

# The Art of Asking Everything

## Sherry Turkle: Is Technology Killing Our Hearts?

**Amanda Palmer 00:32**

This is The Art of Asking Everything, I'm Amanda Palmer.

Here is the clickbait title: when Sherry Turkle was a baby, less than a year old, her dad did experiments on her. You'll never guess what happened next, when she became a tenured professor at MIT.

She's written a book, it's called [The Empathy Diaries](#). I have to get this out of the way, and just out myself from the get go as a squeeing fangirl of Sherry Turkle. I am a true fan, and have been a true fan, and a reader, ever since I read the book she put out in 2012, called [Alone Together](#), subtitled Why We Expect More From Technology And Less From Each Other.

I saw this book on sale in a little book store, I think in Cambridge, and the cover art was of all these people staring into their smartphones while walking down the street alone, and it spoke to me. And I was even a little scared to read it, but it was actually a relief reading it, because all of the things that I had been thinking subconsciously about smartphones, and devices, and the internet, and Twitter, and togetherness, and aloneness, was finally voiced in a book with scientific studies and proof about technology and loneliness, all written by this woman who had been at MIT for a long time, and boom. The stamp of approval. And the book made me feel a little less crazy, and poetically, less alone.

MUSIC BREAK - The Bed Song

Sherry Turkle is a powerhouse weirdo titan in academia, and by her own admission in this new memoir, she has always been kind of a freaky outsider. She has been a researcher and a professor at MIT, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, since 1976. That is the year I was born, people. She is the founder and director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self. And she's a licensed clinical psychologist. She's basically an expert on the relationship between people and machines. The relationship between human souls and smartphones. And she sits around all day every day doing clinical experiments with kids, with teenagers, with grown ups, with Furbies, with iPads, with Siri, with everything, to see what is happening with people.

So the book that I read after Alone Together, which I also gobbled up, was called [Reclaiming Conversation](#). This came out a few years ago. The subtitle of that is The Power Of Talk In A Digital Age. And it cemented my extreme Sherry fandom.

And she is sometimes, and she'll say it in this podcast, she kind of gets branded a Negative Nancy, an anti-technology person, an anti-smartphone villain, but she's not. She is not anti-technology, and she is not anti-smartphone. She just happens to be pro-humanity, and pro-connection. Pro-empathy. And she has also been branded a difficult woman for speaking her truth. So despite all of her many achievements, and being widely published, and being at MIT forever, she's also off grid, which makes her incredibly relatable to yours truly here, and also for many of you out there, especially women who may be listening who have become experts in your areas, but still feel totally insecure because people around you are like, 'Eh, you're not quite really real, sorry.' I can relate.

So I love Sherry Turkle. And in a world of technology going a million miles an hour, and misogyny being this insurmountable hump, she is asking all the right questions, doing all of the important research, and coming up with answers that are not easy to swallow. But goddammit, they are very important.

When I first read her books, I cold emailed and called her, this would have been back in around 2012, 2013. Neil and I were living in Cambridge, and I got to meet up with her, and we hung out in Cambridge, and forged an actual human being, not over screens, connection. And I had a list of fantasy interviews when I started this podcast, of people I was like, 'If only...' and one of them was Sherry. And then luckily, on March 2nd of this year, Sherry's memoir The Empathy Diaries was released, and she decided to give some interviews. [It got a glowing review in the New York Times a couple weeks ago](#), and it was not the book I was expecting to read, and you will see why. The whole second half of the book is just like bomb after truth bomb after truth bomb. Deep family secrets, hidden parents, hidden cancers, deception, MIT, and the men of science being sexist and gaslighty as fuck. It is a really great read.

And as we are finding out in this podcast again, we are all one. This academic MIT woman in her 70s, and this 44 year old rock star weirdo have way more in common than I ever would have imagined in a million years. Recording this podcast was such a pleasure, and you're gonna love every minute of it. Get your wine, get your tea, run a bath, and let us welcome to The Art of Asking Everything, my hero, Sherry Turkle.

MUSIC BREAK - From St. Kilda To Fitzroy

**Amanda 06:49**

Hi Sherry!

**Sherry Turkle 06:50**

Hi.

**Amanda 06:50**

Thank you so much for doing this. I love your fucking book. It is so good.

**Sherry 06:57**

I'm so happy!

**Amanda 06:58**

It's called The Empathy Diaries, it just came out a couple weeks ago. How are you doing?

**Sherry 07:04**

I've never written a memoir before, and it was scary. And I'm so happy that people are saying, me too! That happened to me too! I had that experience too! I'm so glad that you felt guilty about this thing you did to your mother, me too! I'm just so happy you felt alone at college...

**Amanda 07:32**

Oh, me too, me too, me too!

**Sherry 07:33**

And had the wrong underwear, me too!

**Amanda 07:35**

Me too! Me too!

**Sherry 07:36**

Kind of like, preacher! Preacher!

**Amanda 07:39**

So you've written, by the way, I will out myself as a Sherry Turkle fangirl. I've read your other books, your other books are very... They're human, but they're also very academic, and there's studies, and science, and social science, and all of this stuff about technology. When you wrote this book, were you expecting... I mean, you know you were writing a memoir, you knew you were putting this personal thing out in the world. Did you expect a flood of 'me too', and personal responses from your readers, and from a different kind of audience out there that aren't just used to reading your writing about technology?

**Sherry 08:17**

The question is would I find that other audience? Because people weren't expecting that of me. So the question was how long would it take for this book to find that other audience? Because I knew that there were things in the book that would have a resonance with many people, not just women. It tells a story of many universal experiences, immigrant experiences, experiences of abuse, experiences of not knowing how to be in new situations, experiences of feeling like the other, of family secrets. I mean, there was so much. But I didn't know if I could find this other

audience, because I'm not known for memoir. So I think in that sense I was surprised that I'm so lucky that very quickly people found me, they found the book, and they were willing to listen, to accept me as a memoirist.

