

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript

Lynn Thoman

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Ep 39: The Empathy Diaries and How Tech Changes Us and Our Relationships: MIT's Sherry Turkle

INTRO male voice: Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short, memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hi, everyone, it's Lynn Thoman. Welcome to another episode. Today, I'm excited to be here with Sherry Turkle. Sherry is a professor at MIT and founding director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self. Her work focuses on how tech is changing not only what we do, but who we are. Her books include *The Second Self*, *Life on the Screen*, *Alone Together* and *Reclaiming Conversations*.

LT: One of the issues she has explored is how tech is creating a stumbling block to human relationships and empathy. Her latest book, *The Empathy Diaries*, which is terrific, is a deeply personal memoir in which she applies her lens of looking at human connections to herself. Sherry is unique, she brings together tech and the humanities and thinking and feeling, and she done this from MIT, one of the most preeminent science and tech institutions in the world.

LT: I'm excited to learn about Sherry's personal journey of discovery, as well as her discoveries on how our phones are changing us, our empathy and our relationships. Sherry, thank you so much for our conversation today.

Sherry Turkle: Pleasure to be here.

LT: Sherry, you've written a very deeply personal memoir, which is highly unusual for an academic, and it's very revealing. Why did you write it?

ST: Well, my brand has been that thought and feeling are one. I realized many years ago that I was compelled in my work by my personal story, that my personal story was about learning my identity, because I learned how to develop a capacity for empathy, empathy for myself and empathy in particular for my mother. And I thought, that's a book that I want to read, how people's intellectual work is lit from within, and so I just over the years, as I developed a voice that could tell this story fairly and with compassion and love for all of the actors began to write about the relationship between my personal life and my love for my work.

ST: It's not a sort of line by line, what was I doing then and what work was I doing then, it's really about the deeper story on how I fell in love with the ideas that made up the core of my work. Over time, the book matured and I matured, and I made sure to write it at a time when I wasn't trying to get back at anybody or settle scores, I hate that kind of work. It really is a reflection on one's life and work, so it was a very natural progression. It's the book I wanted to read.

LT: The book is an incredible tale of love and empathy and understanding, and yet on the other side, you grow up with incredible secrets. Tell us about your family.

ST: The essential twist in my family and where I needed to develop empathy in order to get with the program in my family, is that my mother had been married to my father, divorced him, we went back to live with my grandparents. Then she remarried a man named Milton Turkle. My name was Sherry Zimmerman, but she wanted to erase all signs of this first marriage, and so I wasn't allowed to say that my name was Sherry Zimmerman, even though it was Sherry Zimmerman. I had to say that my name was Sherry Turkle, even though legally that was a lie.

ST: Even at school, my name had to be Sherry Zimmerman because legally that was my name. But I had to hide my school notebooks so nobody would see them. They got hid under lock and key in a special closet so that my half-brother and sister would never see them. I was never introduced by my name, we never spoke of my biological father, I could never see him, his name was never mentioned, I was the carrier of my mother's secret and my mother's shame, and my anger at her, because we didn't talk about it, I never understood why this was going on, it wasn't that she explained to me, or I understood anything about what this was for, it was just how it was.

ST: And it wasn't until... And this is the story I tell in the book, later in my life, after her death, when I meet him and hire detectives and find him and discover the secret that she was hiding about him, that I develop an empathy for her and why she had protected me from him, and reconcile with her, and in developing that empathy with her, really find my true identity and my work takes on a deeper meaning. And reconcile with her, which was so important to my identity and my equanimity, my coming to peace with who I was, who I am. So empathy and learning to have empathy for others and finding a way to have empathy with others really has been the leitmotif of my life and in my work.

LT: It seems that that could have gone either way, it could either have helped you develop into a positive person or harmed you so much that you would be really damaged. How did you make it into a positive shaping experience?

