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HOST:

Some parts of the world have already been in isolation for more than a year. Here in Canada, most of us are coming up on that one year mark and after a holiday season where most of us missed our family and friends, we're now moving towards a Valentine's day with the same virtual restrictions.

In 2018, Siri Agrell gave a talk she titled "How to get laid without your phone," which seems both prescient and impossible in pandemic times. At the very least it needed an update.

Can we start with the title of your talk and why you chose it?

SIRI AGRELL: My talk was called "How to get laid without your phone." The topic I'd been asked to speak on at The Walrus Talks was humanity and technology, and there are a lot of technologists on stage that night. So, I decided I wanted to be the one who spoke on humanity, and I don't think there's a lot of things, more human than our desire for connection and for love and the ways that we seek it out.

SIRI AGRELL AT THE WALRUS TALKS IN 2017:

My name is Siri. Uh, yes, like the iPhone and yes, like the iPhone. If you tell me anything, I will share that with a bunch of different people afterwards, I'm going to start tonight with something that I started thinking about it about after talking to some young people in my office that I used to work in, many of whom were dating, exclusively through apps like Tinder that had been mentioned a couple of times tonight.

These thoughts were inspired initially by, by one young guy. New, smart, funny, interesting, ambitious, who told me about a text he'd received from a girl he'd been saying for about six months saying that they needed to talk. He knew what that meant as we all do that they are going to break up that it was time and he started to dial her number. And then he thought, you know what? I'm going to see if I can play this out. And so he texted her back and they broke up entirely by text. No face-to-face contact, no talking, never seen a gun. And when we talked about it afterwards, he admitted to being, you know, propelled partially by laziness, by a developing a version to conflict to a discomfort pretension and to the fact that there really wasn't anything there to begin with. And, and partly just



because he could, because the option was available to him. And then he asked me about the olden days and seem genuinely amazed and intrigued that people of my advanced years had, had ever managed to find and connect with romantic partners without this technology, without swiping or the benefits of algorithm propelled curation mean he couldn't imagine how it was done. And it sounded pretty terrible to him.

HOST: Why did this fascinate you?

And after right more than a seven minute talk, talking about dating and talking about our romantic interactions and online dating are, it's just a proxy for talking about how our reliance on technology has shaped us and how it affects us. And I worked with a lot of young people, you know, both in government and in the tech sector. And they would tell me about their lives and how they were dating and how they were breaking up and how it affected them. And it made me think back to how I used to do it and how my friends used to do it when we were in our twenties when we were there in age. And I think it's just so emblematic of the shift, right? The things that people are experiencing now, and it's not that things were better when we were younger, it was messy and horrible and terrible time. The tools that we have now are so important in so many ways, but they are affecting us. And I think that's the thing that I wanted people to think about that these, you know, little boxes that we hold in our hands and we stare up for at least four hours a day, that behaviour is changing us. And we have to acknowledge that match. Think about it.

The people in grade nine French class, he was sitting behind me. He made up some excuse to ask me something. And I turned around and saw it in his face. I remember the girl sitting next to him, giggled and quickly looked away in a new job out of university, hired to run a literary magazine. The publisher had hired someone else and arranged for us to meet in a college street coffee shop. I walked in and thought, Oh my God, hours later, we were still walking around the city in a meeting at work, a frustrating conversation with people, many people who lacked vision or creativity. And suddenly I realised that one of the voices was speaking of possibility of answers of opportunities to be seized. And I recognise something in the voice before I even looked up

How to talk to people: In grade 10 on the phone for hours conversations. It seems silly now, but mind blowing at the time, no training, no trading of anecdotes or opinions or what we're watching on Netflix. Just question after question in the same clumsy dreams and response, the same naive fears. And I still remember exactly where I was sitting in my bedroom. When I had that conversation shopping together for a Christmas present from my mom, my twenties, he said something that caught me off guard and made me laugh so



hard that all I could think was I'm going to be with this guy for a really long time, hours and hours, straight, everything and anything, poetry and delight and frustrations and ambitions. Silence, only to think about what had been said and the improbability and luck of having had the chance to hear it over drinks. Often it was over drinks, how to get naked for the first time. Anyways, always in the same room as one another. This used to be an obvious thing. Once in university, while tree planting pulled slightly out of the shadows of a tree while we kiss not so anyone can see or for a pitcher, but simply so we're fully in the Moonlight,

How to get serious: On a small plane flying across Northern Ontario. In my twenties, the turbulence is terrible, and I'm a person who firmly believes that a plane crash is how I'm going to die. The pilot, sits with me and talks about sailing. That planes are like boats on the sea, riding the waves. And I realised that if there's a possibility, I'm going to grow old and die with the person I love, then chances are it's going to be a bumpy ride, but that does not automatically mean you're going to crash. So, hold on to the armrests and try to enjoy the ride, how to break up in high school. It was outside his house in the middle of the night, crying to Sinead O'Connor's "Last day of our acquaintance" playing from the car I stole from my parents' garage,

Once in a bar, him not taking it well, trying to talk me out of it, explaining that it's simply because I'm young and haven't yet learned how to settle yet. Dragged out for hours until the candle on our tea table finally burned itself out. And I leave on the porch. Quietly leaves falling from the trees, drawn out, painful, really wallowing in it, painful and really rolling around in it, relapses and recurrences until they're fewer and further between until they're cast into a part of yourself that is simply memory and you let the rest of you

Over and over again like that. That's how you do it.