I was compelled to write this book. I didn't write this book, this book wrote me. And I think it's because I'd reached a point in my life where my relationship with my work had become my story. Because I had been looking all my life for books that talked about people's intimate relationships with their work. I'm passionately involved with the story of intimacy and privacy and democracy online. I don't just care like, oh, that's my little academic topic. That is really compelling to me as a person, as a human. And I knew that the story of the assault on empathy in online life, that's not just what I do when I go to work, that's not just a good way to make a living. That is really compelling to me. And I knew that came from my personal history. And I knew that there weren't too many books that came clean about that connection. There were a couple. [Oliver Sacks wrote a book called Uncle Tungsten](#), where it's clear that his science, and his desire to stay sane, really are bonded together. That the periodic table saved his life at a certain point, by putting order in the universe.

And I just thought, I have got to write this book about why empathy, and the search for empathy, and the need to tell people why empathy is a human quality, and not something that any machine can pretend to do, and that'll just be okay, I just had to do that. And I just sat down, and I told my publisher this is what I wanted to do, and they said, okay. And I think they were surprised that it was so personal. I think they were kind of expecting maybe a little more intellectual history, so when they started getting family secrets, and naked fathers in the shower...

**Amanda 11:42**

My God, if I were your publisher, I'd be jumping up and down!

**Sherry 11:45**

I mean, I think they were like, oh... Well, that wasn't exactly... Oh. I think they weren't expecting exactly what they got, but I think they trusted me, that if I thought I had an important story to tell, it was because I did. And then it turned out that it is a pandemic story. Because it is a story of what I call *dépaysement*, stepping away, de-countrifying, stepping away in order to see better, which I think is what the quarantine has been about. We've had the privilege of stepping back in order to see our world anew. And that really is what so much of my life has been about, is being a stranger to my environment, being othered to my environment, and being able to see it because of that. And I think that's my superpower. And I think that's gonna be everybody's superpower now.

**Amanda 12:43**

Will you, in your own words, just talk about when you reflect back on the family that you came from, which was sort of jagged, but especially those two formative men: your dad, and then the man that your mom remarried. Can you walk us through those two men, those two stories?

### **Sherry 13:03**

My mother married and had me with a man who I think she thought she was marrying a glamorous fellow. He was a chemist. She saw him as a scientist, I think he had a MAster's in chemistry. I think she saw this as a kind of step up for her. She was a graduate of Brooklyn College, she was one of those people who had graduated high school at 14, and college at 16, in the New York City public school system in those days, you kind of kept skipping smart people. She went to work very young, apparently her heart had been broken. She felt a pressure to be married right after World War 2.

The mystery is, and I knew nothing about why, after a year of this marriage, I was born very quickly, and when I was one year old, she left him, precipitously. She put a few pieces of diapers and maybe one of her dresses and some shoes into an A&P bag, and she had her sister pick her up, and we went back to live with my grandparents near the parade grounds in Brooklyn. And we lived, really, five adults in a one bedroom apartment in my growing up.

And this father, whose name was Charles Zimmerman, was completely denied to me. So when answering your question in the first instance, I'd have to say I'm talking about a total absence of a man. I wasn't allowed to say his name, because she didn't want anyone to know she had been divorced, which was kind of odd, because there I was, a child. But I was kind of part of the Bonowitz Clan. Her parents were Edith and Robert Bonowitz, my aunt, her sister, was Mildred Bonowitz. She went to calling herself Harriet Bonowitz, and I was there, and really I could have been a distant relative! I was just another Bonowitz.

I had a very close relationship with these loving adults, but this Charles Zimmerman would be denied to me, both when my mother lived with my grandparents and aunt, and then when she remarried a man named Milton Turkle, because I was asked to take Milton Turkle's name, even though he didn't adopt me until many years later, well into my teenage years. And my name wasn't Sherry Turkle. My name was Sherry Zimmerman. So in school, I had to write Sherry Zimmerman on all my papers, then I had to come home and there was a special closet where I had to lock up all of my papers, so that my step-sister and brother wouldn't see them, or know that I wasn't a full Turkle.

I never knew why. There's a psychoanalytic concept of foreclosed, when something is more than repressed. We are not talking about this. It didn't happen. It's not even like, well here's your dad, and it was something so traumatic that I don't even wanna talk about it, when you're older you'll understand. No. It is as though it didn't happen.

So I had one father who couldn't be discussed, and whose name I couldn't carry. And then I had this other stepfather, ultimately, when he did adopt me later, who I think felt very ambivalently about me, because he had two children, biological children, with my mom, and then he had me. Our relationship was quite strained, because I really had been brought up until I was 5 by my grandfather Bonowitz, by my Aunt Mildred Bonowitz, and this really very embracing family. I

wasn't ready to accept yet another guy who had a fake name, and where I had to pretend, and yet another pretend situation. Living under this regime of pretend got very old.

And then there were kind of odd things. My mother wanted me to take a naked shower with this new Turkle, and they had kind of odd ideas. A lot of people said well, was it sexual abuse? It was more like sexual...

**Amanda 17:21**

It sounds a little like sexual cluelessness.

**Sherry 17:23**

Cluelessness!

**Amanda 17:24**

You describe this scene in the book with your mom smiling, and saying we're gonna do this. With this idea that we're gonna be progressive parents, and you're gonna go into this shower with this guy you've never met, and you need to look at his dick because we're progressive parents.

**Sherry 17:42**

Yeah! And it was so clueless, and I was so traumatised. I told my mom, no! It never happened again. But it was so typical of this new family. Yet another place I had to pretend. I just didn't like it at all. So I just had nothing good to say about him.

He had very particular insecurities, because when my mother died he wanted to use me, and again this wasn't sexual, he never made a move on me. He saw me as the designated adult in the family, the smart one, the one who knew about the world. He wanted me to drop out of college and come home and take care of my step-sister and brother. He was a force of keeping me away from progressing in my life. Whereas my mysterious biological father, in the book I describe the quest to find him, and the many surprises when I finally do find him. Because of course, all my life I went to the mailbox every Hanukkah, every birthday, every holiday. Would he remember me? Would he remember me? And of course he never did.