ST: I was very lucky because I was asked to keep a secret, which was a very damaging thing, by my mother, grandfather, grandmother and aunt, my mother's sister, four adults who loved me dearly. I was asked to keep this secret, this odd secret, not just about my name, but about the very existence of a father by people whose love I experienced as so powerful and so pure, whose love suffused my life. They read to me, they spoke to me, they talked to me, they taught me about citizenship, they talked to me about Jewish life, they talked to me about the Holocaust, they taught me who I was, and history, and they gave a context for their lives and my life, and they not only loved me, but they wanted me to be someone in the world in this country.

ST: So my solution, and why I didn't go nutty, which is I think what you're suggesting, or become very mean or bitter, was to try to get into their heads and figure out why would these wonderful people be doing something so odd. And so I became the Nancy Drew, the girl detective who I loved in my own life, and tried to figure out what was going on, what could possibly be motivating these people who I loved so much and who loved me so dearly. In *The Empathy Diaries*, Nancy Drew plays a big part, because she's the one who's going to use her smarts to discover the truth of her situation, and I became the Nancy Drew of my life, trying to figure out why these people were on such an odd mission with me.

LT: And it seems like they had many odd perspectives, from hiding your name, to hiding their home, hiding your father so you didn't know who he was, and then strange experiences, like after your mother and your stepfather were married.

ST: Yes, they weren't great spymasters, you understand. This was a Brooklyn Jewish family who bought delicatessen on Sundays and I mean, they... This was not Americans. So one thing they did in their attempt to hide my father's identity is they had a picture of him and they cut out his head. They had a cupboard over the kitchen table, and they put significant photographs and documents and legal documents. I called it the memory closet, and there I found two precious documents, the two documents that gave me keys to my father's identity.

ST: I found a book that was labeled "To Sherry Zimmerman." It was the first time I saw my name written out, since nobody referred to me as Sherry Zimmerman. And I also found a photograph with his face erased. I cherished that photograph. He wore a tweed suit, his pants were tweed, he had lace-up shoes, and I fell in love with that photograph, and I later turned out to be a Freudian, surprise, surprise. And I'm sure I fell in love with every man for a long time who wore lace-up shoes and tweed pants. I'm sure I just walked through the world looking for men who were wearing those shoes and those pants.

ST: So there were these moments, and also, I mentioned the Holocaust, I think, before. They were marked very much by World War II, and I had an odd role in the family because I was the designated adult, not because I was old, this is like when I'm four and five, but because they were frightened by the world. So when a tradesman would come or a sink was clogged, I would be sent out and they would hide in the bedroom all dressed up. It really did have echoes of the Nazis coming.

ST: My grandmother would hold her purse, all dressed up. My grandfather would be in a suit, and I would go out and deal with this world. I was a child, but somehow that I was the one who could better deal with America than they could. They were frightened. And a lot of this wore off on me. So in some ways, my story is an immigrant story, and in having empathy for them and their fears for me, I had to take this into consideration too, that these were loving people, but these were fearful people. And I think the story you're referring to about when my mother remarried was she wanted to break away from this fearful childhood and this fearful atmosphere. These were the pieces of my immigrant story.

LT: What impacts did the way you grew up have on you, your world view and your work?

ST: Most importantly, it taught me there's always another story adjacent to the official story. And for a sociologist and ethnographer and anthropologist, there is no more important message, there is no more crucial message than that, because I was the other story, I was the secret, because when my mother remarried, she said we were all Turkles. I was a Turkle too. But I knew that was a lie. I wasn't a Turkle, I was a Sherry Zimmerman. I had another father. So in this story of Brooklyn normal, there was another story, because there was a secret that I was the holder of.

ST: And whenever I'm in a new situation and I'm seeing the sort of situation that's being presented, I'm always aware, I'm always asking, "What is the other situation this situation is hiding?" And it turns out that that's a classic question that was posed by my generation of European sociologists,

Michel Foucault, for example. What is the... That the normal hides, the story that it's repressing. So I think that my growing up prepared me for my fundamental job as a sociologist and ethnographer in a very deep way.

ST: Secondly, being thrust in the role of a grown-up when I was a baby. These things gave me a kind of hyper-vigilance, I call it. It's not the most attractive quality. It means that I'm always a little bit looking for the thing that's a little bit different than just what came before, a little bit of an over-attentiveness to what's going on in the world. Again, excellent for a crack sociologist, not so excellent if you want to be the most chill person in the room, but really excellent for a crack sociologist.

