

"I" Statements podcast - Episode 13 – Transitions
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Rachel: Hello. This episode is being released as we transition into a new year, leaving 2020 behind us and welcoming 2021, a year whose joys and surprises and losses we don't yet know. I've seen many social media posts and op-eds describing how things won't magically be different now that we're in a new year and it's true that the pandemic is still ongoing, and it's true that the history of racialized violence in the United States has not been addressed, nor have its modern day manifestations like police shootings of Black people, virus-related xenophobia against Asian people, and the disproportionate impact of health and economic crises in Native communities, and it's true that too many people continue to live at the margin, dependent on the whims of a fickle government in order to avoid eviction, deportation, or hunger. The events of 2020 highlighted these entrenched injustices in a way that, honestly, I have not seen at any other point in my life. Yes, these inequities that became increasingly salient for many during 2020 are still with us in 2021; we also have the spirit of collaboration and innovation that made it possible to develop and test and begin distributing vaccines for COVID-19, and we have the commitment to a better world that led millions of people to protest and to vote and to donate their time and energy and resources in 2020, and we have the resilience that has propelled every one of you through the past year. I think it's undeniable that the systems we're in are not meeting our needs for safety, connection, justice. It also seems clear to me that we have what we need as individuals and as a collective to change these systems, and so I find myself feeling hopeful and a little rejuvenated as we transition into this new year. In this episode you'll hear people talking about their experiences with transitions, including Jasmine and Gary who recorded with me, and also listeners who shared their perspectives by sending in a voice memo. I hope you will forgive the range in audio quality and focus on the impactful stories that people share. So here's the transition into this episode...

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

Gary: Hi, my name is Gary Evans, I'm a faculty member in Human Ecology at Cornell University, and when I think of transitions I think about "mentor."

Jasmine: Hi, my name is Jasmine Daniel Gardner, I'm a PhD candidate at Cornell, and a word that comes to mind when I think about transitions is "life." I went through so many different life experiences that kind of forced me to transition into who I am right now. When I was graduating from high school I was blessed enough to get a Gates Millennium Scholarship and so then I knew, OK that's my free ticket I can - or it's my golden ticket, I can go anywhere. And

where I decided to go was Dartmouth College, and it was in the middle of nowhere, and it was difficult for me because I felt out of place. I was very timid and I didn't speak up a lot, and I was afraid to be who I was, and I had people that I was around – and, mind you, Dartmouth was a completely different experience because there was a lot of people who were from a higher socioeconomic status than I was - and when people see you coming out of a public school, you're a minority and then you're on all these scholarships so they say, 'Oh you're low income,' they go, 'Well you don't know as much as me' or 'You can't do this because you didn't go to this prestigious private academy.' And so I went through a lot of that where other students would say things to me like, 'Well you don't know this because you're from public school.' And so I think a lot of stuff when I was in my undergrad I was afraid to do, or I was afraid to try, or I was afraid to learn because I felt out of place and I was constantly getting these messages, both spoken and unspoken, that I didn't belong there and I believed it. And so I believed that I wasn't capable of doing XY and Z when, like, the older I got the more I realized that I have a lot of innate abilities and innate gifts and one of them is to just focus and try something new and to stay with it long enough and to believe in myself enough that I can accomplish that thing. And so, like, that was a really big life lesson to learn and it took me transitioning through several different jobs, different experiences where people were saying like 'How can you do this thing? You can't do that thing you're just this kind of person. You can't do that thing you're just this kind of person.' But it was learning and knowing in myself that accomplishing anything, becoming anything first starts with the belief that you can do it so if, even if other people don't believe in who you are because of what you look like or don't believe in who you are because of where you come from, you have to have that belief in yourself and then you just have to drive and push for it.

Rachel: Yeah, that sounds like a lot of additional obstacles to transitioning into college that many people don't have to face: feeling doubted by those around you and really having to be a champion for yourself and push through that fear or refuse to accept other people's doubt. Gary, what was your transition to college like?