MUSIC BREAK - Grown Man Cry (Piano version)

**Amanda 18:58**

So you talk at the beginning of the book, and then you go into it later, about these experiments that your bio dad did on you.

**Sherry 19:07**

The book begins with my finding my biological father, as a woman of, I think I was 30-something. I've hired a detective, and he opens the door, he's living in Queens, and he opens the door, and he says to me, of course there's that shock, because he looks like me. And

he opens the door, and he says, 'Did you find me through the New York Times?' And at that time the New York Times had all these ads, find your job through the New York Times, and I'm thinking, all these years that I've been looking through the Queens telephone directory, and the Bronx telephone directory for Charles Zimmermans, all I had to do was look in the personal columns and I would have found that he's looking for me. But no.

He was a quack scientist who had disproved Einstein in his mind. Yay! And he had written, he had self-published a little book, and taken out an ad in the book review section, back of the book review, that said 'E = mc<sup>2</sup> is not correct, Queens substitute high school science teacher disproves Einstein. For more information...' and gave his Post Office box. And he had just assumed that I had found him by seeing the name Charles Zimmerman, and this disproof of Einstein, which of course I had not.

I said no, I hired a detective to look for you. And right away, I was a trained clinical psychologist by that point, starting analysis. Right away I saw that this was not somebody who could connect with what was happening here, the father and a daughter were having a reunion. He really was quite... I wanna say like an engineer, but that's giving away too much, that's sort of unfair to all engineers, but he really had an algorithmic way of saying, no, your mother wouldn't have liked that, I agreed to not see you, I agreed not to see you, that was it. And I said did you miss me? Not apparently.

He had a picture of me when I'd won some award, he knew I'd gotten into Radcliffe, he had a clipping which he gave me, which is the only way I knew that he had kept track of me in any way. When I got into Radcliffe from Brooklyn, this was a very, very big deal, that somebody from Brooklyn had gotten a scholarship to Radcliffe, and in the Brooklyn newspaper there was a little thing about it.

But he really was quite dissociated. How did my dancing, laughing, charming mother, how did this happen? But I didn't understand why she left him until he told me that she had found him doing psychological experiments on me, ala [Skinner](#), deprivation experiments, putting me in the dark, not talking to me, not responding to me. Today we would call them, they're in the genre of [still face experiments](#). Deprivation, of not giving a child any feedback. We know that's very bad for children, and yet he was doing them, hoping to become famous, using me as his material. And my mother found him at one of these experiments. And when she found him, she'd left him. We had gone to court, and my judge made me see him once or twice, but essentially that relationship was over.

And that's why, in that encounter with him, so much was accomplished. I reconciled with her, because I realised she had saved me. The best she could, she had saved me from what? Some kind of potentially psychosis. She was terrified by him. And I reconciled after her death, I was able to say mom, thank you. She was gone, but she was within me, and I was able to be in touch with that, and thank her for that.

And I was able to make my peace with my biological father, and say goodbye to the fantasy that I had had of him all these years, that he was gonna be some kind of Prince Charming. The absent father is always the father you can't have. Who could he possibly have been?

**Amanda 23:49**

There's a beautiful passage in the book, and you say 'After he died I was there to bury my father, and according to his wishes have a Rabbi perform the traditional Orthodox service at his graveside. He didn't know how to be a father. But while I was growing up, my connection to the idea of him, to a fantasy, that he had somehow been special, a scientist father, had given me courage. And that was worth a lot.'

And when you just make the obvious connection between what his fantasy was, the experiments with you, I'm gonna be a famous scientist, you managed to take that mangled quack fantasy and you became the real deal, Sherry.

**Sherry 24:38**

That's why I feel it's so important to explore your past. That I was compelled to tell this story because I think that it offers such comfort to feel like a whole person. To not feel, oh my God, I was determined by my background, yuck! No, it's saying look, this was a part of my life that I always thought I needed to reject, this horrible guy who did experiments on me. And the more I thought about it, it was no, this was somebody who had his own dignity, who had his own ambition. He had found errors in the [Michelson-Morley experiments](#), he thought Einstein was wrong, he was out there with his ideas, he wanted to engage. There's something of that in me!

MUSIC BREAK - Trout Heart Replica (piano version)

**Amanda 25:51**

There was another huge family secret that you said you sort of always sensed, and you knew, until it was finally revealed. Your mom had cancer pretty much the entire time you were growing up.

**Sherry 26:05**

Yes.

**Amanda 26:06**

And hid it from you. And then she got really ill when you were in college, and it all just sort of exploded. And again, you get this sense that she was doing it out of some sort of warped protectiveness.

**Sherry 26:19**

She was definitely doing it out of protectiveness. My mom was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer and had a mastectomy of the left breast when I was in fifth grade. And she made a decision then that basically no one was to know, which meant that her sister, her mother, and



her husband knew. And that was it. Now, I'm sure some of her friends figured it out, because some of her friends were wise in these ways, or had had this disease themselves, or figured it out. But basically, officially, that's who she told.

And for me in particular, her desire was that I go away to college, because I'd figured out I wanted to go away to Radcliffe. I needed to go to Radcliffe, I just needed to go to Harvard, and when I was told that I couldn't go to Harvard cos I was a girl, this was just my dream. And she wanted me to have my dream. It was really as simple as that.

And people said, well did she live through you? I don't know if she lived through me. I just know that my mother was on the side of my having my dream. I think she wanted to participate a little, but I never felt that kind of clawing, 'I've got to be there at every minute for you.' She wanted me to have my dream. And she knew that I was so close to her, and so involved with her, that if I knew she was dying, I would stay in the city, and go to a school in the city, and I think I would have gone to Barnard, which was an excellent school. I would have done very well, and I probably would be here. I mean, I would have done very well. But she wanted me to have my dream, and so she didn't tell me.

The mystery to me was how she kept this secret from me, really until I was 19 years old. That's ten years of keeping this secret. Especially a daughter. We were hugging, we stayed in the same bed, when she would be ill I would go into her bed with her, we would watch movies, we would eat popcorn, I'd bring her soup, we were physically very close.

