

"I" Statements podcast – Episode 19 – Nourishing
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Rachel (0:05)

This is "I" Statements, a podcast where complexity, vulnerability, and curiosity collide. In this episode we're talking about nourishing. My name is Rachel, and a word that comes to mind when I think about nourishing is "warmth."

Stephen (0:20)

Hello, my name is Stephen, I use he/him pronouns, and a word that comes to mind when I think about nourishing is "growth."

Kathryn (0:28)

My name is Kathryn, I use she/her pronouns. And a word that comes to mind for me when thinking about nourishing is "communal." I think my social identities are related to even just the word that I picked. Because my mom is from Singapore, and a big part of Singaporean culture - they joke that one of the past times is eating, the other one is shopping - but one of the pastimes in Singapore is eating. And so basically, every memory that I have of being in Singapore of being with my extended family on my mom's side is around food, is around cooking or going out to restaurants, and really indulging in lots of food. We have lots of second dinners, where we'll eat in the house, and then we'll go out and do other things at night, and then we'll stop for hotpot afterward. And so I think a lot of the way that I connect to my mixed heritage, my Asian American identity is through food. That's how I sort of relate to my, my relatives and who I have a lot of distance from physically, because they're all still in Singapore and I'm here in the US, but also sort of emotionally, because I don't see them all the time. A lot of like, inside jokes about, there's this one seafood restaurant that my gong gong, my grandfather, really likes, and we joke about how long it'll take before we end up there. Usually, it's within 24 hours of landing in Singapore, which is usually at some bizarre time, like 11pm, or 9am. But within 24 hours, we'll be there and I'm not sure anyone else in the family really likes it, but we go, and that feels like a nourishing memory. So that's where I'll start with that.

Stephen (2:12)

I'm jumping off of relationships among space, among community, and nourishment. And I don't know if this is just like, super sad - I don't think of it as a sad thing, actually, but maybe other people will - a lot of my life, I feel like what's been more salient was the absence of nourishment. Because I think I've been presented, I guess, like with this idea that like one's home community, I grew up in a Korean ethnic enclave and that like that, that should be nourishing. And then to some extent, it was, in the culinary sense for sure. I don't know where I could find like better Korean food besides where I'm from, at least in the United States. And I felt sort of still alienated from that community, because I identified as queer and then sort of a

lot of what I felt the community was sort of enforcing, in some ways, was these very sort of, like heteronormative expectations of how I should be behaving. And then me feeling like I couldn't do that just made me feel like I didn't have access to a fuller sense of nourishment. So sort of just like, I don't know, like, that not being complete. And then I'm looking towards queer community and then that I think is also, can be presented as, a really nourishing space for queer people. And I didn't feel like I had complete access to that either, because I was Asian American. And so I sort of just like, a lot of my life, I think a lot of those sort of just like, if I don't feel completely nourished by either of these communities, sort of like what other sources of nourishment can I find? How can I sort of like push the communities I was part of to be like, more nourishing. It's also funny, I'm using nourishing now as a synonym for inclusive. So I think I'm noting that and I'm like, that's interesting, as well. And, yeah, I think that's the way that I think a lot about how nourishment and social identity sort of interact in my own life in terms of which communities do I have access to and feel nourished by and which communities do I not? And then where, then the places that I've gone to? I don't know if I have a firm answer to that yet, actually. So that's well... I'll pause.

Kathryn (4:42)

I'm thinking, Stephen, about the word that you brought in, at the beginning in relation to the things you've been talking about. So thinking about what being nourished enables us to do in terms of challenges and risks and growing together and how like, nourishment, or being fed, is one of the baselines and taking that to also think about, like inclusion, as one of the baselines before achieving more work, before achieving justice, and how that is one of like the stepping stones, I think towards it; beyond representation of people feeling sustained in some way to be able to continue the work. Just to continue on our little metaphor journey. Rachel's stuck here with two English majors, so I think we're gonna end up with some of that. [laughter]

Rachel (5:36)