LT: And then how did you come to be interested in technology?

ST: By accident. I took a job at MIT. I was finishing up a book on why the French had not been interested in psychoanalysis until after they had had a student movement, a kind of radical student movement. And there was a French Freud who was perfect for the time and fit in with radical ideas and helped the French reinterpret themselves in a moment of, I call it *dépaysement* moment, the betwixt and between time in French society when the old rules were over, and new rules hadn't been written yet.

ST: I traced how people who really had never heard of psychoanalysis fell in love with this new way of thinking about the mind that was much more conducive to the new kind of society that the French were building, much less focused on rules and much more interested in the inner life of the individual. And MIT said, oh my God, this woman knows how to think about how ideas about the mind spread through a culture. Maybe she'd be interested in thinking about artificial intelligence, this new cognitive science of the mind, and how it's going to spread through the culture. Maybe she'll come here for a year and study that.

ST: So just around the time that I was finishing my doctorate, I had the idea that I would go to MIT for a year, finish my doctorate until I found a job I wanted to take and would look into this new cognitive science thing at MIT and just finish up my book on French psychoanalysis, which was called *Psychoanalytic Politics*. And I got there and I saw these people thinking about their mind using the metaphor of machines, don't interrupt me, I want to clear my buffer, I would need to re-program my ideas, hacker talk. One young woman said to me, "When I program a computer, I think of my mind as a piece of the computer's mind, and I've come to see it differently." And I was completely hooked, seeing this new object, the computer, as a second self, as a Rorschach, as a new way of thinking about how we think about ourselves.

ST: And that has been the story of my career. I've followed that story really ever since the late 1970s, as it's gone from personal computers to home computers to stand-alone computers to gaming to where we are now. Everything from robots to texting to mobile phones to Facebook to social media to pandemic and Zoom.

LT: What fantasies do our phones and our constant connections offer us?

ST: The fantasies that we can be immortal, and the fantasies that we can be perfect. My students don't want to come to office hours because their idea is that they will type a perfect email to me, and I will type a perfect email back to them. They'll type the perfect question, and I will type the perfect

answer, and won't that be a great interaction? It's the offer of companionship without the demands of friendship. It's the offer of companionship without the demands and vulnerability of intimacy.

ST: But mentorship isn't like that. A mentor, you come in, and a mentor says, that idea, not so good, but come again, I'll be here again. Take that idea and we'll look at it again together. Together again, again together. That's what a mentor does. It's not about perfection, it's about imperfection and relationship, together again. So the dangerous fantasy is you take what mentorship really offers, which is together again among human beings, imperfect human beings, and you turn it into the fantasy of a perfect email responded to by a perfect email, and it's very disturbing. But your question is exactly apt, that is the fantasy.

LT: And so we have time, you're saying, to shape the parts of us that we want to show the world, whether it's an email that we can edit and perfect, or whether it's an Instagram photo or even a Zoom meeting, they're all typically short interactions where we get to shape ourselves.

ST: From the very beginning of studying online interactions, the thing I highlighted most is that these are interactions where you're less vulnerable. Texting is the best example, because it's the worst... It's the worst. You get to shape your presentation on Facebook, you get to shape the presentation of self and be who you would most like to be. The internet is all about reducing vulnerability, and that's the thing that people want to do most, they want to reduce their feeling of vulnerability. I interviewed an 18-year-old once who said everything he does, he wants it to be on text. And I said, Why? What's wrong with conversation? He said, Oh, conversation, I'll tell you what's wrong with conversation, he sounded... I swear he could have been 80. Conversation, I'll tell you what's wrong with conversation. It takes place in real time, and you can't control what you're going to say.

ST: And he's absolutely right. But the point is, that's what wonderful about a conversation. It's like falling in love, it's like serendipity. That's part of being human. What stands before us is how do we feel about letting ourselves be human and imperfect and vulnerable.

