Name: Rachel Chalmers: “Three Horses”
Season 4: Episode #9

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. And now here's your host, Melinda Byerley, founding partner of Fiddlehead, a digital marketing consultancy.

Melinda Byerley:

Welcome back to another episode of Stayin’ Alive in Tech, where we’ve now reached the ninth episode of season four. Our next guest is Rachel Chalmers, a true veteran of tech in every sense. And also a friend.

Rachel is currently a partner and Director of Innovation at Alchemist Accelerator, a venture-backed initiative focused on accelerating the development of seed-stage ventures that monetize from enterprises rather than consumers. She’s also the Head of Corporate Services at AlchemistX; a division of Alchemist Accelerator, and they also have their own Corporate Innovation podcast, AlchemistX: Innovators Inside, which Rachel is fittingly the host of, so be sure to check out the link to her podcast in the show notes. And somehow, amongst all this, she also serves as an advisor to Compaas, a highly innovative compensation intelligence platform.

Prior to these roles, Rachel was a founding board member of the Ada Initiative, a non-profit supporting the involvement of women in open technology and culture. She is also a frequent speaker and author on technology and infrastructure and has been published in New Scientist and Salon. There’s plenty more I could list off, but I think that’s enough for now.

Melinda Byerley:

Born and raised in Australia, Rachel graduated from the University of Sydney and then left her home country to earn a master’s of philosophy from Trinity College in Dublin. She eventually made her way over here to the U.S. and now resides in San Francisco, where she’s been an investor, advisor, and technology industry analyst for well over 20 years.

Rachel’s interest in technology started at a very young age, and it’s no surprise to see how her passions and work now span such a huge range of areas. Today, you’ll hear her thoughts on removing the layers between engineers and the consumers they build solutions for, what “human-centered innovation” actually entails, how to fight burnout, and her experiences dealing with the pervasive climate of harassment and tokeness that still surrounds women working in tech and startups.

As you might imagine, Rachel's journey from Australia to Ireland to the U.S. has certainly provided her with some unique perspectives, especially as a woman who has been in the thick of it during all the twists and turns and evolutions in the tech world since the dot com boom.

And, as you're going to hear, this was always where she was supposed to be.

Melinda Byerley:

Rachel, welcome to the podcast.

Rachel Chalmers:

Melinda, thank you so much.

Melinda Byerley:

So Rachel, people will be able to tell right away when you start talking that you grew up in Australia. So, tell me about what you wanted to be when you grew up when you were small.

Rachel Chalmers:

I wanted to be a horse.

Melinda Byerley:

What kind of horse?

Rachel Chalmers:

A wild horse. But it turns out it's not what you know, it's who you know. They've got that locked up.

Melinda Byerley:

Yes, exactly. We had a guest who wanted to be a dog.

Rachel Chalmers:

Yeah! We should get together, have drinks, water. (Laughs)

Melinda Byerley:

So it didn't turn out that you could be a horse. Maybe you can, and I don't know it. Maybe you're a centaur and I don't know that. You still love horses, so I know that's—

Rachel Chalmers:

I do. I do. I've got two dressage ponies at the moment and they have my entire heart.

Melinda Byerley:

Aww. So when did you become aware of technology in your life? And
that's however you define it. It doesn't have to be formally a computer. But when did you start to become aware of these things that we live with?

Rachel Chalmers:

So, the first great love of my life was my dad. And he was an engineer. He worked for a company called Amalgamated Wireless Australia, AWA. And it's hard to convey the cultural weight that had. For a long time, the AWA building's beautiful art deco skyscraper was the tallest building in Sydney. It's still there. It's Heritage-listed. It was a little bit like a Marconi company or RCA. It built a lot of our radios and televisions. AWA owned a lot of the TV stations. It was involved in a lot of defense contracting. So dad worked on the Sonobuoy, which is a thing you throw off a ship and it sends out sonar and you can identify where you are by it.

Rachel Chalmers:

And he also worked on Australia's first portable computer. AWA actually imported the first microcomputer in 1975, which was a pick created by a computing pioneer whose name was, I kid you not, Dick Pick. Just cannot make it up.

Melinda Byerley:

(Laughs) That's amazing. That is amazing.

