April Wensel: "Better People"
Season 3: Episode 10

Speaker 1:   Welcome to Stayin' Alive in Technology, a series of conversations with Silicon Valley veterans, touching on war stories from the past and practical advice for today. Now here's your host, Melinda Byerley, founding partner of Timeshare CMO.

Melinda Byerley: Welcome back to another episode of Stayin' Alive in Tech. My guest for this episode is April Wensel. April is the founder of Compassionate Coding, a conscious business that's bringing emotional intelligence and ethics to the tech industry through training and community outreach. Previously, she spent a decade in software engineering and technical leadership roles at various startups in Silicon Valley. She also teaches coding and mentors technologists around the world. Away from the keyboard, and you'll understand why I'm telling you this, she enjoys practicing yoga, running ultra-marathons and baking tasty vegan treats.

Melinda Byerley: I asked April to be on the podcast because I think she has had an experience of technology that must be captured for future generations to hear. She also has a powerful message to deliver to engineers about how they can improve their own lives as well as those of the people they work with and to the users that they serve and the world that they develop for. Along the way, we'll talk about how April's training as an engineer didn't fully prepare her for the workforce. It certainly didn't prepare her for the kinds of interviews that she encountered from companies that had questioned her abilities based on her gender or for work environments that would demand she completely give up who she was to survive. April's story of becoming compassionate to herself and others in a time and a place where everything right now feels like it's headed in the opposite direction is pretty damn inspiring, and that's why, for her song, I chose Better People, by India Arie.

Melinda Byerley:	I hope you will be as informed as I was about how to be a more compassionate manager, a coworker and a person. If you're frustrated with the pace of change and tech's approach to inclusion, I think you'll find optimism and hope in April's message and her work. If you do, please take a moment when you're done to send this episode to a friend who needs to hear April's story as much as I did. Enjoy.
Melinda Byerley:	April, welcome to the podcast.
April Wensel:	Hi. Thanks for having me.
Melinda Byerley:	April, I'd like to start a little bit with finding out where you grew up and what you wanted to be when you were a little girl.
April Wensel:	I love that question. You never get to answer that in job interviews so it's nice to go there. I grew up in Texas, in Houston, in a little suburb of Houston, and I had big dreams of being lots of things when I was little. I wanted to be a doctor like one of my grandmas was. I wanted to be a lawyer. My mom still says I'd make a good lawyer because I like to argue.
Melinda Byerley:	Does she realize that lawyers spend most of their time looking at papers instead of arguing? I don't know.
April Wensel:	Right. Yeah, it's true. Maybe not. My loftiest goal was to be president, believe it or not.
Melinda Byerley:	It's not too late.
April Wensel:	It's very true. I hope we get some woman in there eventually. We really need one.
Melinda Byerley:	I agree with you. It's never too late. By the way, I wanted to be the first woman president, too.
April Wensel:	Amazing. I love it. It's a good goal. We definitely need one. It's about time.
Melinda Byerley:	It is true. April, tell us also about the first time you touched a computer, if you can remember that.

April Wensel:	I was lucky in the sense that my dad worked for a medical center, and so he got to take the old computers home. My first one, I don't remember what type it was, because that wasn't what was interesting to me, but I remember it was green on black print on the screen. It was definitely a PC. It wasn't a Mac back then. I was playing around DOS, MS-DOS. That was when I first touched it. Yeah, it was all the command line.
Melinda Byerley:	Did someone teach you or did you just poke around with it and figure it out yourself?
April Wensel:	I played with it, and I had two older brothers that were into it as well, so they taught me some of the commands to type. I was just so fascinated with typing them and then seeing the magic happen on the screen.
Melinda Byerley:	It seems like a fast jump to talk about being a computer science major in college and in fact, I think you're one of the few that we've talked to that actually majored in computer science. Talk about how you came to choose it. How did you get from green on black, whether it's a Commodore PET or whatever it was, all the way to deciding to major in computer science in college.
April Wensel:	Well, another thing that I had, my favorite, was in high school, we had computer science, so I started taking it when I was a sophomore in high school. That was the earliest, and I loved it. We were using then C++, Turbo C++.
Melinda Byerley:	Solid.
April Wensel:	It was so fun. I have to say, I still have a soft spot in my heart for C++ because as finicky and everything as it was, that was what I learned first so I thought this is just how it is. I actually grew to really adore it. Again, it was that magic of typing something and then creating this whole world in the screen. It was really exciting to me. I took all that I could, three years of that in high school and then I went to college. I actually, when I first got to college, still wanted to take computer classes, but I also wanted to study archeology.
Melinda Byerley:	Cool.