LT: People seem to spend a lot of time on social media presenting the self that they want to present, the more idealized version of themselves. Are the boring bits of conversation important? When we have conversations with people, they're typically much longer than over social media, whether it's texting or even Zoom. Are the boring bits of conversation important?

ST: Yes, the boring bits are so important, because if you start skipping the boring bits, what are we? We start to think of ourselves as commercials, we start to apply to ourselves the standards that we apply to commercial spots on television. And that is what's happening. Essentially, when you put something on your Instagram, you're saying, well, how can I do this five-second spot that will be as good as a TV spot. How can I represent myself in some five second spot, some little ad of me, some little advertisement of me? You want to be amazing and sexy and unusual yet relatable. Yes, people want their bodies to be perfect, they want their skin to be perfect. We start to apply to ourselves the standards that we apply to Coca Cola bottles, we objectify ourselves.

LT: It's so horrifying. We no longer also seem to be present all the time with other people. Most of the time I've noticed when people are together, either individually or in groups, someone is on their phone, checking or responding to texts or emails. How do you see this?

ST: Oh, it's devastating, because what people crave most is that feeling of full attention, and all the research shows, one of my favorite studies is that if you're sitting at lunch with someone and you have a phone face down and turned off on the table next to you, the degree of empathic connection between those two people goes way down. And if you re-do that study and you put the phone in the peripheral, face down and turned off, but in the peripheral vision of both people, like on an adjacent table, still turned down and face off, it's worse, because even the phone dead reminds you of all the other places you could be, all the elsewheres, because now we have all the elsewheres.

ST: We're always elsewhere, we miss the focusing on body language, on eye contact, all of that, but we're also distracted by the elsewheres. I interviewed a woman who I'm so fond of, and she said to me, I'm fond of the interview and fond of her, it was a very, very funny interview, and she said, here's the eight-minute rule. And I said, what's the eight-minute rule? And she said, well, eight-minute rule is that you have to pay attention to somebody for eight minutes or you just don't know in a conversation what they're saying. And I thought, oh my God, this woman's my goddess, she completely gets it. A person has to be meander, you have to pick up the boring bits, you just have to be there for eight minutes.

ST: So I said, well, I really agree, you have to be there for the ups and the downs and just however it goes. And she says, but I can't do it. After just a few minutes, I just go to my phone, I can't do eight minutes with anybody. And the eight-minute rule goes together with the three-minute rule, and the three-minute rule was taught to me by a bunch of college students who say that... It's not the three-minute rule, it's the rule of three, I'm sorry, which is that if you're in a conversation with a group of people, let's say six people or seven people around a dinner table, three people have to have their eyes up and then you can look down at your phone.

ST: So in other words, it's a rule that says it's okay to leave the conversation, just as long as three people have their heads up. We're making all these different almost baby codifications to give us excuses to not be with each other, but seem to be playing the role of being with each other the way it used to be. But it's not the way it used to be, because people putting their eyes up and their eyes down, their eyes up and their eyes down, seeing if there are three eyes up, what are you talking about? You're not talking about anything serious.

ST: If I had a problem, if I had, God forbid, a death in the family, if I had an illness, am I going to share that in a conversation where people are looking up to see whose head is up and whose head is down? It's not going to happen. Or if I felt vulnerable about something, and I'm going to go into those dire things. Or what about if I just felt vulnerable about something, I'd had a disappointment in a relationship or in a significant work project, I'm not going to share that with a bunch of people who [____]. So we end up not really sharing of each other, which is also not good, so all of these are not good outcomes.

LT: And then, of course, there's artificial intimacy.

ST: Yes. This is the litany of all the things I love to hate. So artificial intimacy is a particular bugaboo of mine. Artificial intimacy are computer programs, that can fool you into thinking they care about you. They can fool you into thinking they have empathy, but they don't, because for example, during Covid, a New York Times, reporter said, try out this new computer program, it pretends it's a psychotherapist. Millions of people, or hundreds of thousands of people are downloading it because they love talking to it so much when they're lonely during Covid.