This memoir is not just a recitation of facts, but is really an investigation of deeper psychological connections. I think this is an exploration of what we know but don't allow ourselves to accept that we know.

When I visit her in the hospital finally, when I'm called away from school, ten days before she's gonna die, and I'm finally called out of school, you must come home, your mother's in the hospital, it'll be her last hospitalisation. Go to Brooklyn hospital immediately. And I say to the doctors, how long does she have? And he says, oh, about ten days. And I say, well she's coming home in ten days? And he looks at me startled, and he realises that I don't know, and was he supposed to be the one to tell me? And I realise I do know. I do know that he's telling me she has ten days to live.

For people who don't believe in the unconscious, I say come here. Talk to me. Let me explain to you how it works. Because I did know. I knew, and I didn't know. And as soon as he said ten days, something snapped, and everything made sense, and all the times that I'd been given information and not used it, all the times when something wasn't right and I'd looked away, so many things made sense to me that hadn't made sense, and I realised she had given me this gift of freedom, so that I could pursue my dream.

**Amanda 30:08**

Will you read a bit of the book, about feeling alone?

**Sherry 30:14**

“I knew I could receive no comfort, because no one would admit that anything sad had happened. It was a very particular loneliness, knowing that people around you were also sad, but that you couldn’t be sad together.”

That particular quote comes from when I first suspect that my mother has been in the hospital, and that something bad has happened to her. My first suspicion, I’m 9 years old, and in fact she’s had her first mastectomy. She’s had her operation. And my grandparents are at our house. I sense that something is the matter, and I can tell that I’m being shut down when I try to find out. And yet, I’m sad, they’re sad, but for nine years no one could be sad about this. And I think that my mother’s refusal to be sad with me, sad with her family, really marked me.

MUSIC BREAK - Life’s Such A Bitch Isn’t It

**Amanda 31:43**

There’s a passage in your book that I want you to read, where Seymour, your partner, is talking to [Marvin Minsky](#).

**Sherry 31:51**

Marvin and Seymour are not having a conversation actually in this paragraph. Because Seymour is late to dinner. And this was very common. He’s sort of there, and I have begged Marvin to comfort be about what’s with this, that Seymour comes and goes, and has all this bad behaviour, he’s sometimes there, he’s sometimes not there. And Marvin refuses to comfort me, he tells me I’m lucky to have Seymour whenever I can have him. And so now it’s just Marvin and me having a conversation. And clearly that’s not interesting enough in my view for Marvin. This is my inner dialogue, as I’m over my lobster, over my surf and turf, with Marvin Minsky. This is pondering the Marvin/Seymour conversations.

“Marvin and Seymour made a world where intellect was valued more highly than empathy; a good conversation, more highly than common courtesy. Seymour was being as rude to Marvin as he was to me. Marvin was sharing his code: to be interesting, Seymour did not have to be kind. He had to be brilliant. I knew that the two men saw each other as life-long friends, but that evening, as we ate in silence (that’s Marvin and me), their friendship seemed oddly transactional. And since the transaction was about computational ideas, it made sense that I seemed to have nothing to offer Marvin.

I had a moment during that dinner where I felt competitive, and I thought, ‘Well, I could try to say something brilliant about Freud, or Proust, or someone else on my Chicago Great Books list.’ But then I fell back. I wonder if I really believed that I could come up with something brilliant enough, something Marvin-level.

Also, I was angry. But at who? Because I was there not just for the privilege of conversation, but for love, and consideration. And I wanted to be Marvin's friend, not just a brainy purveyor of conversation. I rejected the game.

The next morning, the two men were back at work. In this relationship, brilliant ideas laundered bad behaviour."

**Amanda 34:35**

I have been at that table so many times. I have sat at that table of men laundering ideas at the expense of empathy and emotion, so many fucking times. And it was so validating to read that paragraph, so beautifully written, Sherry.

And up until really recently in my life, I've always gone through that spin cycle of clearly I'm not measuring up. Clearly I don't have brilliant enough ideas about emotions. I don't have brilliant enough ideas about empathy to keep up with these men who are holding court at this table, dismissing, and also allowing. This man is so brilliant that he's literally allowed to just fuck the secretary, and ignore her feelings, and not call her back, because he's brilliant! You must see this showing up all the time right now, given what is happening with Epstein, Weinstein, Cosby, all the -steins!

**Sherry 36:03**

All the steins, right!

**Amanda 36:04**

Can you talk, now you're sitting at this particular moment in time, speaking of Me Too, not to say that Marvin Minsky is some kind of villain, or that Seymour was a villain, but there is this permissiveness around the currency of human life. What's important? Are the ideas important, or are the human beings important? And where are you gonna place your bets?

**Sherry 36:32**

This story has such meaning to me, it's so interesting that you pull it out, because I actually end the book on another Marvin Minsky story. Because I wanna just point out to anyone listening, any woman who has tried to win this argument, and felt she wasn't smart enough to win, I just wanna comfort you a little by saying I've prepared an advance. I have turned my entire intellectual firepower on such arguments. And I lose. Because they come up with stuff that is effing unbelievable!

In preface to this story about Bambi, I'm at a screening of Tron with Marvin Minsky. I know him as a loving husband, a loving father, and certainly was a loving friend to Seymour. He had ideas, brilliant conversation, and certain kinds of ideas launder any kind of lack of empathy, and lack of empathic behaviour, and lack of a certain sensibility about attachment to people. So here's my favourite Marvin Minsky story, which were it not for this interview you'd have to really get to the

conclusion of the book to read, but I trust you'll read it and find it at the end, it's just such a great way to end the book.

So I end the book with my most dramatic story, which is I'm at a screening of Tron with Marvin Minsky. And Tron is a movie about how the inside of the brain, the inside of everything, there's little computer programs, and Marvin Minsky loves it, cos it reminds him of his [society of mind theory](#), yadda yadda yadda yadda.