Gary: I started college I was young, just barely 17, and I realized after about a year and a half that I had never really consciously decided to go to college - I just kind of did it because that's what everyone around me was doing and it's clearly what my parents expected me to do - and it really wasn't the right place at the right time for me. I was wasting time and money and, you know, not doing that great - I was doing OK but I really wasn't doing that well in school - so I decided to drop out and do something different. And so what I did was I worked for Office of Economic Opportunity as a community organizer. What was really good about that experience was that was something I really did choose to do and it was something that was important and I had a feeling I'd be good at it, I wasn't sure but I kind of thought I would. And it's, it's interesting when I think back, I really didn't even, I had no fear, I had no concern at all that I wouldn't go back to college. Of course I had some concern about, like, you know, the unknown of what I was going to be doing until I started doing it, but I think for me that transition - not at all in the same way that Jasmine was talking about - but I think I did come out of that experience probably with increased trust in my sense of making decisions, even big

ones, that it's going to be, it will become the right decision, it might not be necessarily right away. But it gave me, I think, a certain degree of confidence and, and you know, the difference in my activities and my grades, everything was basically like night and day between the first two years and the second two years and so the only difference was that I had spent this time kind of more consciously thinking about what did I want to do. So, as I said, that was a transition that I chose to make.

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Listener voice memo #1: When I think of transitions what immediately comes to mind is, I think, the period that I'm in right now. So I am going into my very last semester as an undergrad at Cornell and all around me my friends are getting their grad school acceptances, their law school acceptances, I'm so very proud. Myself, I am going to spend next year in Japan. And so I'm in this transition period where there's still time left in the place that I know, but also a lot of our thoughts and a lot of our energy is going towards the future. And I think something that I'm realizing now is that I am scared, which I didn't think I would be. It feels very cliché to be scared at the end of college, but I am. I feel like to this point I've had so much structure, you know, I've had K through 12 and then I've had college and I always knew those plans and now I'm looking at me making my own decisions for myself and me figuring out what is best for myself and the people who I care about and how to live in accordance with my values. And it's scary, it's so new. And so yeah, the transition I'm in is, is looking at what feels like the rest of my life but I realize is only the next step - I have to remember that. And I think the takeaway from this that I'm learning right now is that, as much as I am thinking about the future, everything that it has potentially in store for me, it's also to not sort of lose sight of what is directly in front of me. You know, I have this one last semester, these last couple months in a place that has become my home with people who have become my home. And so I have to figure out how to, I guess, make this semester not feel like one last long sad goodbye, but rather just like one last celebration and one last period of, you know, learning and growing. And then it'll be over. My four years will be over and I will go out into the world.

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Listener voice memo #2: A transition that I have been thinking a lot about has been my transition from graduate school in Boston to my teaching fellowship in Malaysia earlier this year. I've been reflecting a bit about how my life transitions have marked a change in the way I introduce myself. In graduate school I often talked about my involvements at Cornell, my studies in organizational behavior, my partner and my identity as a gay man. It was seldom that any of those facts, labels, or identifiers came up in any way when I introduced myself to my community in Malaysia. While salient, my sexuality was taboo. My identity as an American was questioned because I spoke the local language and presented phenotypically Malaysian. And my pedigree didn't carry any weight because no one really knew or cared about whether someone was educated at an Ivy League institution. My transitions between spaces, cultures,

contexts and roles have all sparked for me a moment where I reconsidered how I would introduce myself and, more specifically, the labels I wanted others to attribute to me.

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Rachel: The word that I shared at the beginning of this episode was “growth” because many transitions for me have catalyzed some reflection or learning or adjustment, and this doesn't always lead to me growing but often it does, and I'm wondering what have you gotten out of transitions that you've experienced?

Gary: Yeah, I think that one of the things that happens when you go through transition, whether it turns out bad or good, I do think you get a lot more insight into what's really important to you and maybe what's not so important to you, or sometimes you discover something you thought was important maybe wasn't as important as you thought. I think that you gain a lot, at least I do, I feel like I gain some insight. When I was, I was already a full professor, again kind of young, I guess there's a pattern here, in any case, I got a, I got this feeler from Cornell. And I was living two blocks from the Pacific Ocean with a 180 degree view of the beach and I just felt, I talked to my wife and asked her what did she think about that, and she said 'Well why don't you explore it, you know, just to kind of see what the options are.' And I remember thinking sort of back to this experience in college, about how good that transition had been for me and now I had, you know, I had two children and I was married so it wasn't just me going through this, I had to also be considerate and thoughtful about that. And, you know, my wife and I came to the conclusion that this might be actually a really good time to make a change in terms of where we were with our, our family. So the point of all that was I think having gone through one pretty major one at 18 years old, telling everyone you're dropping out of college and then that having turned out to be actually a really positive thing, kind of gave me the, not only the confidence, I think it also gave me a little bit of experience about, sort of, how to, how to work it through, like how to think about the change, how to think about why, what are your motives, why are you doing this, and then, as I said, it was more complicated 'cause other people were more involved. And it's interesting, I remember we went back to the beach to visit friends and see people and I'd only been in Ithaca for, I don't know, maybe six months at the most, and I remember coming back to Ithaca and it felt like I was coming home and when I went to the beach – which, I had lived there for 17 years, not a short time - it felt like, wow this is a really nice place to visit. So that was kind of intriguing to me, so.