ST: So it just so happens, I had a very bad start of the pandemic, I was very frightened. I went from being the best person at Soul Cycle, being in the age group that was most likely to get intubated, and I just was not... I was like... But it was very traumatic for me. I was very anxious in the early days, because it was just fear with no knowledge, I was living in a high-rise, people were very sick, and I was very frightened. And this reporter, he called just at that point. So I was thought, I'm going to try this, I'm not going to be ironic, I'm going to encourage... This artificial intimacy machine tells you to make an avatar for the artificially intimate psychotherapist, and I called her Kate, and I talked to Dr. Kate and I said, can we talk about loneliness? That's my big problem during Covid, I'm lonely.

ST: And she said, yes, I'm able to talk about loneliness. And so I actually tried to have a conversation. So I said, okay, well, my big problem is loneliness, and she said, loneliness is warm and fuzzy. It was like a programming mistake, I'm sure the next day, this is a very, very smart artificial intimacy program. She was gone in a wink. And I said, well, thank you very much for your time, bye-bye, and I called back the New York Times reporter and I showed him a screenshot and I said, look, please. But I wasn't surprised. If you're worried about death, or your body or a fear or you want to talk to a person who has a body, you want to talk to a person who knows what it is to fear being alone, to miss seeing your child. You can't talk to some machine that doesn't have a baby.

ST: So to me, this was just absolute demonstration that there's nothing wrong with artificial intelligence, but it should stay in its lane, which is not pretending that it understands the most human of things, which is our bodies, our health, our children, loss, mourning, grieving, fear, anxiety, lust. These are things people go to talk to therapists about. Passion, faith, God. It's pretend intimacy, pretend empathy. It feels to me like a diminution of our humanity to be having these pretend conversations.

LT: You could see a more advanced sociable robot who could parrot the sounds of empathy, for example, to an elderly lonely person saying, I'm so sorry you are feeling bad, or I'm so sorry you're feeling lonely. Tell me about how you're feeling.

ST: Absolutely, that's why I'm nervous about it, because this one is very smart, but it had like a hiccup, just an error, but it was basically very smart. The point is, is that no matter how smart they get, they are pretending. Why do we want to be fooled? Of course, they're going to be able to fool us, I grant that. It's not that hard to fool us, because they're working from human scripts, they're scraping the internet for long conversations about these things, of course they're going to be able to fool us.

ST: But the point is, why do we want to be fooled? What's the pay-off to be talking to somebody that's never had the experience? Let's say I was sick and I had to talk to somebody about my anxieties about death. That machine would know nothing about the fear, it would have nothing real to talk about, it would be a performance of what I think people deserve to have in the real. So I find it very disturbing that we're considering this. I don't think it's a great thing.

LT: You think about what people want from Siri, and you think about what the robot of people's science fiction dreams is like. Can you talk about that?

ST: Yeah, they want the illusion of companionship without the demands of intimacy. I think that

really is what it boils down to. This fear of vulnerability makes us in some ways fear our own kind and not trust our own kind, because our own kind betrays us on a regular basis, and that disappoints us. Real people, they abandon us when we make ourselves vulnerable to them, they sometimes have their own ideas. Engineers like to say it's a friction-free relationship, that's another thing that drives me crazy. When were people supposed to have friction-free relationships? That's an odd thing. That's a very odd thing.

LT: That's an odd thing that nobody would have even considered before tech and sociable bots [robots].

ST: But now engineers say, here's a goal we can make human relationships friction-free, we can try to use engineering goals in human relationships. That is odd.

LT: It certainly is.

ST: In *The Empathy Diaries*, I think I tell the story of a demo I went to at MIT about the internet of things, and they were talking about friction-free relationships, moving them from engineering culture to social culture. And they gave an example in one of these early demonstrations and people were so infatuated with this idea that you'd order a mochaccino cappuccino from Starbucks and your phone would have information on all the people in your life, and also it would have a map of where all those people were in space, and it would plan out a route for you to get to Starbucks, let's say, to get your coffee and without passing your ex-wife, your ex-girlfriend or your department chairman with whom you might have had a fight or anybody with whom you might have had any friction.

