

Dr. Sherry Turkle: We all know that the computer is not just a tool. It's the emotional, you know, kind of psychic center of our lives, for good and for bad.

Bentley de Beyer: Hi, everyone, and welcome to Talks at GS. It is my true honor to be joined by Dr. Sherry Turkle today, the Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies and Science and Technology at MIT and the founding director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self.

Her new book is a powerful memoir called *The Empathy Diaries*. It ties together her personal story with the groundbreaking research that she's done on technology, empathy, and ethics. Sherry, thank you so much for joining us today. It's a real pleasure to connect with you.

Dr. Sherry Turkle: My pleasure to be here.

Bentley de Beyer: The memoir is deeply personal, and I really recommend it to everyone tuning in. Beginning with the complex relationship you had with your biological father, Charlie Zimmerman, who your mother left when you were a baby, creating this gap in your family's life. How did that childhood drive the Sherry Turkle we know today?

Dr. Sherry Turkle: My mother left my father, my biological father, when I was one. And I wasn't allowed to speak his name. We weren't allowed to -- we never referred to his name. She went back to her parents, who were the Bonowitzes [sp?]. I was part of the Bonowitz clan. I saw my name, Sherry Zimmerman, written in a book that was hidden. I was just part of that group.

So I -- the first thing I got out of this kind of hidden life of secrets was that I was going to live a life centered in truth. I really became committed to really understand the danger of this lie and that lie and this family secret and that family secret because it had such a corrosive effect on me. So that's the first thing.

And second, I realized that what you see in a family or what you see in any situation is not necessarily the whole truth because I was an example of the other truth in my family that nobody knew. And so I think I developed a kind of sociological mentality very young because whenever I would go into a situation I would say, "I wonder what else is going on here?" I would never just take things at face value because I knew that

there might be a Sherry with a hidden name, a hidden divorce, you know, a hidden father wherever I went. So I think that that kind of sensitivity to the other truths that are not part of the normal that's being shown was also kind of embedded in my story.

Bentley de Beyer: You wound up at Harvard where you underwent your own self-discovery. I think there's one moment after an interaction with a fellow student in the book that says a lot about the discovery. You write, "I realized how much I wanted to talk to other people. I wanted to hear their stories. I had heard too little of life." Can you talk about that moment and what you took from it as you continued to pursue your studies?

Dr. Sherry Turkle: I met a woman who I had been -- who talked to me about how strangely I was coming off to the other girls in the dorm. And she -- and I didn't understand why. And she said because I was so shy that I would go into their rooms and I would ask for change for the Coke machine because I didn't really feel as though I had, like, other reasons to kind of go in and bother them. And she said, "You know, that's kind of like not okay. Just go in and say you'd like to just come by and visit."

And I put myself in her place, and I realized how brave she was in telling this young woman, obviously so anxious and shy, you know, "You're a good woman but you're acting nutty. Come in for this." You know? And we sat down and we had a conversation, and that's where this quote that you just read comes from. I had an empathic -- she had an empathic conversation with me. She put herself in my place. She asked me why I kept coming in for those quarters and those nickels and dimes. And I explained to her. And she said, "Well, you've got to try. I understand, but you've got to try something else."

And I said, "Well, you know, you all have famous fathers. You're all rich. You all have beautiful clothes. You all went to prep schools." She said, "But you're a lovely woman, and you are very smart and we want to talk to you." It was a transformative moment. And, you know, you never know who you're talking to. You just never know who you're talking to until you say, "Who are you?"

You know, empathy isn't: "I know who you are; I can walk in your shoes." It's: "I don't know who you are; tell me a little bit about yourself." So it was really a transformative moment.

Bentley de Beyer: Sherry, I really want to probe into

empathy. What I loved, one quote when I was researching before we got together together was your definition of empathy, which I loved. The ability not only to put yourself in someone else's place but to put yourself in someone else's problem. How important do you think empathy is for leaders, you know, running an organization like ours?

Dr. Sherry Turkle: So in an organization, empathy is not: "I know what it's like to be at your level of management." It's: "Tell me what it's like for you." What has your pandemic been like? Because I think we make a lot of assumptions about what this past year has been like for other people. And actually people have lived this very differently.

So a manager has to say, you know, "What has this been like for you?" So the first part of empathy is really not making assumptions and really being quite open to listening in humility to what somebody is really going to say. Not having the answer but really asking the question.

And then the second thing is a commitment to being there for that person and the implications of what they're going to tell you. And that's the piece that usually isn't included in definitions of empathy. Definitions of empathy usually stop with, "Oh, I've heard you. We've had our sort of kumbaya moment. And now I'm moving on," you know? We had our come-together thing.

My definition of empathy and why I think it's so important in organizations and also politically now when we need to rebuild our country, we need to rebuild our organizations is that it's a commitment to not just hearing that person but to then committing to them for what you've heard and what it implies about where that relationship needs to go next.