You know, as, as a few of us have mentioned are kind of just a low stakes example of the intersection between technology and humanity. They weren't introduced to do harm quite the opposite. Yeah. They're designed to forge human connections and they're doing so sometimes more than once in a single night. But to me, they demonstrate the need to think about those connections and the types of moments it is that we seek the moments that define us as human, both individually and collectively that make us who we are. What are those moments and how do we enable them through technology and how do we protect them for the sake of humanity technology, as we've heard tonight is advancing rapidly and introducing new tools, new ones that I'm scared of now like brain implants and they present many opportunities and breakthroughs, but also the potential of many new threats to our wellbeing, to our society, to our security and to our



sense of selves. But I would argue that the discourse around technology is framed incorrectly as it's put forward in terms of a battle, we must fight.

There are those who will argue. We need to fight against these threats against the potential dangers of unchecked technology. And there are fierce generals in this fight who point out the advancing enemies on our shores, the casualties who've already been lost and who understand from history and insight and common sense and experience. And sometimes from their own complicit involvement where these evolutions can lead and the dangers that they can hold the fighting against something requires troops or requires those who will follow you into battle and who believe they are not being constructed into a losing war. And so I would argue that this conversation about technology and humanities should not be framed in terms of what we're fighting against, but what we're fighting for as technology continues to advance, we must fight for the moments that make us human.

We have to fight for the magic of critical thought for the thrill of real human connection for the nuance of language properly used for the benefits of community, lived out in the open for the principles of public service of civility, of compassion, of straight up passion. We must fight for the painful moments too, and recognise that there's something to be gained from them and something that's lost when they are scrubbed away by convenience and efficiency. What do we lose when we can no longer experience inconvenience, awkwardness, solitude, pain loss. When we no longer actually get lost, we must fight for an unsanitized experience of humanity. Remember it, seek it out. Even if we do it with our phones in our hands, we must frame our conversations about humanity and technology against a goal, not a threat against the experiences we want, not processes we're introducing. And we just need to remind ourselves what we're fighting for. And that doesn't mean talking against technology, but in defence of humanity, I run a space for scale-ups called One-eleven. And I will tell you that no one in there is creating a company or a piece of technology with the goal of making things worse. No, one's doing that.

When you talk to people about what they're working towards, they will always talk in human terms that they are trying to free up time to create opportunity, empowerment, to make things easier to help people learn so that other priorities can emerge so that people can truly apply their expertise. They're trying to solve problems to create the moments that we all seek. And so if those are the goals, then those are also the metrics against which we must measure success. If we're trying to create time, we must seize on that time. If we were trying to enable expertise, we should listen to those experts. If we were trying to create opportunities, we must make sure they materialise for many and not just for a few. Technology is a tool. It is not a crutch. It should empower, it should not erode.



And so we must remain focused on the humanity and ask ourselves constantly, is this what we were working for? Are these impacts acceptable? And can they be mitigated? Are we doing something simply because we can do it because the opportunity is there because we can, or are we doing it because we should.

In many ways, the choices we face today are no different than the ones in the past. When other industrial revolutions have occurred, there's always been innovations and there's always been costs, but perhaps today we can push ourselves to get to solutions faster. We can anticipate the cost and we can make some upfront investments. No one here is arguing that cars shouldn't have been invented. There were accidents as was reference, uh, right from the beginning, but we probably could have thought about seatbelts and sobriety a little earlier. We must task ourselves as creators, and also as consumers to constantly measure the benefit of what is gained through technology while fighting to ensure that nothing important or essential is similar simultaneously lost. We must ground ourselves and the human experiences that we seek. It's not that we must find love with a phone or without one. It's not that we must reject technology or choose to work without it.

It's not that we shouldn't communicate through Twitter or Facebook. We should just remember that the people on there existed in real life too, when it comes to finding love, I've done it in my life without a phone, without an app. And I know the moments that define me and how I've chosen to live. And there are those today. I'm sure her using Tinder and finding those moments as well. Those moments of eyes meeting those flashes of familiarity, talking until the candles burn out. And I think they're finding pain too. They're definitely finding awkwardness that I know, and I hope they're experiencing those moments too, at least for a minute. I hope they're taking a moment to really live them, to feel them, to wallow around, to take the time to call instead of texts, to look each other in the eyes, to steal one last kiss in the moonlight and maybe be alone for a minute or two or three, and asking themselves who they are and what they want before they raise their hand for the next swipe.

HOST: How did this talk lead to a book and how will that book live in this virtual reality we live in right now?

SIRI AGRELL:

One of the things I love about or loved about the walrus talks when they were happening in real life was, you know, the audience and the conversations you had afterwards. And after I gave this talk, you know, so many people came up to me and started telling me about the experiences they were having dating or the things they remember doing or their own. And Jessica Johnson. Who's The Walrus editor-in-chief sort of leaned over to me and just said, "You know, you



really need to think about doing this as a book.” Um, but that was a couple of years ago. And I think it, it really accelerated for me when the pandemic started. Um, because all of a sudden, all we had was our phones. All we had with our was our screens, we were on our own. And the only way we could connect, you know, was via Zoom or on text.

So, it really sped up. I think that intellectual, um, process for a lot of people where they realised, you know, I'm, I'm bereft because of this, I'm missing something. And so I just felt there was such a good time to say what we're experiencing right now. We had been experiencing before this, there was a lead up to this and now is the moment to really reset and say, okay, when we come back out in the world, what do we want and who do we want to be to each other? And that's what the book is. And so, you know, I thought Valentine's day 2021. As we hopefully emerge back out the world this year, you know, will we remember how to love each other?

HOST:

Siri Agrell spoke about connecting and reconnecting meaningfully at The Walrus Talks: humanity and technology in 2018, and her new book, *How to get Laid without your Phone* is available now at www.withoutyourphone.com. If you enjoyed this podcast, please share, subscribe, and leave a review on Apple podcasts.