ST: In other words, how can you use technology to make sure that your day does not have to deal with any sort of human friction... And I think in the book, the way I put it, is I said, who said that it's bad to not rub up against the friction of our lives, the people we're fighting with, who made that rule? And then I said, apparently, technology doesn't like that. Yeah, I think the question is, do we apply technological values to human life, and I think it's a very bad idea, that technological ethic applied to human life, we have to step back and say, well, where have we applied it, let's try to not do that, and let's start afresh and see if we come up with better ideas.

LT: What do you see ahead in five or 10 years? In what ways do you think tech will change us?

ST: I think there's a big struggle now. I think the pandemic has been a watershed moment because we had a year of zooming and now we're resuming, and take parents. Before the pandemic, a lot of parents were getting ready to say, oh, I've heard about these programs and I will give my child, not cradle to grave, but cradle to college experience of learning, it'll learn all his or her foibles, design an educational experience just for their learning style, that is, could be fabulous, use technology in a way that's so advantageous to the child. And now we talk to parents and they say, I want my child to have a person. Give me a person. And I think a lot of us are feeling this way, that we crave the full embrace of the human coming out of this. And I think that there's an opportunity to step back and really ask some hard questions about the regulation of this technology.

LT: Sherry, is there anything else you would like to discuss that you haven't already talked about? What should I have asked you that I did not ask?

ST: How can we get children to embrace solitude? We know that without solitude, you can't develop self, so that you can come to another person with confidence that you have a self and say, so who are you, and therefore, have a true mutuality. Psychoanalysts have a great line that if you don't teach your children to be alone, they'll only know how to be lonely. You learn solitude by being alone with another person, you don't learn solitude by being thrown in a room alone, you learn solitude by taking a walk in nature and holding the hand of an adult who also likes to walk alone in nature. You're alone together in nature. And gradually the child drifts away and walks ahead and learns to be peaceful by themselves in nature, knowing that there's a loving adult around.

ST: This takes time, this takes patience, this takes having adults who themselves tolerate quiet and solitude. And this is very important, it's essential to my message.

LT: Why is it important, Sherry?

ST: Because again, the psychoanalytic line is, if you don't teach your children to be alone, they'll only know how to be lonely. But if you don't learn how to be alone and know yourself, you're always looking to another person to tell you who you are, you don't have that sense of who you are so you can turn to another person and have empathy, which you're saying, I know who I am, but I don't know who you are, tell me who you are, I want to know who you are. And that's how a relationship is born. So I think this crisis of empathy is a crisis of solitude, it's a crisis of distractibility, and I think that's very, very important.

LT: Sherry, what are the three key takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

ST: Teach yourself and your children a capacity for solitude. Think about if you don't teach your children to be alone, they'll only know how to be lonely. Create sacred spaces in your home where there are no devices, where you can just practice the quiet of solitude. And think about vulnerability, that empathy is born in vulnerability, in the capacity for vulnerability. You can say to someone, I know who I am, I have my vulnerabilities, but I'm strong enough to be here and listen to you. And to be empathic, which I think is what we each need now, to heal ourselves, but also to heal our country, empathy is saying to somebody else, oh, yeah, I know how you feel, but I'm a vulnerable person who is able to handle just listening to you and being humble enough to say that I don't know how you feel, but I'm going to listen and I'm going to commit myself to you and see if I can help out.

ST: And I think that being comfortable with your vulnerability and being able to sit in humility and say to somebody, tell me how you feel, in all humility, I don't know, but I'm ready to listen is a very brave thing to do, really puts you on the line, and that's my third thing, that's really what I think we need.

LT: Sherry, you've been very brave, writing such a revealing tell-all in which you reveal everything, you make yourself very vulnerable. So thank you for your work, and I highly recommend The Empathy Diaries. It's wonderful. Thank you so much, Sherry.

OUTRO male voice: If you enjoyed today's episode and would like to receive the show notes or to get new fresh weekly episodes, be sure to sign up for our newsletter at 3Takeaways.com or follow us on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. Note that 3Takeaways.com is with the number 3, 3 is not spelled out. See you soon at 3Takeaways.com