April Wensel: Yeah, because I thought I wanted it to be like Indiana Jones. It turns out archeology is not like that. It's sorting shells in a basement for hours on end. I was like, okay, back to the computers. That's when I switched back to majoring in computer science.

Melinda Byerley: I like to ask people this question about how they think their major influenced how they think. The reason I ask this is my niece is starting college next year. When she's been thinking about what to major in, I try to tell her that I think that majors impact ... It's less about what you're doing and more about how it teaches you to think. For those of us who don't have a computer science degree, what did it teach you about how to think and how does it affect your perspective on the world?

April Wensel: That is a really interesting question, especially because I studied computer science at a liberal arts school.

Melinda Byerley: Interesting.

April Wensel: I got a BA in computer science. I wasn't in that hardcore only-engineering environment that I think a lot of people who study computer science are. I got a good balance. Even my professors, my computer science professors had an interest in other things in the world and so it was a little more of a balanced perspective. But definitely very logical, very rational, that bent, not very I guess poetic, so to speak. I did take English classes and that sort of thing, but it was very much more rational thought, here's how you go from A to B using logic in that. That's definitely how I've mostly approached the world after that.

Melinda Byerley: How well do you feel, or maybe you don't feel this way, that your degree in computer science prepared you to work in computer science when you were out of college?

April Wensel: I definitely got the right programming skills that in that sense. We did have one class on software engineering that was more about not just the coding but how to actually build software, the process, and things like that. I think that was helpful. Yeah, I felt pretty prepared. Although, coding in academia is very, very different from coding in the industry. I have to say that I think the people who do coding boot camps that are more focused on training professional skills, I honestly

think that they come out much better prepared to work in the industry than people with computer science degree, just because you get a lot more practical skills than most coding schools I found.

Melinda Byerley: Say more about that because I was a theater major and I've done a little bit of coding. Maybe give me an example of the type of thing of what you mean by that.

April Wensel: I think that when we're coding in academia, it's more thinking about the algorithms and thinking about how you ... It doesn't really matter what the code looks like if it accomplishes what you want it to accomplish. My code would be very messy for school, because it could be, as long as it got the right answer. That was really all that matters because it was just me working alone for the most part on these projects. As far as other people being able to read the code or update it in the future, that really wasn't a priority and it wasn't graded. If it wasn't graded, I didn't really care. You got to have priorities.

April Wensel: People who do the coding boot camps, they're trained how to write code on a team to produce working production software. I think they learn a lot more about test-driven development and how to build maintainable, readable code and work together better on a team. I think that they get more practical skills. I mention that because I think that people who do have computer science degrees often have a little bit of arrogance around it compared to people who go through the professional coding boot camps and stuff. I feel the opposite way. I think they're better equipped. That's why I like to point that out.

Melinda Byerley: That's fascinating. I'm actually surprised and yet not surprised because it's almost like you go through and you understand the theory, and then it sounds like you get your first job and then you have to learn like, okay, how do I apply that theory? The computer science teachers never teach ... No wonder nobody ever wants to document their code.

April Wensel: Exactly. Seriously. Right? It's exactly that.

Melinda Byerley: Now I know why, because they're not teaching it in college.

April Wensel: Exactly. Yes.

Melinda Byerley: I always say the code is not done until it's documented, by gosh.

April Wensel: Seriously. It's definitely true. My interest in it, coming from Compassion and whatnot, is that if you document your code and you write it in a readable way, that's compassionate for people who are going to be maintaining and using your code, and even for the customers because then you'll be able to extend it in the future as needed on your team.

Melinda Byerley: This is perfect. We're going to get in there shortly. I have a transitional question, which is, so you've got this degree in computer science and it's clear that once you get out of college, you have to learn the way to apply that knowledge in the workplace. What surprised you? In terms of your expectations about what your life would be like after college and what they turned out to be, maybe talk a little bit about that.

April Wensel: It was interesting because I mentioned that I started computer science in high school, and all of my computer science teachers in high school were women, and a few of my professors in college, computer science professors, were women. As I started to do interviews for jobs when I was about to graduate, that's when I first got exposed to a lot of the bias in technology and the bias in interviewing. I was interviewing for a job at a game company. I loved video games back then so I was all excited. They said, "We really like to hire women when we're working on family games, but right now, we're working on these action games, so we're not really"-

Melinda Byerley: Wow.

April Wensel: Yeah, they said that straight up. I was like, "Oh, okay." I was the very insecure college student, so back then, I wasn't ready to challenge them on the spot, and I was just like, "Oh." This world that I thought was going to be women and men equal and all of that, I got that rude awakening early on when I started doing the interviewing. I think that was one of the big shockers, was like, oh, so although like things felt equal in school, in the real world, not yet.