We're communicating across difference in this metaphor journey, and I love it. And it's funny because, you know, what comes to mind for me when I think about social identities and my experience of nourishment actually is difference, and, and fear that I felt. And a specific example from when I was a child: I grew up in a predominantly white part of the country, my whole family was American citizens. And my best friend when I was growing up, her family, her parents had come from Poland and spoke Polish and English. But her grandmother came to visit when we were maybe like six or seven years old and I remember she didn't speak any English, she only spoke Polish. And she came to stay for like a few weeks, I think when, when my best friend's parents had a second child. Like, I don't think I slept over at my friend's house that whole time and we had a lot of sleepovers, so this was unusual. And I remember being afraid that her grandmother was going to make some sort of food that I didn't recognize, and that I didn't like, and that I didn't want to be rude and like not eat it. I had kind of no reason to believe that just because the food was different, I wouldn't like it but that was the assumption that I made, right, because it was something I wasn't used to. And because I couldn't communicate with this person, I think that also heightened my concerns about not knowing

what I was eating, or you know, not being able to communicate what I needed. And it's interesting to think about how that attitude of "difference is scary" probably showed up in a lot of other ways in my life as a child. But this is one example that comes to mind for me when I think about nourishing, and it meant that I, in some ways, I imposed a distance. Stephen, you were talking earlier about feeling not connected to communities that you are ostensibly part of -Korean American community, queer community - but feeling in some ways like this other identity is kind of getting in the way of feeling sustained here. And I think I imposed that on myself. In this in this regard. Like I couldn't have maybe been connected, right, I was part of the social community for my friend and her family. But I imposed the distance there of not letting myself feel curious or close to, to this new person who I wasn't familiar with and had some identity differences with.

Stephen (7:52)

Rachel, what you're saying is also making me think of the moments where we deny ourselves access to nourishment. And to sort of like turn back my own narrative a little bit and to recomplicate it a bit, I'm thinking about how, yes, the Korean American community has, I think very, has issues with homophobia, queer community has issues with racism, making huge broad generalizations about these things which I also recognize. And yet, I'm wondering how much just sort of just like my perception that I am not welcome here was informed by what the community was doing and how much of it was imposed on sort of something that I imposed upon myself. Like, if I look, if I assume that I do not belong when walking into a space, when I assume that I won't have access to the nourishment and sort of walk in there, sort of like, what does that, how does that predispose me to feel and behave? It's almost like, I am different therefore, I don't think I can be nourished by this thing. Which is, I think, similar and slightly different, Rachel, to what I was hearing whereas like that instead of thinking someone else is different, I think I was thinking I was different. And therefore, I don't think I can be nourished here, which may or may not have been true. How do we nourish ourselves in times of isolation, when we feel like we don't have access in some ways to the things that would usually nourish us? Like, sort of, it's like, in some ways, like what we have now might not feel very nourishing, but then it's like, we're sort of still moving forward in the hopes that we will have access to that kind of nourishment and warmth again.

Kathryn (9:39)

Or even not, like, I don't know someone who is like mentally ill and, or just someone who goes through times that are hard or stressful, I think sometimes, like the act of nourishment itself is just like, 'okay, we're gonna just gonna feed yourself tonight and like, that's what we're gonna do'. It also feels like a pause or like, when I am baking or cooking for other people and gathering around a table like care feels so present. And so I have been thinking about how that care can still be present for myself when I'm just in my apartment making myself dinner, and making myself a dinner that is not just a bagel with cream cheese.

Stephen (10:24)

Kathryn, I love how now what you're getting at, you're making me think about, is like nourish as a verb - the act of doing it - instead of receiving nourishment, giving nourishment. And then when the recipient is myself like, sort of just like what does it mean for me to be nourishing myself? And why I don't, maybe this is TMI, but like, why am I so bad at it? is the other thing that I'm thinking about. Sometimes it's for me, I think, I love the way I think, Kathryn, as you talked about nourishment and pause. But sometimes it means like pausing, and then how I don't let myself do that. Like if I make a mistake, or I encounter something challenging, or if I mess up, it's almost like I don't deserve nourishment because I've made a mistake, I just need to keep going and get better. And I'm wondering sort of just what would it mean, even if I've done something wrong, to take the pause to make sure that I have like sort of the energy, the nourishment to be able to then repair the wrong that I've done, as opposed to going immediately into that space. And that's like a weird thing because it's almost like, if I did something wrong, then I'm sort of like I tacitly don't deserve to be nourished. And if I were to hear someone else say that I would be like, 'that's really sad.' And now I'm hearing myself say, like, oh my god, that's really sad.

