Natoshia: Absolutely

Rachel: Yeah and I think it's funny, you know you're talking about this example of shared experience with people you know. I can think too of sometimes I've had with strangers where there's been joy and in part because there's just this connection that I didn't anticipate. So, an example that comes to mind for me of finding connection with strangers, again it's about food but I was at Franklin barbecue in Austin TX. So I went by myself, I stand in line for 4 hours surrounded by strangers. We get inside and we order food and there are some big communal tables that can seat, like, 12 people and so I sat with my little wine family, like these strangers who I at met just that morning and I just like, when I think about that moment, it's so full of joy and in part because it was just so beautiful. A) the food was perfect B) there were these people who, you know, we chose to be there and just made this connection doing this kind of ridiculous thing but still a good thing and that we, like, sat together and ate food together. It was just so joyful, just like impossible to predict coming up with strangers.

Natoshia: I'm glad the food was good.

Rachel: Oh, it's perfect. Yeah yeah yeah.

Natoshia: Yeah

Rachel: Yeah

Natoshia: It would have been very unfortunate

Rachel: Oh my god.

Natoshia: If you waited for hours and

Rachel: Yeah that would've been

Natoshia: It's not!

Rachel: the opposite of joy.

[laughter]

Rachel: But yeah

Tony: I wonder, I wonder how much of people's experience of joy is actually couched to some extent in hardship, right? So I imagine this is a scale of extreme visible, you know, explicit hardship all the way down to things that may not register for most people as hardship, but undesirable experience, like waiting for hours in a line. Because of that, that if... when it is unexpected, you would imagine it would be more likely to be unexpected in an experience of hardship and, like, the most extreme example I might give to this is: in my experience, it is people who adhere to or subscribe to some deep faith, faith-tradition that I've been the most amazed by their relationship to joy and their ability to... in the face of all evidence to the contrary that things are going well or that this is a moment to experience joy in, they do. And it's almost, if I could impose some meaning around it, it's almost an exceptional ability to see the forest for the trees or see some bigger opportunity here, when I'm getting lost in the details of what's currently happening, like how could you possibly be appreciative or joyful right now? People who adhered to some deep personal spirituality are able to conjure a sense of joy, a recognition that it is but for the opportunity to be here that I'm thankful, I'm grateful, and experiencing joy. And so there's a big moment there that if you can experience joy and some of the things that I'm coming to, bringing to mind, that's interesting to me. So it just makes me wonder, is an ingredient of joy some backdrop of hardship or challenge that makes joy even salient to people?

Natoshia: I think it's both. I think it can be both. Hardship can show up and manifest itself in many of ways. I think about, I went to undergrad at the United States Military Academy at West Point and that was a very challenging four years but on graduation day, you very quickly forget about how challenging those 4 years were because you did it, you received the diploma, there are, you know, 800-900 other people who were there with you who experienced that and are also at the end of that experience with you, celebrating like "we did it" and then there is the moment of making a really good

cup of coffee that you're like "Oh, well I didn't screw that up!" And that's not something that I would consider a hardship, but I think it can be both. I think there can be the extremes, the hardships that you go through that, as you get through it, the storm so to speak and then the sun coming out at the end of that, and it can also just be you walk outside your door and the sun is there. I don't think it has to be either/or. I think they can exist simultaneously.

Rachel: That made me wonder too, your comment about hardship. So I'm thinking about, you know, as an American, the kinds of hardships that I have experienced or that I encounter in my day-to-day seem like they pale in comparison to a lot of potential hardship that exist in the world that I know many people experience and when I try to imagine, well what does joy look like for someone who lives on less than \$2 a day? Like I think to myself, I don't know! You know, maybe it's some of these same things, right, like taking joy in presence with others or with yourself and so I don't want to say just because I can't imagine what that looks like, there must not be joy there. Because that seems really dehumanizing, right? You talked earlier about this idea of, I want this full- my full complexity, right, this full range of emotions I experience. And then it also feels naive for me to say that someone who's living on less than \$2 a day has the exact same amount of access to joy as someone with billions of dollars, right? And so I just don't know, what does joy look like in those situations, and who has access to joy, and what does that mean?

Natoshia: Yeah I'd argue that I think everyone has access to joy and I think it just depends on how the individual defines what joy looks like. Um, I was fortunate enough last month to have an opportunity to go to South Africa and then visit Ghana and went to a community in Soweto in Johannesburg where, by all definitions, they live well below the poverty line. But as you're walking around, and you're meeting people, people are smiling, children are playing, you see a group of gentlemen who you can just assume are cracking jokes and making fun of one another and they're doing some of the same things that we would be doing over here and I felt the community, though they didn't have a lot – for example, running water – they still had each other and I think that in and of itself created a sense of joy, the access to joy.

Tony: I think it's difficult and potentially even problematic to attempt to quantify joy. While I can appreciate and see the potential benefit of the attempt to try to, from an equity standpoint, I think there's something about joy that I want to say everyone has access to it; everyone has an abundant access to it. I want to be part of things that help people including myself have greater access all the time to it, but I think the minute we started to make internal comparisons or external comparisons about



quantity, we're starting to both create the problem, um, of using our self as the basis for adjudicating who has more or less. From the perspective that joy is a signal to me, like it has a utility, I guess what I'm saying is that joy is more than an outcome for me – it's a type of signal, kind of an interesting thought exercise to try to imagine joy as a utility. It actually is a type of tool you can use to navigate the environment. If you're willing to entertain that idea for a second, to me, it is a potential lens into what might happen, I guess in a psychological sense, when people feel they reached this bleak moment in life, is if they feel constrained to the point that they cannot experience joy here. I think that is a lens for me to try to understand how people make certain kinds of decisions or move in certain ways that in the moment, it's really hard for me to process. But when I allow myself to think: yeah I guess if you did not perceive joy or even the potential to ever derive joy, that could explain that otherwise curious decision. And I don't need to go into, you know, the space but when people decide to move, they decide to leave a relationship, they decided to do something that, from the distance I'm at, is hard to understand, I don't get why the decision was made, this could be an explanation, not to get to meaning-make or explain everything, but it's understanding to me. I guess that's if you weren't experiencing joy. I was experiencing an abundance of it but if you weren't experiencing any, that decision makes a lot more sense, of why you moved in that way or made that decision or came to this realization for you, is the lack of ability to have it or perceived ability to ever experience it again, it would make more sense to me.