April Wensel: I think, too, just, I don't know, I guess it was just totally ... I didn't really know what to expect. I thought I would get a job solving interesting problems as people like to say and sticking to my computer world and not having to deal with the human world. That's also not the case.

You're thrown into these teams and you have people all around you and so you can't hide out in the basement coding anymore. It's just really not how it's built up. That was another thing that was different. Because in school, I spent most of my time alone, on the computer, coding, and then I got in the workplace and it's like, oh, we actually have to talk to each other and I need to learn how to get along with people.

Melinda Byerley: That's fascinating because there might be people who struggle through computer science in college and have really good people skills and then that can help them, so if they can make it through that period of aloneness. There are people who are comfortable being in the basement, as you said, coding, they need to know that this is coming, that this will be waiting for them when they come out. It helps both people, I think.

April Wensel: That's a good point. That is a very good point. Yeah.

Melinda Byerley: You mentioned some of the bias that you encountered when you were interviewing. I think it's a good question to ask, what some of the professional and personal challenges that you encountered in software engineering and how that led you to start Compassionate Coding?

April Wensel: I think I got disillusioned I guess as I jumped from job to job. I kept thinking, I'll find that job where I won't have bias and it will feel like we're doing good in the world and all these things. I'd keep getting a few of those needs met but not all of them at once. I had worked for a company that was doing good in the world or I liked the product, but then they'd do something unethical or the boss would say something inappropriate to me and it's like, oh, I was so close.

April Wensel: Probably an example, I was at one job and I liked what we were working on. It was a product to help children. The boss that I had at the time, the male boss, I was challenging him in a meeting about I wanted to approach something differently. His response back was to take on a high-pitched female voice to repeat and mock what I was saying.

Melinda Byerley: Wow.

April Wensel: Yeah. I was like, whoa, that's not cool. That was an overt thing that happens and I was just like, oh, that's interesting, that sort of thing. I think so much of it that happens, and this is why I think a lot of women say, "Oh well, I've never experienced bias," so much of it is unconscious or subconscious or whatever where it's like how you're perceived in an interview. I think that definitely affected me where if I walk into an interview, the interviewer already has in their mind what a coder looks like, and it's not me, coming in dressed feminine as I do and not taking on that masculine persona that a lot of times is associated with coding. That's already working against me. It's like when you're an empathetic person, you can pick up on that energy in an interview because you can feel it's adversarial and they're assuming there's basically-

Melinda Byerley: They're looking for reasons to get rid of you. You can feel it. I felt it, too.

April Wensel: Yes. You know exactly what I mean. Imagine that energy and then being asked to solve really challenging problems that you know how to do but add that extra layer of anxiety about, oh, they're looking for me to slip up and make some little mistake. It was a nightmare. I've cried so many times after those interviews just because you leave feeling like, I don't know, just worthless. It's like they tear you apart. There are these really hostile interviews. That was another thing. I think it doesn't just affect women and people from underrepresented groups, but I think we experience it worse because of all the stereotypes working against us.

Melinda Byerley: I'm fascinated by this story of you being mocked in a high-pitched voice. The reason I'm fascinated by it is I have too encountered bias but maybe because I'm tall and I'm a big woman and I have a deeper voice and it's loud. No one has ever mocked me that way. I'm fascinated at the form and the tone. I have felt it differently. I think that's such an important point to explore that bias doesn't just look like one thing. Often it's absolutely related to the traits that you either express or in some cases don't express as a woman. I tend to be less feminine in the way I dress and less feminine in my appearance, and so the response I get, I bet, is remarkably different from the one you get, and yet they're still both forms of bias.

April Wensel: Yes, you're so right there. It's very true. Actually, I have seen both sides of it because I did use to present in a more masculine way, and I think it was partly survival instinct of knowing that that's what I was supposed to look like to succeed. I would wear the hoodie. I wouldn't wear any makeup. I'd always wear jeans and a t-shirt and like I said in a hoodie, and I took on a lot of those traits I think. It did work. I was accepted as one of the guys a lot of the time early on in my career, but it worked. Although, inside, I was denying who I really was, and that's a very painful thing psychologically to do, to suppress who you are in order to fit in. It wasn't sustainable.

Melinda Byerley: If you want to wear a frilly dress, no matter what your gender, what does that have to do with your code? That seems obvious to me.

April Wensel: It just seems obvious to me too. I'm in this private Facebook group for women in tech, and somebody was sharing, this woman, because she's analytically minded, she's a coder, she did a little experiment with her dress at work. She liked to wear dresses and that thing. She stopped doing that and did dress more masculine. She's like, "Yeah. I find that all my male teammates talk to me more and come to me more with questions and all that thing and include me more. Should I just dress like this from now on?" I was just like, "Oh my, gosh. This is still a problem." We're not past these things. These are still active problems in the workplace, which is unfortunate.