Rachel (11:46)

Stephen, I think you had verged back into metaphor, territory, but what you were saying really was landing with me in terms of actual food. Like, I think this idea of that there are some foods that are bad, and there are some foods that are good and like your idea of like, if I do something bad or wrong, then I need some sort of punishment. And I think it's been interesting for me to notice, I think, some of the ways in which diet culture does show up in how I understand what it means to feed myself and how that's different from nourishing myself; from actually paying attention to cues related to hunger, and fullness. It's not that I'm done eating when my plate is empty, like I'm done eating, when, when I feel full, I should eat when I feel hungry. And this has, for me, been a process of unlearning a lot of things I was taught about how I should have a relationship with food as a woman in the United States, who is white, and in some ways, therefore, like more proximate to ideals around beauty and beauty standards. And, yeah.

Kathryn (12:49)

I think it's also related to taking up space. I think in a lot of areas of my life, people have expected me to take up less space or wanted me to take up less space and how I have let that sort of settle and have internalized that I should take up less space, and how that often shows up in terms of food of like, 'Oh, it's fine, just like skipping dinner doesn't actually make a difference'. When that's not true in terms of energy, and how I'm able to let myself grow in all aspects of my life. But how food feels so related to like my physical existence and the body, like how my relationship to that looks. And like, in the fall, I was in all these classes that were ended up like talking about food. And I was so uncomfortable for the whole semester, like thinking about, I think thinking about how I was ashamed of my relationships to food, because not only that, like I should feel ashamed for eating food, but also then the guilt of like, I

shouldn't feel that way. And the sort of - it doesn't feel, it feels really unsettled in that, like I have so many positive associations with food, and like I was talking about earlier, so many of like, my most beloved memories with my family members and with my mother are around food, but then also how uncomfortable all of that feels and how uncomfortable indulging feels. And that I sort of sometimes think about nourishment as that is indulgent and is not just the baseline that I was also talking about earlier, and how contradictory it all feels in my own relationship to it. And so I think that makes it uncomfortable to talk about because a lot of the different components seem to oppose each other.

Stephen (14:45)

What you're making me think of - and I think Rachel, what you were saying ties in here too - like there's a there's like this, right - I'm doing scare quotes - like "right way to eat," there should be like this kind of relationship to food. And that makes me also think about how so highly regulated eating is like, even in the times that we're expected to eat, like, what we're expected to eat, who is expected to eat what, what is acceptable to eat and what is not. And there's so much shame around it. Like, I feel shame when I eat things that other people say are bad for me or like, I'm sort of like, sometimes it's like, 'oh, I'm about to go to the doctor,' it's like, 'I should be watching what I eat more.' There are all these messages about sort of like what tastes good isn't good for you. Why are health and pleasure sometimes painted as in tension or in opposition? And in one sense, like nourishing food is like healthy food but then, Kathryn, you're bringing this other set of nourishing food as like food that's pleasurable to eat. And now I'm stuck at this tension so...

Rachel (16:04)

Yeah, and I think too Stephen, like, why are we taught that you can't trust yourself to know what is good for you, right? Someone else needs to impose this idea of what are good foods or bad foods or the right way to eat. And I think often about when I, when I was growing up, my family received food assistance, so food stamps and WIC checks (WIC is an acronym that stands for Women, Infants, and Children, and they provide food assistance for women, infants, and children). And I remember at the grocery store, there were specific things you could use these forms of food assistance for; it really sends this message that people who need to receive food assistance cannot be trusted to make good or healthy choices for their family. That's kind of how I interpreted it. I was a kid decades ago, and I was curious if it was still this way. I googled it and I felt stressed just reading the guidance around how to use WIC checks in New York State; it was as specific as: you can buy this kind of milk, skim, 1%, 2%, whole - only whole milk if you have a one- to two-year-old child. I mean, like they were so specific, and it was for so many, and it's like you cannot buy organic, you cannot do this, you cannot do this. And just the idea of walking into a grocery store and having the experience of trying to get food for my family being so regulated, that just sounds so disempowering, right? I am not being trusted to make choices that are in the best interest of my family.