Bentley de Beyer: Why don't I just turn a little bit back to your story about the connection of your experiences with your research now. Your academic career ultimately landed you at MIT. And as you write, "I have a front-row seat on a movement from a psychoanalytic to a computer culture, a shift from meaning to mechanism." How has a psychoanalyst embraced that computer culture? And what did you see in that culture that was missing as a psychoanalyst?

Dr. Sherry Turkle: Right. Well, I'll give an example of what it looked like at the time. I was studying people's relationships with technology, particularly with computers. And

from the very beginning I used words like "intimate machine," "computer as Rorschach." Even in the late '70s, early '80s, when the early personal computers, the Apple II, I mean, I was there when Steve Jobs brought the Apple II to MIT. And, you know, people just wanted to touch it. You know, not the Macintosh, that clunky Apple II. I mean, you know, people just wanted to project their mind onto it.

One girl said to me, "When you work with a computer, you take a piece of your mind and you put it into the computer's mind and you come to see yourself differently." The earliest computers provoked that kind of -- I called it the Second Self. So I was getting, of course, you know, with my psychological training, I was getting that very emotional feeling from people when they talked about computers. And I would tell the engineers around me, you know, this is what I'm studying now. And they would say, "That is a waste of time. What a waste. You're not going to get tenure. You're wasting your time. The computer is just a tool."

So that's how I was treated, as though I was seeing something and listening and hearing something, which all of us now know. I mean, we all know that the computer is not just a tool. It's the emotional, you know, kind of psychic center of our lives, for good and for bad. But engineers just kept saying, "Don't do it. Don't do it." You know, even people who thought I was very smart and very clever and who didn't wish me -- who wished me well, you know, thought I was just, like, wasting my time and would not succeed if I continued on this path to nowhere.

So I think that was the challenge in my career, and that's where I give myself -- I don't know -- credit for persistence, obstinance. Maybe that's part of, you know, not having a father and saying, "I'm going to find out who this father is," you know? Nobody wants me to know who he is, but, you know, I am just going to find out, you know?

You know, once I decided something is interesting, I'm going to figure that puzzle out.

Bentley de Beyer: You've long argued in your work about the virtues of solitude. How has this new way of life we've been living reframed your thoughts on solitude as we all find ourselves with much more alone time than ever before? And I'd say I'll just put the caveat around "alone time" compared to, you know, people who have families, who may want some more alone time or want some more gaps or breaks for themselves to recharge

one-hour re-energize?

Dr. Sherry Turkle: In the beginning of the pandemic, I became quite anxious and quite -- you know, I'm fit. I'm healthy, thank god. I'm fit and healthy. But I went from sort of SoulCycle to being, as an over-65 person, you know, most likely to be intubated when I first started to read about the pandemic. And that sort of SoulCycle to most likely to be intubated, you know, if I got COVID was just totally disorienting for me. And I had a very, very difficult time with it. And I became very anxious. It was very hard for me to settle down. I live in a large apartment building in Boston.

And people got sick. You know, people were told one person in the elevator at a time. The valets take your car, but then you had to wipe your car down and you got the car back. I mean, I just became not okay. And it wasn't until my daughter came to stay with me for a while and, you know, and sort of took care of me a little bit until it was, like, "Mommy, it's dinnertime. Soup." You know? Which is those simple words of there being someone there to help me settle down that I got reoriented. And then was fine and then she and her husband left, and then I was fine. And I could find a path in solitude in which I was re-centered.

So the reason I tell this story is that a capacity for solitude doesn't mean that you can't be shaken or that you can't be, you know, thrown off your stride or you can't be traumatized. A capacity for solitude means that when you find yourself again you have the inner capacity to, you know, look within who you are and cope.

Bentley de Beyer: What's the best piece of advice you've ever received?

Dr. Sherry Turkle: On work, the piece of advice I got from Barrington Moore. He said, "Study what you love." And the reason he gave it to me is because he didn't think I could make really a career out of being an academic as a woman, so his idea was basically -- he gave it to me I think because he thought as long as you can't, like, earn any money studying -- I mean, I think he gave it to me for the wrong reasons. But basically it was, like, you know, try to make your job and your work, your passion and your work as much of an overlap as you can. It can't be 100% obviously, but try to really work at what you love. And if you do, when you fail -- and we all have failures; you know, everybody has failures -- you will have loved the

thing itself. You will have loved work itself.

And I think that that has just sustained me so much because, you know, when you're working on a project, you're working on a paper, you know, not a lot of people like it. And if you really have just loved the writing of it, you're really not so worried about that. I mean, you weren't able to love it, but it's been a wonderful life writing it.

Bentley de Beyer: Sherry, thank you so much for joining us at Talks at GS.

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