Melinda Byerley: It's interesting. Some of the most eye-opening stories I've heard have been from trans people in both directions. People who were born men but realized that they were women or felt more comfortable presenting as women, talking about how, when they started to present as women, how people contacted them less and took their ideas less seriously. Women who realized that they were trans men realized how much more seriously people took them. Even to this day, it's an astonishing thing.

April Wensel: Yeah. I've read some of those stories. They're very powerful. Definitely.

Melinda Byerley: Tell us about Compassionate Coding. Tell us about what it is first.

April Wensel: Compassionate Coding is a whole different philosophy for how to approach software development. It's based on putting human

concerns first at four different levels. The four levels of Compassionate Coding are: caring about yourself, so having self-compassion. That means avoiding burnout by taking good care of yourself and working on things like imposter syndrome, combating that. All these self-concerns and emotional management, that's the first level.

April Wensel: There's the level of dealing with your colleagues, both people who code and people who don't code and treating them with respect and empathy, things like that.

April Wensel: Third level, talking about how we care about our users. This ties into user-centered design. Actually, listening to the designers since they care about the users. That's that level.

April Wensel: The fourth level and the highest level and it's what really keeps me motivated about all this is really caring about the impact the technology we're building is having on the world. I think in coding, there's this tendency to focus on the bits and the bytes and the ones and zeros and to not think so much about what this is doing in the world. You're just writing the code. Actually getting people to care about that. It's a new way to approach software development that takes into consideration the humans impacted at all these four levels.

Melinda Byerley: Is Compassionate Coding an idea? Is it a company? Is it a nonprofit? What is it?

April Wensel: It is a company, yes. It's an approach and a company built around the approach to teach it. I travel around and do trainings within tech companies and speaking and that thing in order to spread this approach and to teach it.

Melinda Byerley: What inspired you to do it? What made you say, I need to do this? This is what I need to focus on. What was the straw that broke the camel's back?

April Wensel: There was a very definite one, which was I personally went through this evolution, as I mentioned, of trying to fit in and being one of the guys, but then realizing that I didn't want to be that way anymore and I wanted to be more empathetic, but then seeing that there really wasn't a place for that in technology as it was. I ended up quitting my

last position working for someone else because I had started speaking up about lack of diversity at the company and making suggestions for how we can go about it. I got the feedback in a one-on-one that people were "afraid of me" for doing this. At that moment, I was just like, "Seriously?" I finally found my voice. I'm trying to stand up for what's right, and me, the only woman lead, I was the first software engineer on that whole team of 40 people and they're afraid of me? It was just very frustrating.

April Wensel: I was like, you know what? I'm done. I quit the job that day. I gave two weeks' notice, but I was just done. I quit the job that day, and I was like, you know what? I'm tired of jumping around from toxic company to toxic company and I just want to fix this. I found that through having my own company, I'm actually able to make a greater impact at all kinds of companies and people actually listen because I'm a third party so I'm not involved in all the politics of the company, but I can call it as I see it.

Melinda Byerley: I do know, as a consultant, I often say the things that make me a terrible employee make me an awesome consultant.

April Wensel: Yeah, I love that. It's so true.

Melinda Byerley: It is refreshing. We're seeing more and more women and underrepresented minorities taking this path out of frustration. Are you seeing that as well? I should say that I see that, but I don't know if my perception matches reality.

April Wensel: Yeah, I think it's true because a lot of these institutions were built around men and were created by and for men, white men. I think that it's people who don't feel like they're able to or don't want to force fit themselves into these environments that weren't really created with them in mind, an empowering choice is to create your own environment and to help shape these other environments more to your liking.

Melinda Byerley: As you described the Compassionate Coding methodology, starting with self-compassion, I can't help but notice how it's related to Buddhist philosophy about this idea of starting with yourself. I have a children's book, Start Where You Are, I've always been fascinated, thinking about all the different words and if you emphasized each of

them, and I have come to believe that I think the way she would pronounce that book is Start Where YOU Are, to not start where you ARE, but start where YOU are. Was that a factor for you or how did you come to develop this framework?

April Wensel: I'm definitely influenced by Buddhist philosophy and everything, definitely. For me, the transition happened when in 2016 I went vegan because I learned about compassion and this idea of non-violence towards all beings. I stopped wanting to participate in violence against animals. I realized as I went deeper into a lot of the reading about compassion and this non-violence and thinking "that's what I feel a lot in tech, is violence and how we speak to each other and how we treat ourselves and beat ourselves up." That's what inspired me to use the word compassion in my work. I think that it's the key to just peace and positivity as well in how technology is impacting the world versus now, which is pretty problematic in a lot of ways.