He loves it, he loves it, the mind is a machine, we're made up of programs. And he's surrounded by acolytes, as he's talking about how this is exactly what he's trying to say theoretically, this is brilliant, this is wonderful. And he sees me, and he says, you know, this is the kind of movie every kid needs to see. No kid should ever see Bambi. This is the kind of movie they should see instead.

So I'm such a jerk, I jump to the bait. I'm wanting to have a child some day, I grew up with Bambi, I'm thinking about Bambi. 'Marvin, why can't children see Bambi?' I ask, thinking of the mother, thinking of Bambi's love for his mother. And he says, 'Well, Bambi teaches that it's important to love you mother and be attached to a parent, whereas we're gonna be raised by robot minders and artificial intelligences, and no child should learn that that's important, because in the future we're gonna be raised by robots. So it's completely out of the question, and bad for children, to get that kind of idea about human attachment.' And all of these kids, and all these students, these impressionable MIT students around him, are going yes! Yes! Bad Bambi!

So I just say at the end of the book that when I had my daughter, the book is dedicated to my daughter, I stored up on Bambi, I made sure we had one at my summer house, my summer cottage, one at the winter palace, one at the summer palace!

**Amanda 39:56**

Your paraphrasing of Marvin Minsky here, "Bambi indoctrinates children to think that death matters. Some day we will conquer death by merging with computers. Such attachments, Bambi's attachment to his mother for example, will be unimportant. People need to learn to give that stuff up."

**Sherry 40:19**

It's not that different from being around a table and trying to argue for empathy, or trying to argue why computers shouldn't be psychotherapists, or trying to argue why computers shouldn't be companions to children, or trying to argue for all the things that I argue as a proponent of empathy. It's not because I'm anti-technology, I'm just pro-people.

**Amanda 40:43**

Pro-empathy!

**Sherry 40:44**

I'm just pro-empathy. Empathy for me was the way I kept sane in this household of people who had their reasons for lying, and I needed to figure out what those reasons were, so I had to become empathetic with them. It was a way to stay sane, it was a way to stay connected.

MUSIC BREAK - Melody Dean (piano version)

**Amanda 41:15**

There's a great passage in the book about your tenure at MIT.

**Sherry 41:21**

Well, to set the scene, at MIT I was fired before I was re-hired. And when I was fired, I didn't think it was right, because I'd written two books, and lots of papers, and I was Ms Magazine's woman of the year, and I was an Esquire person under 40 who was changing the nation, and they had made a rule just before I was fired, I would have had to be not only in my department, but another department to be hired, and I'd never heard about this rule until I was fired. I contested it. I didn't sue, I just made a stink.

The set up for this paragraph is I got a letter saying that I could come back, and I could stay. And so this is my sum up.

"I was not admired for my defiance. Women who are dispensed with, and come back to make trouble, are not likeable, even when they win on the merits. Instead of feeling proud that I'd stood up for myself, I felt ashamed that I'd been forced to do so. I exiled myself. I attended departmental meetings, taught my courses, did my research, and immersed myself in my students' writing. But I chose to stay off the larger MIT stage. We experience our lives as segmented, until in a moment of crisis or decision, things start to come together. So even when I got MIT's imprimatur, I never had a sense of belonging. REal daughters don't have to argue their case before a jury.

Real daughters don't get legalistic letters that tell them to be gone, and that they need to reverse by power of their wits. Nor, it crossed my mind, do real daughters have to hire detectives to track down fathers who've disappeared for decades. This is not a good way to think about success at work, or about belonging to a community of peers. But it was how I felt."

**Amanda 43:36**

That feels so much like my last 20 years in the music industry. Simultaneously fighting to be accepted and admired, but the fight itself invalidates the fucking fight. If I have to fight this hard to get you to say, yes your work matters, yes you are real, yes you are authentic, just like all these other big people... the fact that I've had to fight so hard makes me feel ridiculous.

I sort of did what you did, Sherry. I just was like, fuck all of this. I'm gonna go off grid, I'm gonna build some other house sort of away from the city, in the desert, where I can just try to pretend that that huge city of authenticity, MIT, the men, the awards, isn't really what I am craving. And

I've never reconciled it. I still, to this day, feel those deep desires to be truly authenticated. Like one day they'll send me a letter saying 'We were wrong the whole time, you really were real from the beginning, we just didn't notice!'

**Sherry 44:56**

What I think is so important about my writing about MIT, and it's interesting that you said at some point in this interview that I express anger at MIT, it was very important for me to admit that I've had a great career at MIT. That I'm not sorry I fought for my job, and took my job there. I'm not sorry that I didn't say, you didn't like me? Okay, I'm leaving, bye! You could say I snatched defeat out of the jaws of victory in a certain sense, because when I won my position in this kind of weird way, I basically said look, I'm not gonna sue, but I am gonna call the New York Times, and you'll have a reporter who says why didn't you give her tenure? So get ready for... What does it take for a woman to get a tenure around here?

And I think that since they had only this reason that I wasn't a scientist, and I didn't have two positions, this thing about I needed two positions not one, I didn't think they thought it was gonna be a good look. I realised that I didn't step up and say, well okay, now that I'm here, I'm just gonna start running committees, and I'm gonna wanna be the head of some stuff, and I'm gonna wanna run an institute.

They didn't get the best of me. I didn't insist that they get the best of me. I hid, and wrote my books, and did my work, but I did it sort of off grid, in a way.

**Amanda 46:35**

In this passage in the book, where you're talking about your tenure, you describe yourself as a difficult woman. I don't think you should say that. The university, and the man, and the system that you describe in this book, sound a hundred times more difficult than you go!

**Sherry 46:53**

I meant that I was seen as a difficult woman. But what made me difficult was simply that I complained about being fired instead of going quietly.

**Amanda 47:03**

What do you think about empathy and the human beings' relationship, or maybe lack of relationship, to it right now?

