



Transcript of Accidental Intellectual Episode 2: Changing the Narrative

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[Intro Music]

Harrison McNaughtan 0:07

Hi, and welcome to the accidental intellectual, a podcast where we talk to people working in health related fields and get to know the human behind the expert. Today you're hearing from me, Harrison, McNaughton, and Rachael Lyon.

Rachael Lyon 0:20

In today's episode, we sat down with the lovely Rachel Cooper and asked her to briefly introduce herself.

Rachel Cooper 0:26

Hi, I'm Rachel Cooper. I'm a qualitative researcher, freelance transcriptionist and well rounded nerd. My academic interests include medical education, patient engagement, health policy, psychiatry, mental health and bioethics. I am currently a master of bioethics candidate and Fulbright Canada student at Harvard Medical School. And in my spare time, I love listening to podcasts, especially true crime and narrative journalism podcasts, hanging out on Twitter, and animating puppets for my toddler Naphio.

Harrison McNaughtan 1:00

Not only is she a Fulbright scholar and accomplished academic, but she's also a great conversationalist. We had such a great time chatting with her.

Rachael Lyon 1:07

We touched on Rachel's path to academia, the importance of diverse voices in bioethics, her decision to speak publicly about her mother's physician assisted death, and the ups and downs of virtual learning at the graduate level.

Harrison McNaughtan 1:22

With that said, let's get right into our conversation. We hope you enjoy as much as we did.

[Interlude Music]

Rachael Lyon 1:33

Okay so, Hi, and welcome. Thank you so much for joining us. We're so excited that you've agreed to be part of this episode. We're gonna start off maybe with some open and closed questions, some rapid fire.

Harrison McNaughtan 1:47

Mm hmm. So it shouldn't be anything too challenging. I'll go with the first one. What was your favorite childhood game?

Rachel Cooper 1:54

Hmm. I loved Oregon Trail on the computer when I was a kid.

Harrison McNaughtan 1:59

Oh, I forgot about that game. That was an awesome game.

Rachael Lyon 2:02

What is worse, doing the laundry or doing the dishes?

Rachel Cooper 2:06

Oh, dishes way worse.

Rachael Lyon 2:08

I agree.

Harrison McNaughtan 2:09

I'm with you. Okay, third, best thing you ate recently?

Rachel Cooper 2:14

I've been eating cookies for breakfast. Those are pretty good.

Rachael Lyon 2:10

I like that.

Harrison McNaughtan 2:18

It's a good decision. The place in the world you'd like to visit the most next?

Rachel Cooper 2:23

Anywhere warmer than Toronto. I would love to go somewhere south at this point.

Harrison McNaughtan 2:28

Yeah, for sure.

Rachael Lyon 2:30

Sunrise or sunset?

Rachel Cooper 2:32

Sunrise a hundred percent.

Rachael Lyon 2:34

That was very uh, certain answer.

Harrison McNaughtan 2:37

Are you a morning person then?

Rachel Cooper 2:39

I'm 100% a morning person. Yep.

Harrison McNaughtan 2:42

Okay, okay, I could learn something from you then for sure. Okay, horror movie or comedy movie?

Rachel Cooper 2:47

Comedy. Always.

Rachael Lyon 2:49

And pen or pencil as your preferred writing utensil?

Rachel Cooper 2:54

A pen but a pen that writes well, I'd take a pencil or a pen that doesn't work well any day.

Rachael Lyon 3:00

Hmm. Do you have a favorite pen?

Rachel Cooper 3:02

Yeah, I'm pretty keen on the Muji point five these days.

Harrison McNaughtan 3:08

Yes, I love a good Muji pen

Rachael Lyon 3:11

As do I, I think I'm a bigger fan of the point three eight, but I do like the point five.

Rachel Cooper 3:16

The point three eights are a little bit too fine for me, I thought it was also going to like the point three eight. But yeah, the point fives I think are just that - they feel good on the page when you're writing.

Rachael Lyon 3:29

They do. I don't know if it's the gel ink. Because it has the same ink as the point three eight, but you're right it does have a good flow to it. I think I just have big writing [laugh] so I have to use the point three eight so it's not like the entire line on the page.

Rachel Cooper 3:43

Mm hmm.

Rachael Lyon 3:45

All right. So to get started, we're hoping that you can tell us a little bit about who you are and what it is that you do.

Rachel Cooper 3:52

Sure. So thanks so much for inviting me. I've listened to your whole first season. And it's really exciting for me to be with you today. I am a Master's of Bioethics student at Harvard Medical School, and a Fulbright student award recipient for the 2020 - 2021 year.

Rachael Lyon 4:12

Super exciting. Wow. That's like a very big deal.

Harrison McNaughtan 4:15

Congratulations.

Rachel Cooper 4:16

Thank you. Thank you.

Rachael Lyon 4:18

Tell us a little bit about the path. Like how did you end up pursuing this graduate program?