Melinda Byerley: That's super fascinating. How have you been seeing companies adopt this? When this methodology is adopted, what does it look like? How is your younger self, interviewing at these companies, what can he or she look for in the interview process to feel like this might be a culture that is more compassionate?

April Wensel: I think one thing to look for, to think about is how you feel in the interview and afterwards. When I talked about how I would cry after interviews, definitely a bad sign.

Melinda Byerley: Not a good sign.

April Wensel: It's more common than you think. I hear it from a lot of women who say ... Of course, it's not talked about a lot publicly because you're seen as weak and all these things, but it can be really traumatic experiences. Whereas, in a compassionate interview, even if you're not hired, you don't feel terrible afterwards. You just feel like, oh, this wasn't a good fit. I think you can gauge a lot of it just based on how you feel and how you feel treated in the interview and afterwards.

April Wensel: I think asking questions about collaboration on the team and how that works is a good way to find out. If people pretty much keep to themselves or if there is more collaboration because that generally will mean a more compassionate environment. Also, I think one thing

to look at is just the diversity on the team, because if a team has significant diversity then it's not a given, but it's more likely that, if they've been able to maintain that, that they do have a more inclusive culture. Which I think has to be based on compassion. Because being able to understand different perspectives and appreciate different perspectives, you need to be able to empathize and care about how different people on the team are feeling. I think even just looking at that, if the team is everyone looks the same and comes from the same background, likely that's not going to be a very compassionate environment.

Melinda Byerley: You make me think of pair programming. I don't know if that is still as much of a thing as it was certainly a very exciting and hot topic a few years ago. Is that an example in and of itself or has that faded?

April Wensel: I think it is still a popular thing. I think pair programming can be compassionate, but it's not always. Because sometimes you can pair up with somebody and if people are caught up in trying to prove themselves better in the thing, which is not uncommon where the egos come into play and it's like I want to look for the mistakes you're making as you're typing or I want to hog the keyboard or whatever it is. There can be an unhealthy dynamic in pair programming, but I think efforts to do pair programming well and in a compassionate way definitely is a good sign.

April Wensel: Another level up from that is mob programming. That's a newer, kind of new thing.

Melinda Byerley: I don't even know what that is. I want you to explain that to me. I don't know what is.

April Wensel: It's a bigger group. Instead of just two people programming together, it's a whole mob of people. We're talking five, six people all gathered around, and people have different roles and there's a whole thing to it. It's an interesting approach. I've worked with companies who do use the approach, and it's very interesting to watch because the interpersonal dynamics are very important there because you're dealing with a huge group of people. Again, that can be done in a not very compassionate way, if certain people try to dominate and try to make others try to make themselves feel more important than others.

April Wensel: That's the thing. That's why I felt the need to start a company because with all these movements like agile development and all these sorts of pair programming, these are all efforts to care more about people. You can, in theory care, about people but not on an emotional, visceral level actually care about people's emotions on the team. That's where I saw a missing link and was like, we need to not just try to meet customer needs in this very robotic way, but actually thinking, where are we causing or alleviating suffering in the world?

Melinda Byerley: Hi. This is Melinda here, your host for Stayin' Alive in Tech. We are the only podcast to feature long-form first-person oral histories of Silicon Valley. We're now heard in over 60 countries and our average listening time is over 45 minutes. If you're enjoying this episode, we could use your support. You could post a review wherever you get your podcasts about this episode. You could share this episode with a friend or talk about it on social media. You could sponsor us, but no matter what you do, you can help us find more guests and find more people to hear their stories. Thanks again for listening.

Melinda Byerley: How does somebody who is inside of a company right now ... and let's say it's not toxic. I often say if you're in a toxic environment, you got to get out. Especially if you're a junior software engineer, let's just put that out there, you're probably better off leaving. If you're in an environment that's open and receptive or safe, emotionally safe, what are some ways that you can have an impact on the people around you?

April Wensel: I think one is just observing to see what's going around, seeing what's going on and seeing how people are feeling. I think there's a tendency to, when people's performance drops or when maybe they're late on a project or something seems up, to assume that they're just lazy or we need to fire them or something like that. I think the compassionate approach is more to think, what's going on in this person's life? What can I do to help? What's the missing link here? I think just approaching all conflict with that idea in mind can be really useful. It's pretty much just in how we interact on a daily basis. Even when we have disagreements, just pausing for a moment. A lot of it is just about slowing down and thinking, what is going on in someone else's world? What are they worried about? What are they afraid of? What are they hopeful about? Allowing that to inform the interactions.