Rachel: Jasmine, I'm wondering if you've had a similar experience with, you know, one transition building up your faith in the potential inherent in future transitions?

Jasmine: The best transitions, or the things that you learn the most from, are either failures or near death experiences. I would say that those have been some of the most driving factors of my life, like, that have really changed or shift the way that I think. I had a job when I was working in Detroit and I was working for a health system and I had a difficult boss, to put it lightly. And I loved the work I was doing, I was helping a lot of people, and I was doing things,

and I was helping my family, but the job and the way I was treated it was - it was a lot. Like there was like 15 jobs in that one job and my boss was constantly like, 'This isn't good, that isn't good,' but she kept getting praise and they kept getting in money from the stuff I was writing. And she kept getting, like, accolades from the work I was doing but she kept telling me I wasn't good enough, and so, like, I was working a lot and then I was doing a lot for my family at the time and my own health started to take a dive. To the point where I was coming, like I would work like 10-hour days, drive home to Detroit to Ann Arbor to my family's house and then my parents they always, like, grew stuff so they are mini-scale farmer kind of people, so I come home and I was helping my mom, like, lift all this dirt and then I just passed out cold and no one knew what was happening. And everybody was busy so my mom is like, 'I have to go back to my tomatoes,' and I was, like, I was messed up though, like I just passed out. I came to for a little bit but I ended up going into the hospital and so, like, they said stuff about my blood pressure but also about the fact that I may have, like, just a valve in the back of my head that at anytime could just switch off and I could have an aneurysm or something like that. As soon as the doctor said that to me my whole thinking on life changed: after that it's like you realize what's most important to you, and the thing that was most important to me was love. Love for my family, love for my friends, and, like, wanting to find my own love. Like, there were things that I kind of put off or people I didn't pay attention to, and so then I realized, like, there were some changes I needed to make in my life with what I was doing. Like, I loved helping people but I hated the idea of not being appreciated for the work I was doing and not being able to fully do the kind of work I want to do on a large scale, and so I knew I needed to get more credentials to be, to have the kind of control I wanted to have and to implement the kind of projects I wanted to implement.

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Listener voice memo #3: When I think of transitions I think of my brother, Brian. He's three and a half years older than me, he's 31 right now, and he has Down Syndrome. He was always a very high functioning person, was way more popular than I was, and everyone thought of me as Brian's little sister. But come 2011, there was a huge transition in his personality, his demeanor, and in 2012 we ended up getting the diagnosis that, at 22 years old, my brother had early onset dementia. So he changed from this bubbly personality to someone who currently, nine years later, doesn't talk anymore, can't really feed himself or bathe himself, do things on his own, so my parents ended up transitioning from their working world at the top of their companies now retired and taking care of him. Brian being one of my best friends, I had no idea what to feel or what I was feeling, why I was so sad, why I was so angry. And so this caused a big transition in my life to start owning those feelings and start understanding them in a better way. When I grew up we never talked about feelings in my household, we never talked about just things that were going on outside of normal daily life, and this situation with my brother helped kind of bring my family together in a different way and helped me, specifically, really own those feelings and dive deeper into them through the help of therapy and through the help of a lot of good friends and I've never felt more fulfilled in my life.

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Listener voice memo #4: When I hear the word “transition” what comes to mind is relationships. In particular, relationships with really close friends and also my parents. On the front side of things I'm very blessed to still have a few close, close friends from high school and I also took away some really significant relationships from college. And now in my young adulthood navigating what it means to be a good friend, what it looks like to be a supportive person in someone's life, has been a huge transition. In high school, even in college, like yes, we have our own experiences, our own social identities were figuring out, our own family backgrounds and struggles that we're going through, but there is a common thread of, like, our classroom or schooling, what we want to do next in our lives, and there was always a baseline to help navigate and support one, like, one another through. But now being a young adult and not only we're on different tracks in, like, our careers, but also in our personal lives, and my friends start facing events and situations that I have very little experience in - it's been very confounding to figure out, like, how can I still be that person that they lean on or come to? And I think sometimes I haven't always felt sufficient in a lot of situations in the last few years that my friends have brought to me, and I guess what's really been I don't know, like, saving grace but just like a starting place, is listening, and just being, like, a safe place like share your truth and also even sharing, like, not knowing all the answers. But it's been very humbling to realize that we also as problems and situations in our lives become more complex, ourselves may not be able to figure it out, as our support system may not be the only people to be able to figure it out and that it's about, like, sharing resources and just, like, you know, being there as we walk through life type of thing.