Kathryn (17:38)

I think both of your examples really resonated with like rules for me, like who is imposing the rules and who has the power to impose rules. So, Rachel, in your case, like the US government or state governments imposing rules on people who are in an economic position to need assistance, and Stephen, your example, obviously, of just having rules about what is good food, and what is bad food, and how, how these rules feel somewhat insidious but also, for me, get in the way of nourishment. Like for me, that's how power is showing up really clearly is in the imposition of these rules and saying like, No, you don't deserve to be nourished because you're taking up too much space, or you have to keep your body small, or because you don't have enough income to be allowed to access that. Yeah, those are things I'm thinking about.

Stephen (18:36)

I guess I'm thinking of like, these incredible, sort of like trailblazers, or activists, or leaders who sort of in places or institutions that are in some ways hostile, like create nourishing communities for those who don't fit in. I'm thinking about classrooms- both ones that I've been part of and ones that... and maybe ones I've created - but then I'm thinking back to I guess like this high school English teacher I had. We opened with essays about food, which is like very apt for this actually, and then she was I think, the first person who tried to sort of like get across that power shapes language and that the identities that we hold impact both the ways that we create language and how we, and how that language is received by others. And then I like think of it in some ways as a really nourishing space because up to this point, I guess it's like that wasn't a possibility that I was thinking about. Like, it was just everything was about learning about language and learning to use languages but just about like, 'Oh, it's like I need to get my point across in the clearest way possible' and context wasn't necessarily something that I was like paying too much attention to. And then here, it was like, boom, this is something you need to be thinking about. And then I think of that as, in some ways, an incredibly nourishing moment, because it was a kind of intellectual nourishment that sort of gave me a space where I could start asking like other questions. And public high school, in some ways is not, does not have a reputation for being a place that fosters like creativity, curiosity, inquiry. And so I guess, like, I'm thinking about these, like teachers, where it's like, within these very, very disciplined and regulated spaces where they create opportunities for students to nourish each other emotionally and intellectually. Like, I find, I find that pretty remarkable, like sort of just how it's almost like there is this capacity to create nourishment, even in spaces where that isn't encouraged.

Kathryn (21:21)

I don't think this will be included, because it's referencing another podcast that I don't know that people would have listened to: It's the Juneteenth Code Switch episode. You know, they were talking about people who were enslaved and wouldn't necessarily have access to... would just not have access to much food really. And so how carving out spaces to still feel nourished or to still nourish their families and loved ones, and how that became something that people now still crave, even though it was born out of the most extreme marginalization and exclusion

and not having food but turning that into still an opportunity for nourishment. And how that felt for me while listening to that episode, so clearly an act of resistance, but one that like might not even like rock the boat, but was still this like clear act of resistance to a power structure that said, like, 'No, you don't deserve to be nourished, like, you're going to be fed just to serve someone else'. But like how... I don't know, I just am thinking, building off of what Stephen was saying that whole time, I was just thinking about this, like refusal to not be nourished and to still find that and figure out a way to nourish each other. I don't know, just like, what that choice to love or to care and to be nourished means.

Rachel (22:59)

It feels like a very humanizing act in a, in a dehumanizing situation. People saying, 'No, you don't get to experience your own humanity. You don't get to experience the full range of your humanity, we do not acknowledge the full range of your humanity.' Insisting on the existence and importance of one's own humanity through care, through nourishment of oneself and others. Part of being a full and complex human is having a wide range of emotions and I think we get told that there are good emotions and bad emotions and so I'm curious what emotions feel nourishing, or maybe not, for you?

Stephen (23:44)

I guess I've heard from so many people and on so through so many sort of sources that anger is not a nourishing emotion. It burns the fuel it doesn't like provide it. I prevent myself from feeling it too as much as possible because for it's like, it's been ingrained in me that it's such a negative emotion and that it like it's draining, it's like a leech, it's like a parasite, etc, etc. And at the age of 30, it is now like, 'maybe all these things people told me about anger are not true.' Can anger sustain? Can anger sustain work? And for a lot of people who are doing these amazing acts of nourishment, I - it's like hard, like, resist and nourishment, it's like hard for me to imagine that there isn't some anger there.