Melinda Byerley:	How can managers be more effective? You mentioned when someone is having a difficult time or potentially a performance issue to be compassionate and understanding. Even to ask the question, like, hey, is there something else going on that I should know about? Are there other things that managers can do, absent a program like this, which we'll get into the program in a moment, but just tomorrow if I'm managing a team in my own company, what are some things I can do to be more compassionate to my team?
April Wensel:	I think the biggest thing that managers could do is just work to have their goal be to empower the people that they're managing. By that, I mean to not push your own views or opinions and that thing on the people that you're managing, which happens far too often. In theory that you're, oh, I have this person's best interest in mind, but you're basically telling them how to be in the workplace or telling them what they need to accomplish. I think a more compassionate approach to really help them thrive is to find out what they care about because again, their values are definitely ... There should be some overlap with the company values, but they're not going to be exactly the same.
April Wensel:	I think it's important to just empower the person on their own to dig deep and know and to not make too many assumptions because a lot of managers make assumptions. Whether it's, oh well, this is a woman and she is of the age where she might have a child so I'm sure she doesn't want to take on these responsibilities, which is something that happens. Where managers will not put a woman up for a position thinking, oh, I don't think that she would want that. Making decisions for people. I think that that is disempowering and it's not very compassionate. I think that's one thing, is just to put the focus on the actual person that you are "managing" and really care about what they care about.
Melinda Byerley:	What do the people who find your process, your company, what do they have in common? What's the mindset that gets them to reach out to you? Is there a commonality?
April Wensel:	Yeah, that's an interesting question. It's usually engineering managers or the VP of engineering or CTO who reaches out, it's rarely someone from people in operations or HR. Occasionally it is, but rarely. I think that through the content that I put out online, I think they see themselves or some of their employees in that, some of the problems

that I talk about. They're hopeful about the solutions that I talk about. I think a lot of it comes down to that. I do think that there is a growing hunger among people who develop software for that more human side. I think burnout is something that's affecting people on a personal level. Even people who maybe aren't as motivated to care about diversity because they're in the dominant group and they don't care, they do care about the fact that they're burning out. A lot of times, I'll approach it from that angle.

April Wensel: I think it's just that these are people ...The people who reach out seem to be more self-aware and already have some awareness of issues on the team and are just looking to improve that. I think that they're hopeful people too, because otherwise, they'd just be throwing the towel in. There's a certain level of optimism, too, I think, in the clients who do approach me.

Melinda Byerley: Tell us about what that process is like. In similar ways, the work my company does is I'm sometimes involved with change management. I've been thinking for a long time about the impact of numbers on people and that numbers scare people because they're both accountability, but they're also not always reality and numbers imply change. Measuring something means we might have to change how we do it. I've been fascinated in our consultancy with watching how just the simple act of creating a dashboard can generate so much fear, frankly, resistance based on fear, not out of laziness or belligerence, but just, you can tell it's just straight up discomfort and there's a there there. I'm really curious about your experience working with companies where you're encountering resistance or fear around some of these principles and what's working.

April Wensel: Yeah, that's an interesting question there. I do think that there's sometimes a fear, yes, that we're going to have to change things. People do get stuck in doing something a certain way and so they're afraid that in some way, by trying to bring more compassion, it's going to slow us down or it's going to make us less efficient or something like that. When really it does the opposite because a lot of times, what I'm brought in to help with is unproductive conflict on a team. If people are so wrapped up in their own egos that every disagreement turns into just a head-butting competition, no forward progress is made. Actually, if you slow down and practice empathy, it ends up being more efficient and it does help the bottom line.

April Wensel: I think, thankfully, because somebody reaches out from a little higher up in the organization, there's some buy-in and so we can leverage that to help people understand why it's positive. I do think in general, in the software development community, there's very much a fear of "human things" and just having to ... which I can understand being an engineer myself. It's messier. We like our logic and everything on the computer because it's not as messy. When you bring in human elements, it's very messy. There's definitely a fear. I encounter that too, just in my online presence in the response to that. When people call Compassionate Coding girly as an insult, as if it's an insult, and things like that or that it's weak and that it's all these sorts of things. I've spoken up about some of the cultures on programming community sites like Stack Overflow because I feel like it exemplifies a lot of the problems in the software developer community. People who love the fact that the site is abrasive and that sort of thing, they told me I was ruining something great.

April Wensel: There is a resistance, I think, to change. It's also inevitable. Change is inevitable. I think we see the corporate world in general and also in technology that we are moving in that more human-centered way. There's not much they can do about it except get on board.