Rachel Cooper 4:25

Yeah, interestingly enough, my path to graduate studies was very sort of circuitous. It wasn't straight lined in any sort of way. So in 2017, I was finishing up my undergraduate studies at the University of Waterloo. But I had started them in 2004. So there had been a lot of starts and stops and, you know, sideways motion along the way. And in the winter semester of 2017, I took an elective in biomedical ethics with Dr. Brian Orend at the University of Waterloo - mainly to fulfill an elective that I needed to complete to have all of my degree requirements. And so I walked into the lecture hall and sat down. And before he was finished explaining the syllabus on the first night, I knew that bioethics was likely the path for me. And - and it wasn't, it wasn't even. I'm trying to think like what it was exactly. And - and I think, you know, for one, he was so excited about the material he was teaching. And so for me, that was hugely motivating. But I also just thought about the kind of multitude of possibilities that existed in terms of the kinds of questions that bioethics was asking and looking to explore, and thinking about my own professional work and some of my own story. And it felt like there was good synergy there. And as I, you know, went through that semester, increasingly, it became clear to me that I had been thinking about bioethics, but I didn't have the language. And so that course kind of equipped me with a new vocabulary that, you know, when I stepped back, after that semester was over, it was sort of like, okay, now I have a way of categorizing or defining the angles at which I was looking at problems that I was already thinking about in my academic work.

Rachael Lyon 6:25

So was this course like, related to what you were studying or was just like one that you took on a whim that you're like, this is a great elective; sounds interesting.

Rachel Cooper 6:33

A little bit of both. So my undergraduate degree was in social development studies, which is an interdisciplinary social science major at the University of Waterloo. So my courses came from social work and sociology and psychology, and then, like an interdisciplinary perspective. And I found myself taking most of my courses in social work, but just theory, not actually practicing social work. And then Interdisciplinary Studies. So, you know, most of my questions were kind of based around, broadly speaking, questions relating to mental health, questions relating to work in the community, questions relating to understanding identity, and stories. And so Biomedical Ethics, it wasn't such a stretch? I wasn't maybe thinking so much, um, biomedically. But certainly, certainly, the ethics pieces were very relevant to the work I was already doing.

Rachael Lyon 7:39

Yeah, I like that piece about like the stories. And as you know, since you've listened to a lot of our podcasts, we're really big on the story piece here. And the story that ties into ethics, I think sometimes, if you look at it too academically, the story gets a bit lost. So I'm really interested in the, the bioethics piece, but also, also the story peace and how that sort of brought you to the work.

Rachel Cooper 8:03

Yeah, I mean, I guess one of the things I've thought about this year, being a grad student, and studying bioethics, and taking a variety of courses in bioethics is the ways in which we conceptualize problems and frame, the kinds of situations that we're thinking about and need to provide guidance for. And I have found a very large gap between the fact that get prioritized are framed in a clinical context, and sometimes how at odds those are with the stories of the individuals that are at the center of the questions that are being asked. And so, when I think about sort of what narrative does, and how it's useful academically, it really provides like a humanizing element to really big questions or really big problems that we're trying to provide guidance for, and and, in some cases, even find solutions for I think, with my own various stories that have happened in my life. When you're at the center of the story, it's very difficult to kind of see, you know, from inside outwards, versus looking from outside inwards. So it's difficult for me to comment on that. But I'm learning that there isn't necessarily like one fixed narrative about a situation and I think for myself, I'm beginning to learn that there isn't one fixed narrative of my own life. You know, I sort of believe certain things about my academic trajectory that now in in retrospect, actually, I'm beginning to tell myself a different story. So having started undergrad in 2004, after, you know, graduating from high school, and going to a high school where there was a really big emphasis placed on academic success and achievement and sort of hitting certain milestones around, you know what it meant to grow up and become a young adult, and really feeling like I wasn't, um, that wasn't my journey at all. And having struggled with mental health issues from when I was very, very young, that couldn't be my journey, because I had a lot of other things that I had to deal with that were more important than school. And so leaving high school, going to university. You know, first of all, it, I didn't find University really interesting. The classes I felt were not particularly satisfying. And I found it quite difficult. And so having done that, I then stepped back from school, and I went to work. And I found that highly motivating and satisfying. And after I had worked for a while in the community, I traveled and did volunteer work overseas, and then that kind of sort of filled, filled me up enough to be able to go back to my studies. And so the kind of journey that I've had over the years, with my, with my academic progress, for a long time, I really understood it as being a narrative or a story of like shortcoming or not measuring up. But now, when I look back on it, so many years later, actually, I needed to have all of those starts and stops and, you know, sideways, movements to be able to actually realize what I wanted to do with my life and what would actually make me happy and, and what was - what I was passionate about, and what I wanted to spend my time and energy really thinking about, and it was bioethics. But, you know, when I was 18, or 19, and just starting my undergraduate degree, I had no idea what I wanted. So, you know, that's me telling myself a different story. But that's also been a lot of work to be able to let go of a different story that I really held near and dear for a long time.

Rachael Lyon 12:00

Yeah, that really, I mean, resonates with me, I have mentioned it before, but like I also didn't go straight from undergrad into graduate school. And I think the things that sort of happened in between directed me to this path, and at the time, it felt like such a failure, actually, to me anyway, on my part for you know, not having it figured out. And I actually think if I hadn't done all those things in between and taking a different path, I wouldn't have been here like, I wouldn't have known that this is what I wanted to do. And I also wouldn't have been able to do it even if I did know.

Harrison McNaughtan 12:35

Yeah, it also seems like recognizing the diversities of these stories, and that you should individual has their own is been a part of your research as well, it seems that you make a big emphasis of your research about patient engagement. I wonder if you could elaborate a little bit more on that.