**Sherry 47:11**

I don't have a definition of empathy that's sort of kumbaya, like it's something easy, just share a little of your pain with me. It's not just sharing your pain, or sharing your place, or putting myself in your place. It's sharing your problem. It's not just putting myself in your place, it's putting myself in your problem.

It's very hard, because for me, empathy begins in solitude. Empathy begins in the capacity for solitude. In the capacity for being able to know who you are, and therefore listen to another person. Because if you don't know who you are, you just project onto another person who you want them to be, instead of being able to really listen to their story.

So in the response to the book, what I've really heard is people understanding that what we need is a kind of active listening that's very hard, where we first have to know who we are, who you are, and then be able to say, not I know who you are, but I don't know who you are. I'm listening to who you are.

Too often, empathy is 'I've been divorced, I understand your thing.' Not 'Tell me how you're feeling. I really don't know.' So it's a radical humility. Tell me. And I try to give very powerful examples in the book, of people who said to me, 'I'm listening to you, and I'm here for the duration. I'm listening, and I'm gonna stick it out with you.'

In particular there was a woman I met in college, I call her Lynn, who really taught me what empathy was. Because I was so at loose ends, I didn't have a friend, I was just floating, I just didn't know, I was so lost. She said, 'Look, let's talk. And you can count on me. I really wanna know what's going on with you, but also I'll be here for you.' She didn't say oh, I know how you feel, you must be lonely, you're from Brooklyn, you're lower class, I'll tell you all about how you feel. She really said, what's with you? And I'll go to lunch with you. I'll be with you. I'll walk a little bit in your shoes with you.

That's what we need to do now. This brings us to our country. We have a country to rebuild, but we also have relationships to rebuild. With each other, and with ourselves. And we have to be empathic with ourselves, we have to listen to ourselves, and we have to show that kind of self-compassion for ourselves. Cos there are so many points in this book where I'm so angry at myself. And I stopped the reader and I said look, look at this example where I'm so angry at myself, and I try to show how you also have to learn how to listen to yourself, and understand yourself, and show that kind of compassion to yourself.

So in terms of the reception of the book, I think that we are at a time where that kind of stepping back, seeing the country anew, seeing ourselves anew, and having that kind of empathy that's an active, engaged empathy, is hitting a nerve, and it should be hit because it's really what we most need now.

MUSIC BREAK - Grown Man Cry (piano version)

### **Amanda 51:48**

I have been in New Zealand for a year now, while pretty much 99% of my social circle is in a completely different situation. We move through life being in different situations, surviving different situations. None of us are ever charting the same course. And one of the things that I have found myself saying, over and over, if not 20 then 60 times, on the telephone, just in the

last two months, is I wanna know how you are, and I have to remind you, my frame of reference is so far away, I need you to tell me things that you won't even think to mention, because your whole circle is locked down, and I haven't been through what you've been through for the last nine months. And I want to understand, and I always say I know I can't really. But tell me. And it's been so strange, Sherry, talking to a friend in upstate New York, Brooklyn, Queens, LA, Chicago, Sarasota, Austin, and just saying to all of them, I don't really get it. I haven't been in lockdown for ten months. I don't know what's gonna come at me, but I'm here, I actually really wanna know.

### **Sherry 53:23**

I think that radical humility, I think very few people are able to accept the anxiety of this radical humility. And I think that that is a big message of this book. And I think that's why even though I didn't write it to be a pandemic book, I think that's why it is so relevant to this moment. Because it is preaching that empathy requires this kind of active engagement, and radical humility, and a kind of listening that is really about I don't know. And a willingness to have someone say, you said something that I think was very profound, a willingness to have somebody say, 'I just can't even bear to start. It's too much to even try to explain this to you.'

Because it's a little bit like my students who said they just couldn't even begin to talk to me about how they felt that this guy throwing himself and the desk out the window, for them it was just a waste because he was gonna fall at the same speed, which really is a very disturbing, symptomatic way of denying your connection to the emotion of somebody committing suicide. That's where they could begin. Just my being able to say, well, if you can't talk about it now, I'm in my office every afternoon. Come back, and together we'll try it again.

I always say, together again. Together again. That's how relationships of mentorship, and empathy, and connection, that's how they're made. You're there for the duration with these people. And that's very hard. It's very hard to sit with that. And so that's what I'm trying to communicate, that's what empathy is.

### **Amanda 55:44**

It requires time and attention.

I haven't even asked you about where you've been locked down, I assume that you've been in Massachusetts, or nearby.

### **Sherry 55:53**

Oddly enough, I've been locked down on the beach that [Thoreau](#) walked when he was contemplating not being alone, but when he was contemplating living life deliberately. He walked the beach from Sandwich to Provincetown. He didn't wanna live alone. When he was living at Walden Pond, the joke was that he'd live close enough so he could hear [Emerson](#)'s dinner bell every night, and he would often have dinner with Emerson. So he wasn't so big on aloneness. What he wanted was to live deliberately, by which he meant that he wouldn't just be living thickly



with people, without having made that choice. He wanted to live deliberately. And he took this walk, and he thought about what it was to live deliberately. What that meant.

So actually now, we are in a position to ask the questions, do I want to be not vulnerable when I talk to a friend about her last conversation with her mother, and how it was on a screen? Do I want to be protected by a screen when I'm having that conversation? Or do I want to show that I'm showing up fully present for that conversation?

I think we're all thinking about this now in a new way. And I think that's good. Because before, like you describe yourself in a bar, you have your iPad, or your pad, or your surface, whatever you have, your phone, and you just use the seven different programs you have, for being a little bit less vulnerable you just choose one of those, and you just choose that. So whether it's a Slack, or a text, or an email, or whatever. You just do whatever feels emotionally right. But you're not vulnerable in the same way as if you were present.

Many of us crave the full embrace of the human including that full embrace of the human vulnerability, because it was a horrible thing to say goodbye on a screen. And it hit us.

**Amanda 58:29**

You could look at this and see the upside, that perhaps we are seeing what we're missing...

**Sherry 58:35**

Yes, I do, I see both.