Melinda Byerley: Get on, get off, or get out of the way.

April Wensel: Yeah, exactly.

Melinda Byerley: Who do you think ... Also, I think it's worth asking. I'm looking at your photograph. I believe you identify as a white woman. Am I correct?

April Wensel: Yes.

Melinda Byerley: As a fellow white woman who's also been on this journey, how has this effected the way you look at the world and your own personal growth around diversity?

April Wensel: I think that being a white woman, so being in some ways having a lot of privilege in certain areas but then also seeing the other side of it where, as a woman, not having privilege in certain circumstances, you get to see both sides of it. I think it helps me empathize, I think, with white men, for example, because I can tell them, "Look, here's how privilege has ... Here's areas where I've been ignorant about my own

privilege and I've made these missteps and I've made these mistakes. This is just a human thing."

Melinda Byerley: I've survived.

April Wensel: Yeah. I didn't have to dig my heels in and say, "No, I did that thing right." I could admit that I made a mistake. I think being able to do that is helpful. I think that's definitely … I'm always trying to be mindful of these things and learn about these things. Something that, for me, has become a new thing too is just being more mindful of using ableist language where I'm saying things that I'm using words that could be potentially offensive and just learning about that. There's always something new that I'm trying to learn, too. Again, it's compassion. It's not because I'm trying to follow certain rules or whatever. It's because I genuinely want to be compassionate and inclusive. I think most humans do. I think if we approach it from that angle and take our ego out of the equation, it's a lot easier.

Melinda Byerley: It's funny. I've been very public about the fact that I was a Republican for most of my life, not the kind we generally talk about now. I was also more of the classic libertarian, meaning I was very much in favor of compassion and very much in favor of letting people be who they wanted to be in every way. When people have asked me how I made that transition, I said that a lot it was compassion. It was the fact that I worked in theater, I had friends who were gay. I had friends who were trans. I had friends who were not from America, who were of different colors and different religions. As a result, I wanted all of my friends to be safe and happy. It was like, well, wait a minute. Well, why am I voting for people that are doing things that are hurting my friends? I think, just based on my own personal experience, I feel there's a lot of power in what you're talking about in terms of when we have compassion … I had compassion for other people before I could have it for myself. It depends on who you are. Going back and working on compassion for myself, some people might start the other way, but I think there's something really powerful about this idea.

April Wensel: Thank you for sharing that. I think that's so true. I've definitely read some studies showing that when we do identify, instead of thinking about a group en masse, a group that we aren't part of, but thinking about the individuals in that group, like you said, your friends from these different groups that may not have felt very welcome in

environments, it can be so powerful for unlocking the actual human compassion that you have. Not in an abstract, yes, I believe in equality for all kind of way, but, wow, my friend is actually scared to do X, Y, or Z because of these reasons. I think you're right that it drives home the actual visceral emotional feeling that we're talking about here.

Melinda Byerley: They can take you to action instead of just an idea or conceptual.

April Wensel: Yes.

Melinda Byerley: What do you think are the greatest barriers to that point to people, anybody, really? Again, we're not just picking on you, white guys, I promise. All of us have potential biases, whether, like you said, it's ableism, trans-inclusivity. There's all sorts of ways this can play out. What do you find are the biggest barriers inside of people that help them get from, okay, I believe this, I want to be this person, to actually being this person?

April Wensel: I think it's two major things that I think. One, the pace that we move at. I think when we're trying to, especially working in technology, this fast pace but our whole world really right now. Everything moves at a very quick pace. I think that when you're moving at that pace, there's no time to care about people. It's really hard to slow down and think, what is this other person going through when you're rushing around? I notice this is even out and about. I'm just having a happy day doing something going ... I was mailing a letter, and then someone comes up behind me and they're just like, "You don't own this box," implying that I was blocking it. They had so much anger. My compassion side knows it's because they're in a hurry. They're suffering right now, and so they don't have time to care about how they're treating me.

April Wensel: I think a big part of not being able to empathize with people from different groups and the challenges they face is just this looking out for number one thing and moving at such a pace where you just don't have time to slow down and consider others. Because it does take time and effort. That's one, it's just the pace of modern society.

April Wensel: I think the other thing is fear. I think fear is so powerful, and I think it's so common. I'm not just talking about fear of people from different groups, but more just fear of admitting mistakes and then being perceived as a "bad person." I think our protective mechanisms to

defend our ego against being perceived as a bad person are so strong that we're willing to bury our heads in the sand, so to speak, just to avoid acknowledging where we do have privilege, acknowledging where we've made mistakes, where we've done things that were not ... because if we don't have that self-compassion where we can admit "I made a mistake but I'm not a bad person," that takes a great amount of self-compassion. I think that, again, it's that fear of losing yourself or being perceived as bad. I think fear and that speed are two things that are definitely in the way.