Rachel Cooper 12:50

Mm hmm. I think this was also kind of a learning journey that I've had around, you know, how we tell stories pertaining to how we make services or systems or policies better. And what I started my career in patient engagement, maybe like five and a half or six years ago, I was really resolute on telling my story whenever I could. And that's like, deeply problematic now that I think about it, you know, many years later, I think when you're a white woman who speaks the dominant language, and comes from a middle class background, there are a lot of privileges that get wrapped up with the kinds of services or systems that you can or cannot get access to. And in my case, I was very, very privileged to be able to get access to systems and services that then become the basis of the stories that I'm telling in patient engagement. And over time, I'm realizing we should not be trying to make services better necessarily just for those people. I think it's the folks who don't get their needs met, and who, you know, are, you know, black or Indigenous people of color, people who are racialized people who are trans or don't fit neatly into certain boxes around their gender or sexual orientation. People who don't speak English, people who don't have high levels of literacy, people who don't have access to, you know, right now in COVID technology. Those are the folks who I think need to be we that, you know, institutions and organizations and governments and policymakers need to hear from those people, and they need to plan to be able to meet the needs of those folks, because everyone else will benefit, right? But part of getting to that place for me around patient engagement was really thinking about whose stories were not being heard. And part of that meant for me is I have to stop telling my story or doing so in different kinds of ways to different kinds of audiences and thinking about what really mattered and it's not really about my story, there are so many people who have had really difficult experiences, and for many different reasons have been silenced, despite the fact that they want to tell their story. And so I think a lot about whose stories get to be told, how they get to be told, and what venues - whose choosing to or not to listen. And so that's that intersection for me around narrative, and and the patient engagement work that I'm doing. And certainly, I think there's been a lot of evolution in my - in my own thinking over the time that I've been doing the work for sure.

Harrison McNaughtan 15:36

I can imagine that that also is especially important as you start your foray into, well not start but continue working in bioethics. I can't think of a field without - it might be that collecting those stories and making sure they're heard, could be any more important.

Rachel Cooper 15:50

And you know, I think right now, we are in a moment of racial reckoning, at least in North America in terms of thinking about police violence, thinking about systemic and structural racism, thinking about who even gets access to the kinds of platforms where they're seen as credible to be speaking from a lens of bioethics. And so my field, among many other fields that, you know, there's a reckoning that's happening right now. And I think the conversations are starting to pick up momentum. And I'm still waiting to see actionable change.

Harrison McNaughtan 16:27

Hmm mm. I can I agree that I think those those types of conversations are beginning in many industries, but lots of lots of ways to go for sure.

Rachel Cooper 16:35

And, you know, I think about this notion, and I don't recall where I heard it first so apologies that I don't have a source. But, you know, I think about this notion of institutional humility, that people who sit in positions of power within institutions sort of need to individually but also, as representatives of their institutions, actually, humbly make space. And that means actually reckoning with the, their own kinds of actions that have perpetuated inequity, or that have oppressed individuals or groups or communities.

And doing so in a way where there's transparency about that humble reckoning. And, you know, in my work, not just in bioethics, but across all the different things that I've done in my career, intermittently, I see little bits and moments of that. But again, there needs to be a much more committed approach among all of those folks that represents places and positions of power.

Harrison McNaughtan 17:35

And I think it's important - Yeah, by nature of the privilege of those people in that position, you're often blinded to a lot of the things that we're talking about, and you aren't even recognizing that you're overlooking them. But I think what we've seen this year is, if you haven't recognized those things, personally, people are shouting them through megaphones in the streets, figuratively and literally, I think it's come to a point where you can no longer say you didn't know any better.

Rachel Cooper 18:00

You know, I think in bioethics, there is this great hashtag on Twitter, that's #blackbioethics. And just there must be about 100, or more black bioethicists that do all sorts of different work across all different parts of bioethics. And when I think about the incredible perspectives, the unique perspectives, but also just the vast array of knowledge and insight, and kind of pieces of wisdom, that folks in the black bioethics community hold, those are the folks that I'm really listening to and thinking about and wondering sort of what is there that I don't know that I should be really paying attention to what they're saying, How can I fill in the gaps that I have in my own knowledge and my own perspectives that will allow me to do work in a way that aligns with what's important to me, which is a commitment to justice and a commitment to equity and a commitment to like democratization or trying to kind of relinquish some of the, the elitism that I think sometimes is bound up in bioethics.

Harrison McNaughtan 19:12

And it's interesting on the note of elitism that you're finding, such enriching conversations on social media and learning so much on social media. It's not the classrooms in the ivory towers, it's actually with the people on - on things like Twitter.

Rachel Cooper 19:29

Yeah. And I mean, I also just want to own the irony that I'm talking about the elitism of bioethics, and I go to Harvard Medical School, like that irony is not lost on me. And I think it's important to put it out there. You know, I think one of the beauties of Twitter is that people don't necessarily need to be affiliated with an institution or with a particular place to be able to contribute to the conversations. And I think about also just Twitter for me, as someone that has a really short attention span, it's actually a great way to think about things that aligns with the ways that I think about things, which is in very short bursts, intermittent, while doing other things at the same time, but you know, in the morning, I, I read Twitter, and then I inevitably, at some point during the day, I'll have a conversation with somebody that refers to exactly what it is that I've just read on Twitter. And so I see those different parts of my day and the the different kinds of hats that I wear in my life all kind of connecting into each other. And, you know, I think it's really important if I'm, given that I have this privilege to attend Harvard Medical School and to study bioethics, it's important to me that I really try and share that knowledge, to the extent that it's possible to do so in 280 characters on Twitter, which is not necessarily easy, but also being able to amplify the perspectives and voices of people whom I'm listening to and paying attention to, and who I believe others should be listening to and paying attention to.