Kathryn (24:36)

Yeah, I think... [bshhhhh sound] [laughter] I was recently talking to my therapist, about, [laughter] about like a just like a really bad, like experience. And I had this revelation that rarely, in these kinds of situations, do I get angry. And so we started talking about boundaries and anger, potentially, as a response to the breach of a boundary. And so I think in some ways, anger also feels like protective of, of a boundary or of like a community of like something that you want to protect and like what you care about. I don't know, when I think about the earlier conversation we were having about, about rules and about the ways that that has, that, that they have impacted our relationships to food, there's a part of me, deep down that is like, working on anger as like, no, like, I'm actually kind of mad about that, that like that has stolen something that feels so precious to me that I started out the episode talking about, like, some of my most cherished memories with my relatives and, and of connecting to myself and to my identities. And also just like, enjoying food and, and like delighting in something really well made, or finding pleasure in creating and being in the kitchen and, and sharing food with

others. And having that, having forces that take that away or wanted to dampen that? I don't know. They could make me mad. I'm really tentative to say that because I am still figuring out what anger feels like but yeah, but is like, that could be like when I think about it for other people at least, it like isn't it's a bit infuriating that that's something that is so like, one, crucial to like, our survival and to our well being and, two like, such like, that can be such a positive thing is being messed with.

Rachel (26:49)

Yeah. And, Kathryn, given the way you described anger earlier as a thing that can be a sign about what needs protecting it makes perfect sense to me to hear you say, 'I want my relationship, my connection to my family members to be protected. I want my enjoyment in life, my experiences of delight and pleasure to be protected.' So it makes perfect sense to get angry if it feels like there's something threatening those really treasured valuable elements of what it means to be alive.

Kathryn (27:23)

Yeah, the "do people like, eat to live or live to eat?" Like I'm a, I'm a live to eat person. Yeah, except when things get in the way. Like, I like to enjoy my food. I don't want to eat boring food.

Rachel (27:38)

We've covered a lot of big ground, right, we've talked a lot about big ideas, and I'm just sitting here wondering, you know, what is the most nourishing thing you've done this week? I ate some delicious cauliflower tacos with someone I love and continue to feel nourished by that, it was a few days ago. But I'm wondering what, what for you has been nourishing this week?

Stephen (28:02)

Thinking about sort of like when I was giving nourishment to a being and I'm thinking about my cat. And how every morning, he like comes around, he climbs onto bed, he's like, 'Hello, I love you, feed me.' And then I go over and like the food is like disgusting: cat food is not appetizing. But then it's like, I don't know, it's like, I think there is something so wonderful about that; I'm like starting every day nourishing a being that asks nothing from me besides nourishment.

Kathryn (28:36)

I have been training for a new job that is in part working with high school students and a lot of the week of training has been a lot of has been like, 'why are you here? Why are you going to do this work?' And I think the answers I keep coming back to and the answers of the people around me have been really nourishing: to think about curiosity and fostering connection and excitement and joy and fun and like those are the goals for the summer is to like have fun. And I think that's been really nourishing to prioritize those things, to remember that those are acts of love that we can create for our students and for ourselves. And to be nourished by the fun

and by the excitement and curiosity and how we can sort of like hold that for each other has been just something that has warmed my heart and filled my belly [laughter] all week.

Rachel 29:41

Curiosity, cat food, and cauliflower. I don't know what else other than nourishment [laughter] might bind to those three things together so I really I really appreciate the, the two of you bringing your perspectives and your questions and your feelings to this conversation on "I" Statements, a podcast from Cornell University's Intergroup Dialogue Project. We are going to take a break next month so there will not be a new episode in August, but we'll be back in September. If, in the meantime, you want to email us with ideas for future episode topics or thoughts or feelings that you've had about this episode, you can find our contact information and other information about our program at our website: www.idp.cornell.edu. This podcast project is nourished by a number of people including Bryan Garner, who did our cover art, and my good friend Evan Wilhelms, who wrote and performed our music. That is all. Thanks and bye.