Rachel: A comment about discrepancies and experience is making me think of a thing you said earlier, which was which was bringing equity into the conversation. You mentioned something about joy and equity and I'm wondering, how are joy and equity connected, if at all?

Tony: It's interesting to think about, how joy and equity are connected. I think we touched on one, although we had a different framing for it but one way is our access to demonstrations of joy in others and I think we have unequal access to what that looks like, the different manifestations, what counts as evidence of joy in certain communities, and when present who gets to narrate that? There's a lot of inequities in that and there's a connection there. This probably sitting on top of a lot of other structural manifestations of a lot of other things happen in our society, but joy also fits into that and there's just less access to how some communities experience joy, what produces it, and should that produce joy for people or not, I see inequities in that, unfortunately.

Natoshia: I think the hope is that we get to a space where organizations that are in power, that have the ability to put money behind advertisement, television, movies. I mean look at, look at the response when *Black Panther* was released or *Crazy Rich Asians* were released. It was just, "Oh my god, you mean to tell me there is a movie that's out that the entire cast looks like me and they're telling a story that I can relate to? Though I've never been to Wakanda, I would love to go. Anyone knows how we can get there? Um, but I think if people in those positions just took the time to actually hear about and learn stories of other people who aren't in a dominant class and tapped into directors, producers, actors, writers who could tell those stories that we might be able to start shifting and changing the narrative a bit. But because of where we are today, we just have to rely on social media influencers and a couple of folks who were on, you know, network television to tell the story for us. And it's a missed opportunity I think and it's unfortunate.

Tony: Circling back to this point of like a movie release that for certain communities or individuals within those communities, it's a big deal just to even see yourself on a screen... can be a source of joy in itself is a "look at this thing." And it's interesting just how complex these experiences are. 'Cause I want to share one kind of quick moment because it has to do with the film, it has to do with the film that had a similar sort of reception among people and among communities that I'm a part of. The movie was called *Moonlight*. It is a beautiful movie from the plot, from the lighting, things that I don't- I don't know anything about filmmaking but I'm like, it just works for me. Everything about this movie really works. And especially to see the story of black men that is as complex as I know it to be, right? And that's rare. But there's also moments in it that I took or construed as moments of joy that I deeply relate to and I'll share one quick example that when one of the actors, one of the main actors, is meeting up with an old friend. A man in the car, he's about to go into the restaurant and his friend's going to make a dinner for him, he's going to kind of... they haven't seen each other a long time, right? And he's sitting in the car for a moment before he goes in and he's kind of like cleaning up, brushing his hair, and listening to music, just him in the car. But it was hip-hop. That's my thing, like that's, I've had that moment over and over in life and so both for the character in the movie but also for me, as an audience member, that's a moment of joy that I completely relate to. And actual, the actual song he's listening to, was something I would have listened to. And so it's like, that's the part where there's this, there's this space still between the rarity and novelty of a movie like *Moonlight* and how important it was to be made, that I hope we make more and more and more and more of those because I want to keep seeing that. But I don't want it to be a novelty. I just want to consume movies like that, because it's filled with

experiences like that. Like I saw myself in that scene, I saw myself in that car. and that was just really important, so more of that.

Rachel: What questions are on your mind now as we come to the end of our conversation about joy?

Tony: I would wonder how we could be more mindful about our role in helping other people or more people experience joy. So, I wonder how we can be more agentic about creating environments that increase the probability that other people around us will experience it. I do feel able, maybe wrong about this, but I feel able to manufacture moments of joy for my kids and maybe I just need to feel that way but, and I am wrong sometimes. What I thought it would be hilarious, was not. But I've shown up and I've seen that happen before and I think there's a simplicity to those moments that wouldn't be difficult for me to also approach my relationships with my adult friends in the same way. So I would like us to be more thoughtful about, present company included, to be more thoughtful about the role I'm playing in other people's joy and I want them to be more thoughtful about their role in mine. Um, I think that might be a question: how can we do that? How can we keep that in front of us long enough to get better at that ,would be an exciting thing to do.

Natoshia: I think one answer that you actually said is to show up and to be present. I think at a bare minimum just being present and showing up, that in and of itself can light the match for the spark for "torch joy." Yeah yeah yeah, I do. I do think that.

Tony: Neat idea

Natoshia: This is fun, I enjoyed it.

Rachel: OK cool.

Tony: Yeah? Enjoy, enjoy.

Rachel: I also enjoyed it.

Tony: I did too.

Rachel: Good. No, so we all enjoyed making this podcast which is made by Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project. If you have ideas for future episode topics, please send us an email. Just put something like "podcast idea" in the subject line so

we know what the heck you're talking about, but you can find our email address and other contact information or learn more about our program at our website [www.idp.cornell.edu](http://www.idp.cornell.edu). Thanks and bye.