Rachael Lyon 21:11

I'm wondering if you can actually give us a little bit of like an explanation or a background about what bioethics is. I think that you've touched on it a little bit in some of your answers about like, what's

important to you to look at when you're doing bioethics research, but can you give us sort of a sense of more concretely what it is?

Rachel Cooper 21:31

You know, it's the definition of bioethics is an interesting conversation unto itself, because I think people define it in a plethora of ways. And I've just pulled up my notes from that particular seminar that we had at the beginning of my academic year really thinking about, you know, what bioethics is, and how we define it. I would say, you know, bioethics is thinking about, you know, what is right and what is wrong, as it pertains very broadly to living things. So, you know, in my particular case, I'm thinking a lot about medical care and health care. But there are people who do bioethics research in teaching and scholarship around environmental ethics and conservation, you know, around stem cells and genomics and genetics. And depending on how you define the notion of what is living will kind of create a framework for for what it is that you're thinking about. But for me, I'm really thinking about people who access health care, I would define health care, quite broadly, not just medical care, and really thinking about all the different kinds of stakeholders and parties that are involved when health care gets access, or for whatever reason cannot or does not get access.

Rachael Lyon 22:55

It's a big topic.

Rachel Cooper 22:56

It's huge. Yeah. And I mean, that's the exciting thing for me is that there is no short, no shortage of areas that can allow, like, I can think about all sorts of things within - within that kind of topic. And I'll never run out of things to think about

Rachael Lyon 23:11

Exciting part of academia, I guess.

Rachel Cooper 23:13

For sure, for sure. I mean, I think like the, for me, I am so invigorated thinking about ideas and questions. And whether it's learning new things, or thinking about things I already know about from different angles, it really like, like invigorates me in a way that a lot of other things don't

Rachael Lyon 23:33

Sounds like the right field for you!

Rachel Cooper 23:35

So far, so good. You know, maybe I'll find a field that's even better tailored to you know, how I think and how I function, but so far this is, it seems like a really good fit. Yeah.

Harrison McNaughtan 23:46

So I did want to transition to another topic. Earlier this year, you wrote a piece for CMAJ. And it was a letter to your mother's physician, the physician who administered medical assistance in dying. And I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about this piece in general, and also what motivated you to write this piece?

Rachel Cooper 24:09

Yeah, thanks for asking about that. So my mother had medical assistance in dying in August of 2019. She had been sick for a long time and decided that she wished to have a medical assisted death. Why I

wrote the piece so I think, obviously, like grief is very complicated. And the grief that I had around my mother's death for a variety of reasons, not just the kind of method in which her - her death came about, like was very complicated and reflected a lot of complicated things that happened in our relationship over her life. But after she died, I was having a difficult time squaring the fact that after my mom made the decision to have medical assisted death, she kind of came alive in a way that we hadn't seen when she had been ill for like the months and even like years before she made the choice. And I, I found myself like trying to wrap my head around that of, you know, she made this choice. And in a way, it kind of brought life to her again. But the thing that brought life at the very end of her life was the thing that was also going to end her life. And so, you know, like, I didn't quite know what to do with that. And after I had been on bereavement leave for a few weeks, I had gone to see my therapist, and he asked me sort of what was keeping me busy, because, you know, I didn't really have other things on the go. And so I had a multitude of thank you cards to write for people who had sent meals and made donations and had provided our family with other support. And then I somehow said, You know, I need to write a letter, or a thank you card to my mother's executioner. And - as it came out of my mouth, I wasn't sure if it was a Freudian slip, and my therapist didn't quite know. And I thought, okay, I'm just going to think about that a little more. And I came home at the end of my day, and I sat down, and I wrote a letter to my quote, unquote, mother's executioner. And, and really, for me, like the, the process of writing that note, was a real moment of catharsis, of really trying to sort through my feelings, and, you know, starting, you know, sitting with a legal pad, and just putting pen to paper and getting those thoughts out. And then, after 45 minutes, or an hour of just, you know, continuous writing, stepping back and looking at it and saying, Okay, I think I've actually resolved this thing that has provided - [26:48] this question this dissonance that I couldn't quite square in my mind. So after I wrote that letter, I reached out to some academic mentors, because I wasn't sure if maybe this was a letter I just wrote for me, or if this was a letter that maybe was meant to be shared with, with an audience beyond myself. And the feedback that I received from my academic mentors was, you know, this is this is something that if you feel comfortable with it, you should consider sharing more broadly. So I had a conversation with my dad and my sister, and, and shared the piece with them. And they were both quite moved. And I was resolved that if they didn't give me consent, or had any misgivings about the piece being shared more broadly than I wouldn't do it and leave it at that. But they both felt, you know, very positively. And so I submitted it for publication. And when CMAJ got back to me and said that they were also quite moved by it, I had to reach out to my mother's physician who had provided medical assistance in death to get her consent. And I have to be honest, that exchange was a very moving one, we had an email correspondence back and forth over maybe a couple of days, I don't remember exactly. And I wasn't even sure if she would remember who I was or who my mother was. But she assured me that she did remember us. And she remembered my mother. And she was also quite moved. You know, one of the interesting pieces about the CMAJ piece was the original title was: "a letter to my mother's executioner." And when the piece went through peer review, that was the only thing that they wanted changed, everything else was fine, and it was going to be accepted. And I went, I don't remember exactly what I did with that, I think I sat on it for a little while. And then you know, felt, given the audience that maybe it would just make sense to come up with an alternative title. And so that's where the, the title complicated gratitude came from. But interestingly enough, when I sent the, when I sent the piece, the news that it was, had been accepted with this new name, back to the physician who had provided my mother with medical assistance in dying, she was upset that they had changed the title, and she wanted the original title to hold. So that was like a really interesting and surprising moments that came out of that experience. You know, like, [29:20] given the conversation that we had before about narratives and whose story gets told and how those stories Get, get pulled as I've thought a lot, especially in the last number of months, because I'm taking a course on narrative ethics. About what does it mean to share a story like the one that I wrote first CMAJ, whether it was right to even share it. And and I mean, maybe my my thinking has deepened a little bit since that time. You know, I think part of the reason I wanted the story to be published was because in

