

WOMEN IN TECHNOLOGY – AN OXYMORON?

So the theme this month is ‘women in technology’. Hmmmm. Maybe I am one of those women in technology? After all, here I am writing in an online magazine? In that question, clearly I am perverting the intention of the theme.... But hey ho... I can only go where my thinking takes me... wherever that is...

Writing for the3rdi magazine provokes, evokes and invokes me. It provokes me to explore topics that left to my own devices, I would not have initiated; it evokes varied emotions in me before, during and after producing an article; and it invokes me to write in the hope that I will discover new thinking and action as a consequence of my engagement. It calls me out to examine something I might otherwise avoid – especially if I am confronted with something I believe I know very little about. On these occasions, I recognise I cannot offer expertise, validated by research. I do not want to offer written rhetoric, nor give too much voice to my non-conscious assumptions with the risk of hyperbole that might ensue. So, on such occasions, I choose to enter a place of deeper personal reflection – to discover something about myself in the hope that this will also illuminate and be of service to others. I do this because I know I can only speak with authority and authenticity about my own internal processes. I do this because I trust that in so doing, more is revealed to me and, I hope, to others. I do this because I love to discover and to learn.

So, ‘Women in Technology’! This is one of those moments of facing my own ignorance. I notice the feelings of excitement, trepidation, irritation, fear of standing on the edge of the unknown, wondering what on earth I can bring to this ‘new’ enquiry – because for me, it is an enquiry that currently has no answers, no firm ground on which I can stand. I perch on the precipice, reaching back into myself and listen to my first thoughts: what do I have available to me that might be useful, relevant, supportive – firstly in helping to make sense of my ‘on-the-surface unknowingness? How might this enquiry be of interest and/ or service to others? I know I cannot answer the second question – as this may or may not reveal itself in hindsight. But I can begin to engage with the first question....

...In my ‘reaching back into myself’ to muse the topic, I am reminded how sometimes I describe my sense-making process as being predominantly ‘inside-outside’ – i.e. stuff happens outside and my attention moves inward to internally process its impact on me. I am generally slower to manifest a response than others whom I experience as more ‘outside-inside’ – i.e. stuff happens outside and they outwardly react more immediately, talking and acting out their meaning-making in the presence of others. In reality I think we are all iteratively processing ‘...inside-outside-inside-outside...’ engaging in a perpetual dance of sense-making in relation to our inner and outer worlds. For simplicity though, I sometimes find it helpful to differentiate on the basis of my experience of relational dynamics with others. It seems relevant here as I consider my relationship with myself, my sense-making and my dominant technological resource – my laptop.

I love computers. I love technology. Way back in the mid-80’s I bought an Amstrad PCW as soon as they hit the shelves. I am a bit of a gadget girl... and yet I notice I have become less so, as the gadgets have moved beyond the realms of being a work and productivity tool. My computer used to provide me with a way to be with myself, to think without interruption. It enabled me to connect internally, peacefully, safely when all around me seemed chaotic, scary, unreliable. It supported – and still does – my inside-outside sense-making. Seeing this insight form on the page helps me understand the periodic resentment I experience as others disturb what for me, used to be a deeply personal, private space. With the advent of the internet, this once personal container has long since been invaded by email, twitter, skype, google circles....

I am a woman. I use technology. I write with it. I create models, capture images and sound. I share information with others through it. Often I experience myself as lost in it. I have some expertise in it and am frequently bamboozled and frustrated by it. My brain is served and fried by it. It is my friend and my foe. It provides a quiet place into which I retreat; and it drives me in an unrelenting, frenzied dance - like the fable of the red shoes, which do not allow the dancer to stop. It is a vessel that helps me capture and document my inspiration; and it is also a beast that sucks my thinking dry and numbs my brain into oblivion. It offers me the best and the worst of myself. It offers the potential for connection with others and I lose myself to it. I am a woman using and used by technology. I am a woman in technology?

Where is this going? I’m not sure yet.... So I’ll need to write some more...



...Over the years I have learned that taking time to write helps me to become aware of what is moving and emerging within me. The act of writing, sufficiently slows down the seemingly chaotic whirling of thoughts, ideas, emotions, memories, images within me so that something can begin to converge hopefully, into a coherent form. I used to write prolifically in my paper and pen journals – but as technology has become such a dominant feature, I find myself more and more at a keyboard. I write to make sense of myself, my relationship in and with others and the world. I write to explore, to share, to create, to integrate learning, to improve. The computer is a tool that helps me work, organise, study, document and reveal myself to myself. And I get drained and exhausted in my use of it.

This insight illuminates, perhaps, why I am largely uninterested in social media. I spend more than enough time in and on the computer. My spirit needs other things to thrive and in my half-hearted dabbles with social media, I sense it would demand far more than I am willing to give for far less reward. It is not how I like to engage socially with others – the real people in my life. When I want to be with people, I want to BE physically, personally, emotionally with them. I want to be able to see, hear and touch them in a context in which we can be wholly present to and with each other. I am not great on the phone – even with my nearest and dearest. Skype is better but the limited channels of communication seem not to be enough to hold my attention. I am kinaesthetic and visual before auditory so I need physical presence to really ‘get’ the whole of another. I don’t believe I am alone in this.

I know I am best when I am wholly immersed IN something. I don’t want to be wholly immersed in and relating through a computer any more than I currently am because to do so, denies me access to diverse ways of being with others. I need to shift containers. Were I lost in the social media world of my computer, I would not find myself joyfully standing in the freezing cold with a crazy hat on my head, alongside another 69 bedecked singers on Portobello High Street singing cheesy Christmas songs, creating tongue-in-cheek merriment to hordes of tiny people and their parents. Were I lost in my computerized social media world I would not have been able to spontaneously join a wee gang of folk who meandered down to the pub on the prom, only to find there were more of us ... so we squeezed onto and around a huge sofa in front of a fire sharing wine, nachos and hilarity at all the weird and crazy things we do and have done at festive times. This is social; this is generative and it connects us through shared lived, in-the-moment experience.

Social Media may work for many but to me, the term is an oxymoron. To be social, is to gather together; to engage in complex, emergent, surprising, delightful and yes, sometimes even shocking exchanges. We are social beings. From a neuroscience perspective, social engagement activates our limbic system releasing oxytocin helping us to experience **relatedness** – a need in all of us – and arguably more so in women. Media is defined as ‘various means of mass communication...’. It is not social. It is generally uni-directional, seeking to send out information to which the masses may or may not respond. In my experience, what we call ‘Social Media’ holds more of the ‘media’ quality than the ‘social’ quality. Its bandwidth is narrow and because of this, only limited exchange is possible. It is fit-for-purpose for keeping people informed but it is simply inadequate for generative social experience. I love my computer and I want far more than it can ever offer.

I know this is mischievously stretching a point... but, in the same way that Social Media may be viewed as an oxymoron, perhaps the same is true for ‘women in technology’? If there are so few of us IN technology, perhaps it is because we simply prefer to engage in more ‘social’ relatedness than the technology-driven aspects of our world currently allow?

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