**Amanda 58:35**

But do you see a dark side, where people are taking the opposite take-away, is I never needed to actually go to those meetings, we could have just had them on Zoom! We can be together without actually having to get together in meeting rooms, we can work in an office virtually, this is fantastic! What about that? What about the opposite takeaway?

**Sherry 58:55**

That's why I'm trying to use this Thoreau term 'deliberately.' That you can make the decision deliberately, that some of the meetings that I had in person were skippable. Some of that schlepping across country to go to some thing with a lunch, and a brunch, and a munch, and a crunch, and a special evening... No. That could have been two Zoom meetings. I didn't need all that. Or maybe once a year, let's have a dinner, and the rest of the time we can get our work done. Once a year it's good for the team to get together. But not every week, or not every twice a month, or not three times a month, no way.

We're now in a better position to talk about this.

**Amanda 59:49**

Do you think people really are going to talk about it? Or do you think that the deliciousness of getting a little bit more compartmentalised, and having to be less vulnerable, and be that emotionally present because of the expensiveness of all of that vulnerability of doing all this in-person stuff is gonna maybe win the contest?

**Sherry 60:11**

I think we should stop thinking that there's Team Turtle and Team Engineering side, and we should choose up. Because I've enjoyed not having to travel. I have migraines, and I take this medicine and that medicine and this medicine and that medicine, but basically, if I don't travel, my migraines really, really drop. Now, I just don't know enough to know if it's the airplane, if it's the pressure, if it's the cabin fever, or just the getting up and changing timezones. I don't care. I just know that a lot less business travel really is good for my headaches.

I am one of the people who is gonna be very deliberate about my business travel. I'm on Team Convince Me. I'm on Team 'what is good for my human spirit?', which should be everybody's team. Is this good for people? Is this good for the human dimension of the project I'm on? And everybody now knows more about how to think about this.

But I think you're absolutely right that there's gonna be institutions that are pressing for remote, and there's gonna be people who are pressing for remote, because you're so much less vulnerable. I teach classes where I'll have 30 smiling faces, and then all of a sudden we'll get to some delicate part of the conversation, and all of a sudden I'll see people's still faces. When the going gets hard, people are taking a coffee break. I think it's gonna be very complicated, but this is the conversation we need to have.

**Amanda 62:07**

And this brings me to the biggest question that I am most interested in. When I knew that I could get an interview with you, the first question that came to mind is kids and screens right now.

**Sherry 62:24**

I have very strong feelings. I think we're in a good position, because a year ago I was in many meetings where some software company would come into a school, and would say something like, 'We have an unbelievable program. It measures your child's every keystroke, it personalises their learning, it goes across the curriculum, it tailors the work to their learning style, and their every interaction, and we're gonna sell it to your school system, and it's just gonna be completely revolutionised things, and we'll give you a free iPad, or surface, and all the entire library will be on things, so no need for the library, and this is what we're gonna sell to your school.' And school systems were excited, and parents were excited. Often people who didn't have much money and were sort of at a disadvantage cos they felt their kids were getting the very best of the best.

If you tried to sell that now, parents are more likely to say, 'Hold up! My child needs a person. My child needs a mentor. I need a person talking to my child, loving my child.' It is gonna be

much harder to sell people on the idea that what's really best is a computer-assisted, artificial intelligence, fancy-schmancy, your kid should be looking at a screen all day in school. Not to mention when he goes home.

And I think that we have gotten, and not just in the area of education and children and screens, I think we have gotten smarter about Facebook, privacy, data scraping, in a way, in my research, a year ago, I was still trying, I had to do so much work to get people to make this connection. When they're taking your data, it's not just that you're getting something good because you're seeing ads that you like better. Here's what's happening. And people would say 'Oh, well, you know, I like getting ads for the ballet slippers, because I like them!' And then I would go back in. But look, making the connection which I've always tried to make, between democracy, intimacy, and privacy. It's a kind of sacred triangle.

Not so hard to do that any more. After this election, Cambridge Analytica wasn't enough. 2016 wasn't enough. You had to see all that COVID disinformation. This has been a giant learning experiment that we've lived through. It's as though we've seen the country anew, we've seen the technology anew, we've seen ourselves using the technology anew. I think that we're ready for a reset in which we distance ourselves from the country, and we say, you know, I didn't see this. I knew this stuff existed, but I really didn't see this white supremacy quite this way, or really didn't see this Black Lives Matter thing, I really didn't see this income inequality, millions of Americans lining up for food banks, I really didn't see it quite this way. This neofascism thing, this QAnon thing.

People talk about liminal times, in my education, I learned to appreciate these times out of times, these moments of potential change. I think we're in one of those. It can go dark. But I think we're sort of at a point, both with technology and in the culture, where we can get that sort of shock, and maybe move forward, and say, you know, I'm kind of done. I'm out of my love affair with a screen for everything. I wanna try something different.

#### **Amanda 66:42**

A few weeks ago, I was walking around Auckland, and I went into a bookstore called Unity, and I saw a book on the table called [The Smart Wife](#). And it was a little bit after I had booked my interview with you, and I bought it cos it looked fascinating. It was by two technology researchers from Melbourne named Yolande Strengers and Jenny Kennedy, and you are cited in the introduction. It's a book about our love affair with digital assistants.

And the same way I wanted to stand up and cheer so many times while reading your book, because I really saw moments that I had never been able to really pinpoint and describe, you were committing to the page. And seeing an entire book about how fucking creepy it feels to listen to men bossing around lady-machines in their living rooms, and I was like, thank you! I cannot tell you how many arguments I have gotten into with Neil Gaiman about how I do not want that woman-box on my kitchen counter, and I can't really explain to you why! Here's a 350

page book explaining to you why this also is tied in with the entire history of the patriarchy, and why it makes me feel really fucking uncomfortable!

I hope you're right. But so much of this, again, comes down to that moment at the table where you feel something, and you sense something, and you know something. But it's like, even with stacks of evidence this big, it feels like it doesn't stack up against the giant bank account of Mark Zuckerberg, or the giant plans of Elon Musk, or whatever they are, they dwarf your empathetic instinct.