2019, when my mother had medical assisted - medically assisted death, there were like, less than 5000 people who had had made in Ontario since the legislation had been enacted in 2016. And so as a family, like we didn't really know what to expect, and I think we were looking for whatever kinds of answers and information we could find, that would perhaps be something more than just like missed. And so part of my wanting to write the story was painting a picture, not just of my own experience, but actually painting a picture of sort of what it's like to be in a room where someone is receiving MAiD, and to also speak to the complexity of emotions that come with it, you know, so I think, what I heard from other family members, not in my immediate family, but who were also in the room when my mother died, was that they had a very different experience of the same event. So it's important that, you know, the story that I told about my mother's death, it's really, from my perspective, it's not necessarily shared amongst others who were there, you know, but I think at the same time, about the things that were important to my mother, and you know, in the days leading up to her death, we spoke a lot about all of the events that she had had over her lifetime. And those events actually became the backbone of an obituary that I wrote that she liked, more or less approved while she was still alive. And the outline of a eulogy that I had, was more than halfway through drafting before she died. And it was important to me that she felt like - it was important to me that she could not give approval, but could have a say, in how the stories we were going to tell about her got told. In the same way that she was resolute on having a say in terms of how she died. And so, you know, really the - the story up until the point where she died she was there for. And well, you know, I can't - I don't know if she would disagree with my portrayal of it. I'd like to think that the peace before she died was a shared experience among many people. And that subsequence was much more about how I experienced those moments after her death. So you know, I think storytelling is a complicated business, right? Because there is no one objective truth. Everybody has a standpoint or a perspective that they come from some time, the way I see an event really does not square with the way that somebody else saw that same event. And so, you know, it's important to say that every story has to be taken with a grain of salt, if not more than one grain, and to know that there are inevitably biases, who's telling the story and how the story is told, and, you know, to really think about what, what is the meaning or what's behind what's being shared or not shared. But, you know, the, the point of sharing the story was really, number one to do a public service and, and really aligned with my mother's commitment to sort of justice, and she was a community organizer, and did all sorts of leadership around making sure that the Yiddish language and the Yiddish culture stayed alive in the city of Toronto. And so, you know, for me, sharing her story was a commitment to that, in a small way, you know, and also really wanting to demystify something that was so kind of shrouded. You know, one of the things I - one of the things I subsequently found out was that family friends of ours, whose husband ultimately had a medically assisted death, you know, that piece got read a number of times before MAiD was provided to that individual, and it provided the spouse with some information around what to expect and and kind of provided a bit of a groundwork around having a little bit of information. And so even in just hearing that, that feedback brought back to me after that person lost their spouse, in a sense of feels like I was able to accomplish what I set out to accomplish.

Rachael Lyon 34:28

Sounds like it was an important part of your mother's legacy, too, would have been something that she wanted.

Rachel Cooper 34:33

I think so. And amongst my family members, there hasn't been at least to my knowledge, any considerable pushback,

Harrison McNaughtan 34:41

It sounds like on the on the other side, actually, that it's gone on to maybe help you process a lot and also help other people kind of guide - because this is a very contentious topic often quite taboo, and I could totally see that there's probably not a lot of stories around this made public and so I really appreciate you sharing yours and especially in such a complex and nuanced way, I think it really captured the moment.

Rachel Cooper 35:05

You know, I think it's interesting for me being someone studying bioethics and having had this kind of an experience, because when I think about my mother's death, the hospital bioethicists was in the room and having reflected on that particular piece and knowing that bioethicists, having met them at you know, various networking events in the city, it was profound to know that that's part of their job. And it was profound for me to know that at some point, in my future career, I may have the privilege of bearing witness to a family's like most grievous moment, in the most difficult moment of their life. And that's a huge - that humbles me greatly. And so to have that experience feels like something that as unfortunate as it was to lose my mother, and as difficult and complicated as it was, it also means that, in my own professional work, I actually have a tool in my toolbox that most others don't actually have.

Rachael Lyon 36:04

Absolutely, yeah. I'm wondering, since you are currently a master's student, and we are as well, so we are really curious how the virtual learning experience has been for you, because you would have started completely online. Is that right?