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Rachel: We've talked about transitions that have happened in the past, and I'm wondering if there are any transitions you feel like you're in the midst of right now?

Gary: I'm in my mid 70s and historically you retired when you were 65, so of course I'm aware of my age when, you know, whenever there's something in a department that I'm in and someone wants to know, like, what have we done in the past, or what, you know, what's sort of the track record? Everybody looks at me and, you know, when that first starts happening it's very bizarre and strange 'cause, like, that's not how you think about yourself, but I have to think about myself that way 'cause it happens all the time and the longer that I decide to keep working the more that happens because, for obvious reasons. And so I think a transition that I'm in the middle of is, I'm not transitioning out of my work as a professor, but I think I am transitioning a little bit in terms of what exactly do I want to do with that role and that opportunity, that privilege that I have as a faculty member. And so I've started writing a book, I've never written a book on my own so that's one big – I've written parts of books and helped people, but - so that's a pretty big major change for me that I'm in the middle of. And instead of writing grants and collecting data, which is what I've done most of my life as an academic, I'm still analyzing and writing, I'm at least at this point not doing much to try to start new

projects. I think the other thing that I think about more, I've always recognized that one of the wonderful things about what I do is you can really have quite a lot of impact on the world and the way you can, I can do that, and I think actually the way most of us do that, is through other people. It's not through things we write or things we say or things that we do, it's just the way that you influence other people and that may alter or bump their trajectory one way or another and so that kind of ripples out. So I'm also thinking more about in what way do I want to spend that part of my time in terms of helping other people figure out their trajectories and getting on with it, and so that's a transition that I'm in the middle of. And, you know, another thing that happens: I've had more than one person say, 'Oh when did you retire?' and I said, well actually I haven't retired and, in fact, I like what I'm doing now as much as I ever have so at least at the moment I don't see any really good reason to retire, 'cause I really like what I'm doing and I think I'm still pretty good at it. But it is, it is a different way to think about yourself, to think about yourself, and sometimes I sort of - I think it's a good thing? - sometimes I kind of forget that I'm old. I just don't think of myself that way, but, you know, I'm in my mid 70s so by any definition I'm clearly old, but I don't think of myself that way. I think part of that is just the, the amazing opportunity to be around lots of young, smart, lively people when you work at a university. So you're surrounded by all these people who are pretty young and pretty active and enthusiastic and have lots of energy, so I just kind of do that too.

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Listener voice memo #5: As a transgender person, when I talk about transitions I'm usually talking about my social and medical transition related to my trans identity. For the majority of my life I presented as one gender, and then when I was 18 I transitioned into presenting as the gender I actually identify as to live my life more authentically and more comfortably. But I'm also currently in the middle of professional transition in my life. After graduating I decided take two gap years before going to medical school and I'm currently in the middle of these transitional years now between two formal educational settings. So I've been trying to think of similarities between these two transitions in my life and I think the biggest one is always reminding myself to keep living in the moment and to keep living my life in the present even during a transition. It was really easy for me when I was transitioning as a trans person to forget to live because I felt like I wasn't presenting effectively as a man, because I didn't pass all the time, I often found myself thinking in terms of the future. I was too often focused on the next step in my transition rather than appreciating the step I had just taken. I was living in the future. In a similar way, since I'm currently in the medical school application process, I always find myself thinking about the next interview or planning what the next few years in my life will look like. So I think, for me, when I'm in a transition it's easy to forget that this moment is part of my life too, equally as much as the last phase of my life and the next phase of my life. So I think I often find myself saying I should be living right now and not just planning for my future, although for me that's definitely easier said than done.

[music]

Rachel: Being in the present is a thing that I struggle with too, especially in the midst of a big transition, so I really appreciate that reminder about the value of staying in the moment, I'm so struck by that line, "This moment is part of my life too." I'm grateful to everyone who participated in this episode and I thank you for listening, for letting this show be part of your life, too. This podcast is made by Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project, or IDP, edited and produced by me. Our logo is by Bryan Garner, and music is written and performed by Evan Wilhelms. If you have an idea for a future episode topic, if this episode made you laugh or cry or think about something and you want to tell me about it, please do reach out via email. You can find our contact information and other details about IDP at our website, www.idp.cornell.edu Thanks and bye.