Melinda Byerley: Yeah. Everything we know about the human mind says the faster we go, the more likely it is that bias will play a role because we're moving on instinct then.

April Wensel: Yes, so true.

Melinda Byerley: Well stated. As we near the end of the podcast, I'd like to ask some questions of all of our guests because they provide us with insight across the podcast. I'd love to ask you for advice that you have for anybody who either wants to be a software engineer, whether they're in college now and they're preparing for that career, or anyone who wants to be a better software engineer. What career advice, what professional advice do you have for them?

April Wensel: I think one is to get really in tune with your own instincts and your own internal wisdom around things and to ignore a lot of the stereotypes out there. For people considering it, no, you don't have to sit alone coding all day. That's not the only thing software engineers do, so ignore some of the stereotypes around that. If you already are a software engineer, I think being careful about who you're listening to and not just listening to one type of person or one specific person, but broadening your horizons and listening to yourself because we don't always need to find an expert in something. A lot of times, we have more internal wisdom than we give ourselves credit for. I think this message especially goes out to people from women and people from other underrepresented groups in tech because in a world that wasn't built for us or biased, a lot of times, we're going to have to trust ourselves more than others. I think that's worth pointing out.

Melinda Byerley: Boy, do I want to underscore that. There's so much advice that I see. I'm turning 50 this year.

April Wensel:	Congratulations.
Melinda Byerley:	Thank you. 50. After 20 years in this town and watching the advice that's given, it's not wrong advice, but it's not the right advice for a lot of people. I, for a long time, took that advice from some of these really smart, strong, powerful people as gospel, and I lived that advice, and it was utterly wrong for me. I would just want to underscore what April said to anybody who's listening, to really think for yourself about the advice you either read online or that you take at work, especially if you are not from the dominant group and really think about, does that really apply to me? Is that going to work for me?
Melinda Byerley:	I tell this story all the time. At home, my partner, my husband will say to me, I'll be talking about some problem and he'll be like, "Well, all you got to do is this." I'm like, "If I did that as a woman, it would just not really go over well." If I push him a little harder, I'll discover he probably wouldn't do that either. Sometimes the advice you get is not really what someone would do when there's something really important at stake. I think a filter that you put on and that instinct you'll hone over your life. I'm better at it now than I was at 25, and hopefully I'll be better at 70 than I am at 50. Along that line, April, what is the best advice that anyone ever gave you?
April Wensel:	That's funny because I have a pretty strong filter and not a lot of advice that gets through.
Melinda Byerley:	It must be good. This is going to be good.
April Wensel:	Yeah, I guess so. To be honest, the one that I always fall back on is this book called Ignore Everybody. That's the name. The advice is right there in the title. It is not like in a not compassionate like ignore everyone's feelings way, but just more ... It's repeating what we were just talking about, which is listening to yourself and knowing that, especially if you're trying to do something creative and novel in the world, that no one else has done it before and so there's nobody who's going to be able to advise you specifically on it. There are not a lot of companies very similar to Compassionate Coding. I'm doing a lot of things differently from how most people would advise and that thing. I really have had to put up a very strong filter and cancel out a lot of the negativity and the well-meaning but not very empowering advice I've gotten along the way. I like that advice, ignore everybody.

Melinda Byerley:	That's a good one. What gives you hope and optimism about the future of technology?
April Wensel:	What gives me hope and optimism is honestly, every time I will give a talk or do a presentation and getting some kind word afterwards of somebody that's like, "I don't feel comfortable speaking out about this, but I'm really glad that you are." That gives me hope because I see that there are kind people throughout the world and throughout the industry, and it's just about waking everybody up and getting people involved in this and speaking up for people. Every time I hear somebody who is right now a little bit shy or doesn't feel comfortable but knowing that this person exists and that they're for this, I think that that gives me hope, as well as seeing people change their mind. Anytime I see someone change their mind given evidence or given exposure to something, that gives me hope too because we need people who are willing to evolve. That's where I get my hope from.
Melinda Byerley:	Where can people find you and Compassionate Coding?
April Wensel:	The best place is compassionatecoding.com. Also, I tweet a lot as well, @aprilwensel. Those are the two places. I have a mailing list at compassionatecoding.com so people can find out a lot more information there.
Melinda Byerley:	April, thank you so much for coming to the podcast. It was such a joy to talk to you. These issues are really important to me, personally, and I think they're important to the industry as a whole, and I'm really glad you're able to join us.
April Wensel:	Thanks for having me. It's been fun.
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