Rachel Cooper 36:19

That is correct. Yeah. I started like, the first of September 2020.

Rachael Lyon 36:25

Wow. So yeah, what is it like studying completely online, and also studying bioethics virtually,

Rachel Cooper 36:30

I mean, I, you know, so I was supposed to be in this program. Last year. And because my mother died days before I was supposed to move to Boston to start, the program very kindly gave me a deferral. And, and I so appreciate that they did, because it was really in no, no condition to go to a different country without a without a support network and a community to study something that hits very close to home every single day. So, you know, then when COVID happened, and there was sort of a period of time where there was just a lot of uncertainty about what was going to be and how things were going to play out. And it was, was really difficult for me personally. So you know, Harvard Medical School made a decision in May, so very early about what the fall semester was going to look like. And that was really good for me, because I could really think about what it would mean to do my my one year program, at least partially online. I think there's pros and cons to doing it online. So I mean, the pro for me is that I'm in my apartment in Midtown Toronto, and my family is close at hand. And my social supports are nearby, just as they were last year in the year before that. The con of that, obviously, is that the people that I've met in the program, my faculty, people that I would potentially get to know as a course of doing interesting things on the campus at Harvard Medical School are not close by. And so, finding that sense of community in my program, I think, was quite difficult at the beginning. On one hand, we're all so excited to be in this program and to learn and study together and share that experience. And on the other hand, you know, we were in a moment where there was this great uncertainty about a pandemic that we were still learning about, there was so much grief in the world about racism, and anti black racism, and oppression and police violence, and, you know, like a public uprising around anti black racism and structural violence and police brutality. And then kind of getting into these moments where, after the first day, we kind of put all of those things aside, we weren't really talking about the fact that we were in the

midst of COVID, and that there was anti black racism all around us. And, you know, being in an American program, there was all the uncertainty about a very tenuous political situation in terms of the US government. And so all of those things, for me, were always swirling in the background, but I think, within the program, we were just trying to buckle down and learn. And so that was really difficult for me. I think finding your people when you can't actually be physically with your people is really, really hard and trying to make friends where I don't know - different parts of my life, the way that I've met people and made new friends is because we're in the same place at the same time and we're there because we have a particular interest or passion or something in common that can then become the basis for getting to know somebody. And you know, when you're not in a classroom, you lose the moments like before class starts and during break and after class, to kind of have small talk and get to know people and find out what's important to them. And and that becomes the basis for like, you know, beautiful budding friendship. And that's really hard to do on zoom because the way that was proposed for us to do it on zoom was to spend more time on zoom and talk to people. And so that's really difficult. It's a difficult way to, to get to know people. So I think after, you know, the first six weeks, maybe I think it took about six weeks to kind of find my people. And now, you know, I have people and we connect on WhatsApp, we connect by FaceTime. Sometimes there's snail mail that gets sent back and forth. So you know, there's, yeah, there's ways of being connected to people. But certainly, it's not the same. And when I think about what gets missed is, like, I've said to many people, now, you know, like being in grad school is hard work, especially the program for me is one year. So I knew going in, there was going to be most of my waking hours devoted to this thing that I really, you know, needed to get the most from, and when you know that most of your waking hours are going to be devoted to something, but you know that other people are going to be next to you doing that same thing in a similar kind of way, it makes those hours tolerable. And so I was looking forward to spending, you know, very long evenings into the night in the library, working on things with friends next to me, and then taking a break and going to get food or coffee or going for a walk and then coming back and doing more of that. It's difficult sometimes to be in my apartment, where I've been, every single day for I don't even know how many months now, where there isn't necessarily a good dividing line between what I'm doing for my schoolwork versus the other things that I do that aren't schoolwork, and doing it you know, basically alone, though, I have a wonderful roommate, and we hang out a lot together. There just isn't the same kind of camaraderie that comes from being with people that are in the program with you. Oh, for sure.

Harrison McNaughtan 41:44

Yeah it's hard to – to foster that camaraderie and also you touched on briefly, hard to foster a balance when you're doing your work from home. Um, I know a lot of people on Twitter and in other places are touching on feeling like they're always at work, they can never escape their emails, their bedroom they turn into an office it's become a very stressful place for them. It – it, there's a lot of extra challenges that have been piled on this year.

Rachel Cooper 42:17

Totally. And I think you know I think it's important for people who are educators to not lose sight of that. I think our program has done a, a really good job with saying you know if things are a lot for people to reach out and they can find ways to try to make that work. I also think that too that Zoom carries with it a cognitive load that for me at least doesn't exist when I'm doing in person kind of learning. So, kind of trying to attend to different people on the screen. So like Harrison is like in the big window I'm talking to, then there's like all these little boxes on top. So I'm trying to attend to one person but you know if people are gesturing in small boxes because you're talking too much or you know they want to transition to the next point, I I can't attend to that in the same way I could in a classroom and know what's going on around me. And so it's been difficult to try and think about how I can bring the most of myself to like, the online classroom so to speak but also have enough energy and bandwidth mentally to

then read things and watch videos which is like, lecture content and also engage with other parts of my brain and learning that I love to do which is basically all in front of this computer screen everyday.

Rachael Lyon 43:38

Have you figured out anything that's worked for you for balancing the work and leisure? Do you have any advice?