And I hope you're right. And I can't actually wait to see the next book that you write, because I feel like now that you've gotten the memoir and plonked it on the table, and been like, yo motherfuckers, this is why this is so real and important, that whatever the next book you write is, I am gonna be on the edge of my seat to see more about the case for optimism, and the solutions.

Because I'm sure, just like with my work in the music industry, I can be seen as a real Negative Nancy, but I don't feel that way. I feel like there are just systems that we're not paying attention to, and that there is abundance everywhere, and we're just sort of skittering into the ditches of scarcity without really realising the car is going off the road. And that goes for social media, computers, whatever, therapy, food, screens, life, kids, all of it.

It's so good to know that there is someone like you in the world, who's gonna be doing the work, and waving the flag for sanity while we all sit here wondering whether we're going fucking crazy.

**Sherry 69:56**

In my way of thinking, this is a fight ahead. You're right that things are still stacked for the patriarchy. This is a call to arms for empathy. This is not a 'things are cool now people have discovered it.' This is a call to arms for empathy. This is not an 'oh, thank God you have my little manual, you know how to do your empathic...' This is a call to arms.

**Amanda 70:28**

Thank you for writing such an incredibly brave book. I can't imagine how it must have felt penning some of those sentences, but you did a beautiful, beautiful thing.

**Sherry 70:41**

Thank you so much.

**Amanda 70:42**

And I love you. Even though we're 12,000 miles away from each other and through a screen.

**Sherry 70:49**

It's been great.

**Amanda 70:50**

It still counts!

**Sherry 70:50**

It still counts. I look forward to coffee. Bye bye.

**Amanda 70:53**

Thank you, Sherry.

MUSIC BREAK - Bottomfeeder

**Amanda 71:00**

This has been The Art of Asking Everything podcast, I am Amanda Fucking Palmer.

Thank you to Sherry Turkle, my amazing guest. You should absolutely check out and read her beautiful new book, the memoir, [The Empathy Diaries](#). All of her other books, all of which I can recommend, [The Second Self](#), [Alone Together](#), [Life On The Screen](#), [Reclaiming Conversation](#), are easy to find on the internets. Make sure you buy from your local indie if you can, instead of the gigantic Amazon gorgon in the sky.

You can also check out the discussions that we've started about her books on [The Shadowbox](#), which is our community internet forum.

For all of the music you heard in this podcast, you can go to [amandapalmer.net/podcast](http://amandapalmer.net/podcast)

Thank you to Morten Gamst at Envy Studios in Auckland, New Zealand, for recording today's interview.

And this podcast would not be possible in any way without my incredible globe-spanning team. Hayley Rosenblum, out of New York, who manages the Patreon, so many projects, so many artistic and audio and visual endeavours, thank you Hayley for just being an amazing human being, wearing 8 billion hats. In the 8 billion hats department, my assistant Michael McComiskey, who has had a really, really busy couple of months cleaning out our New York office and moving around, and grabbing archives from my Boston apartment, is back to being a full-time assistant, and that is great. Our Merch Queen in the UK, out of London, Alex Knight, transcriber extraordinaire, he's always pushing to make this podcast more accessible to all of you, and it's been growing beautifully. And also, he's behind all of the amazing merch that we put out. Our Merch Queen, Alex, thank you sweetie, you are wonderful. Kelly Welles is new on Team AFP, also out of the UK, she is my editorial assistant and social media masterminder-helper-person-friend. You're gonna be getting to know her more and more through the Patreon, through Twitter, you'll see her around. She's helping me craft bigger and better podcasts, and more importantly, she's helping me to write more. She's a great editor. So that is Kelly, and thank you Kelly for a lot of help on this Sherry episode. Cat and Rose at

Spellbound, for graphics, video-making, and all around marketing support. And last but not least, my wonderful manager out of Sydney, Australia, Jordan Verzar, who sees everything, connects the dots, supports me and my staff, and helps me to become a better, and hopefully less busy, artist.

This podcast was produced by FannieCo.

And last but not least, I always have to remind you, this wouldn't exist or be possible, not in this way, without my patrons. At current count we've got about 13 to 14,000 people firing up the engines of this office and this podcast, and everything I write and make and say. My patrons make all of this possible without branding, without advertising, without corporate deals, it's just me, my music, my art, this writing, our guests, the videos, all of the stuff that you see is just me and my little team making it, there is no background money, background ghost, there is no invisible funding formation. It's just my patrons paying for all of this shit. They pay my rent, they pay for my life, they pay my podcast staff.

If you want to [join the Patreon](#), it would mean so much to me. It's as little as a dollar a month, and it keeps all of the lights on.

Right now there are six super high-level patrons who go way above and beyond in the funding area, so I wanna give them a special thank you: Simon Oliver, Saint Alexander, Birdie Black, Ruth Ann Harnisch, Robert W. Perkins, and Leela Cosgrove, who's from Australia and I chat to all the time, big hugs to all of you. You are making my life possible.

Also just a quick note: I don't advertise on this podcast, if you haven't noticed. There are no ads, no sponsors. But, since it's my fucking podcast I can advertise myself if I want to. And I want to advertise that if you happen to be listening to this podcast towards the end of April, or beginning of May, 2021, which probably you are, I am having a gigantic everything Dresden Dolls and Amanda Palmer merchandise clearance. [I will put the link in the notes for this podcast but if you go to either my page or the Dresden Dolls page we are having a giant fire sale.](#) We are clearing out our warehouses of posters, and vinyls, and stickers, and pins, and everything under the sun that's just been sitting gathering dust in our merchandise warehouses for the last 10 years. There is shit that's up to 80% off. Patreon-people get an additional discount. So go over and check that out if you just want some things to make your life more stuff-laden.

All of you listening, it's really a hard moment in the world right now. I just wanna remind you that I love you.

Thank you so much for listening.

I will hopefully hear you, see you, and feel you again soon.

Signing off for now, this is Amanda Fucking Palmer. Keep on asking everything.