Rachel Cooper 43:44

[laughs] Oh I wish I did. Um, I think when the weather was warmer it was much easier to get out for walks. And to just move my body. And I'm someone who doesn't particularly appreciate the cold, which is you know, unfortunate when you live in Canada in the winter. Um, and so it's, it's been a bigger struggle for me to kind of get out and put my screens away and just be present with my body and I think it's – I'm not the exemplar of work life balance, less your listeners think otherwise. I really um don't do that well at all. You know I, I'm lucky to have my family close by and so the extend that it's safe to do so in COVID and I can spend time with them in person I really prefer to do that. Um, and really just be attending to the people who are right in front of me as supposed to on a screen. You know granted that COVID has required us all to lockdown that's really not so possible to do. But even then finding ways to just connect with people who I love. And sometimes, you know, increasingly I am doing that on the phone. Like, literally not even on zoom – I'm a bit old school I'd say, but you know when I needed to set up meetings um, particularly with people who I really enjoy hanging out with like friends, mentors, my family, I don't want to do it on video. I love looking at their faces but I would much rather close my eyes and, and just like listen to the sound of their voice and also re-charge. And it's hard to do that if every single person you are talking to you also have to attend to them on the screen in front of you.

Harrison McNaughtan 45:22

It is very challenging. I – I agree with you I like those strategies. I like to double up and do a nature walk with a phone call, that's become my new favourite. And those are things I honestly didn't do at all before COVID to be honest. I wasn't a nature walker, I wasn't a phone caller but we're I guess trying to make up for all the social interaction we're missing like you mentioned those pre-class chats, the hallway encounters, so we're just trying to do the best we can I suppose. I wanted to ask you as we wrap up our interview now, um, we like to ask all of our guests at the end of the interviews if they have a piece of advice, a piece of saved wisdom that they would like to pass on – and I think that a, especially that a lot of our audience and a lot of our podcast members are grad students we'd love to hear any sort of advice for someone pursuing grad school or having the ambition of pursuing grad school.

Rachel Cooper 45:59

I mean, so okay. So I guess I have two pieces. So one is if people tell you that something isn't possible like don't listen to them, or really minimize the amount of weight you place on that particular perspective. I think if I had listened to people in my life who told me – reminded me of all the challenges that I had been through in my life that would make it difficult if not impossible to do graduate school I'd never be where I am. Um, I really had to find people who would validate the strengths and particular ways that I think and I learn and that I communicate my perspectives and, and really place more emphasis around listening to them. And those are the people who continue to mentor me and inspire me and you know, remind me that even though the work is super super hard it is important and you know I'm doing things that are important to the world. You know, I think the other thing too and one of the reasons that it took me so long to finish undergrad was because not only is undergrad a super big slog but you really don't have a lot of autonomy to learn the things you actually want to learn. Um, you really have to fit into a certain kind of program that requires a certain number of credits and things you actually have no interest in. And so, for me I know that if I am thinking about and learning about things that

innately make me happy and that I'm passionate about I can spend lots and lots of time doing that and the pieces that are not interesting to me would be a humongous challenge. So I think that for people who are doing grad studies or who are even considering grad studies it's really important to think about what are areas of interest or disciplines or topics that you could see yourself spending 10 or 12 or 14 hours a day, 5, 6 even 7 days a week for a period of time really immersing yourself in. And not everything will be exactly to a person's interest but ideally on a balance of proportions if more of it is interesting than not that for me was really important to know that I could make it through studies that are challenging and difficult. So you know to get up in the morning and to read and to write and to think about questions around healthcare and around, you know what is right and what is moral and how we allow people to live autonomous lives in the spaces where there's lots of injustice and there's lots of inequities and things are not as good as we would like them to be – that allows me to keep doing that work even though it's really really difficult work.

Harrison McNaughtan 48:05

Thank you so much for that I think that's gonna resonate a lot with a lot of our guests. I know that resonates a lot with me.

Rachael Lyon 48:43

Me too yeah.

Harrison McNaughtan 48: 45

Thank you so much for coming today and sharing – I appreciate especially how candid and forthcoming you've been. I think that a lot of what you've talked on with resonate a lot with our guests and our listeners so thank you for that.

Rachael Lyon 48:53

Thank you so much. And I will ask just because you said we could come back to it, have you thought of anything fun or, um unique about you that people might not know.

Rachel Cooper 49:12

Um, yeah. So when I was in high school I ran a marathon and it was really [laugh]

Rachael Lyon 49:13

That's so impressive!

Rachel Cooper 49:14

I don't say it cause it's so impressive, more that because I'm someone who has a difficult time sustaining hobbies, and so for me it's just like this remarkable experience of actually sustaining a hobby long enough to do something that I had really wanted to do for a long time. And as it so happens like I wrote some of my best papers while I was training for that marathon cause you spend so many hours – this was before Ipods so I was carrying like a discman in my hand, so that tells you how....

Rachael Lyon 49:49

That's even more impressive, those are heavy!

Rachel Cooper 49:50

The same Counting Crows CD for like 35 kilometers. But you know you do a lot of thinking and so, I'd go on these really long runs and they were slow, I was by no means fast at all but I would come home and just feel super inspired to write and to work on my academic work. I unfortunately had a running

injury a couple of years after I ran that marathon and I never gotten quite back into it. But for me movement is good, movement inspires me and I do my best thinking when I'm like, forced marching around the block between reading and writing.

Rachael Lyon 50:22

I love that fun fact, that should be in your back pocket for the next time you get asked something fun about yourself.

Harrison McNaughtan 50:36

So again, I want to say thank you for coming today and making time for us. We really appreciate your story and we're sure that it will resonate with a lot of our guests so thank you for that.

Rachael Lyon 50:43

Thank you so much.

Rachel Cooper 50:44

Thank you it's been such a pleasure to talk to you and, you know your podcast really inspires me to think about what it means to be an intellectual and to really think about that for myself much more holistically and less academically if that makes sense.

Rachael Lyon 51:01

Absolutely.

Harrison McNaughtan 51:02

Yes thank you, and I'm sure your episode will contribute to that reflection for others, so I appreciate it.

[Interlude Music]

Harrison McNaughtan 51:12

That was such a lovely interview. I just really appreciated how candid Rachel was with us throughout that whole interview, especially being able to share such personal stories. Obviously talking about her mother's physician assisted death takes a lot of bravery honestly to be public on such a personal issue, um and to make your story known. And it's interesting to me actually that that process seemed to – about writing about her mother's physician assisted death seemed to start like a reflective process but it kind of became something more public facing. And I think surely as we heard that process meant so much to Rachel and was a really great reflective process for her, but I'm sure it's just going to help so many other people just as much because those are the kind of stories that we don't often hear and are so important and resonate with people so deeply.

Rachael Lyon 52:08

I think it really like speaks to the power of stories that you know that this was something she was reflecting on and and there was – ended up being such power in the story and it had such an important or I'm sure has such an important place among stories of people who might be going through something similar that they can read and relate to even though it's a personal narrative and it's not like you know, in science we're always like "based in fact!" like "we need to have a pool of how ever many people" um, but one person's perspective and story actually is really important too. I found the piece about the title change also really interesting. That she had originally written, I guess the reflection, entitled it Letter to My Mother's Executioner, and that it had been submitted with that title and the physician who actually

administered, like the physician assisted death to her Mum liked that title. I found that so interesting and that she was like up in arms that the, like the journal wanted to change it.

Harrison McNaughtan 53:14

It is interesting and I think that maybe she could see that that phrasing – Letter to My Mother’s Executioner – while maybe technically in accurate or maybe technically misleading to some people, really reflects how it felt in that moment. That, that’s what was happening and that’s, I guess maybe that physician could see that and could see past the technical semantics and think more about the intention of the story.

Rachael Lyon 53:40

I always find it – it’s so interesting like how words can be so powerful and the connotation that they bring with them. I was, I was so struck by the fact that the doctor really wanted that word to carry through. I was also thinking about uh, our conversation about virtual learning [laugh] and how much that resonated with me especially in these COVID times.

Harrison McNaughtan 54:07

Definitely. I think that’s something that everybody is struggling with now. Obviously we’re going in on about 10 months now, 9 months, 10 months. Um, operating online and it’s especially interesting to hear her reflect on starting a new program, a new graduate program online and that’s that’s, yeah that’s probably an experience that a lot of people could relate to so I’m glad we touched on that. The difficulty of sort of finding your community and just forming relationships in a purely digital setting. Where you have never met these people face to face. It’s something I think that a lot of people have never done before.

Rachael Lyon 54:44

No, and yeah I think it also draws attention to these moments that I never paid attention to before – the in between classes or, you know just as everyone is settling down in a lecture where you can have conversations with people and meet people and make those connections. And I think we, we took those for granted.

Harrison McNaughtan 55:04

Definitely. And I think you know what, I bet you this is more of a collective experience than we even thought. I’m sure people outside of education, um, and even people on the other side of education, the teachers and the professors I think a lot of people relate to the struggles right now. So I’m sure a lot of our listeners can relate to those as well.

Rachael Lyon 55:24

I think that yeah, the, um, teleconferencing sort of burn out is just like, like this ubiquitous experience that um even if it’s like business meetings that you’re attending in quotes online it’s a – a different kind of mental strain and feeling at least with um, is exhausting.

Harrison McNaughtan 55:48

Definitely and it seems, it seems people are managing it a little bit better though. I think that definitely I’m feeling better this semester than maybe the, the winter semester last year. So hopefully as the pandemic is going on we’ll only get better at navigating that.

Rachael Lyon 56:04

I hope so. I think, I think that's, yeah. Something that you get used to and people keep saying the new normal right.

Harrison McNaughtan 56:11

Yeah, hopefully not for too much longer. But that was such a great episode I am so thankful for everything she was able to share with us.

Rachael Lyon 56:117

Me too I hope everyone enjoys as much as we did

[Outro Theme Music]

Lee Propp 56:53

You've been listening to the Accidental Intellectual. Our podcast is produced by Holly Boyne, Manon Feasson, Lauren Goldberg, Bronwyn Lamond, Rachael Lyon, Harrison McNaughton, Stephanie Morris, Lee Propp, and Ariana Simone. Our theme music is by Alexandra Willett and our branding by Maxwell McNaughton. You can check us out on Twitter [@accidental_pod](#) and on Instagram [@accidentalintellectual](#). Our website is www.accidentalintellectual.com. We'll be back next time with more stories from the humans behind the experts.

[Interlude Music]