Rachel Chalmers:

Dad actually worked on the first portable computer that was built in Australia. It was a flight sim for the RAAF, the Royal Australian Air Force base in Edinburgh, which supported the Woomera Rocket Proving Range. So, not many people know this. Australia had its own nuclear industry. We were very much a colony of Britain. And when Britain needed big empty spaces like Nevada to set off bombs—not empty as it happens, the indigenous people still lived there with traditional lives—they used our Woomera rocket proving range. And so Maralinga is a test site up there. And the RAAF base supported the rocket testing and also the flight testing for the Air Force. And Dad—

Melinda Byerley:

So it's like Andrews Air Force Base or something like that, or the proving grounds. The testing proving grounds. Cool.

Rachel Chalmers:

Yeah. So dad built this portable flight sim. It fit into only six steel containers on the backs of trucks. And one of my earliest memories of technology is dad driving this thing, it was called the CMS, down to Adelaide. And he was in a tiny little red hatchback, and they called him Red Robin because my dad's name was Robin. And he accompanied this convoy containing this one computer all the way from Sydney to Adelaide. And he had to scout ahead and make sure that none of the bridges were too low for the containers to pass underneath them.

Melinda Byerley:

Was he a pilot before he made flight simulators?

Rachel Chalmers:

No, he was an electrical engineer.

Melinda Byerley:

Cool.

Rachel Chalmers:

So he literally ran the factory that sold the motherboards that put this machine together.

Melinda Byerley:

And so was that the first computer you ever touched or saw?

Rachel Chalmers:

Yeah. Yeah.

Melinda Byerley:

That's a pretty strong memory.

Rachel Chalmers:

And I grew up surrounded by, you'll remember this, dot matrix printers that had that paper with the serrated edges with the holes in it to go around the cogged wheels. So all of my early coloring and my horse pictures were on the backs of computer paper that came out of the CMS. We just always had stacks of it at home. We recycled it all.

Melinda Byerley:

Was it green and white or just white?

Rachel Chalmers:

It was green and white.

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah. That's the stripes.

Rachel Chalmers:

And then dad got us our first computer, which was an Osborne 1 and I came face to face with this in the computer history museum a few years ago. And it's one of those experiences where you go to the computer history museum with some fellow geeks and you all find your first computer and you have a moment at the altar of, "that's where it all began."

Rachel Chalmers:

So the Osborne 1 was tiny. We had to load programs off these 64K floppy disk drives and they were floppy. This was before you had the hard disks. And these were five and a quarter inch and not three and a half. And we stuck those things in. It ran CPM BASIC which was a variant of BASIC, and that's where I first played Colossal Caves, and where I learned to write my own Infocom adventures, my own interactive text adventures, when I was about 13.

Melinda Byerley:

Nice. How'd you learn how to do that?

Rachel Chalmers:

Back then we had computer magazines, and they would literally have the programs. In the back of the magazine, they would have a BASIC program. And you would just type it in, 10 go to 20. And I learned it exactly the same way I learned HTML when the web happened. I just looked at other people's stuff and then made changes. And if it worked, I just kept building on that.

Melinda Byerley:

So you did this all on your own. Your father wasn't looking over your shoulder or he was like, "Go to it." And you're like, "I'm off and running."

Rachel Chalmers:

Neither. I could take problems to him. My dad and I were so close. He took me to the observatory to show me the Galilean moons. He taught me celestial navigation. He was a big kite-maker and he built a huge box kite for Australian kite competition called the Lawrence Hargrave's Memorial award. And I was a skinny little kid and this box kite was so big that it could actually lift me off the ground.

Melinda Byerley:

I love this. So you didn't get to hold it. He had to do it because it would lift you off the ground.

Rachel Chalmers:

No, he would be flying the kite and I would be holding the kite and it would lift me into the air.

Melinda Byerley:

Wow.

Rachel Chalmers:

Yeah. That was my dad.

Melinda Byerley:

So you love horses, and you're teaching yourself programming at the age of 13. And you come to choose Anglo-Irish literature. So I have two questions about this. One, how did that happen? But two, how has it

influenced the way you think about technology? I love asking people
this question because so many of us of a certain age, we didn't major in computer science. And I think it changes the way we think.

Rachel Chalmers:

Oh, this question is going to go deep.

Melinda Byerley:

That's why we're here.

Rachel Chalmers:

So my dad was a great dad. He was my universe. And for a female growing up in Sydney in the 1970s, that was pretty unusual. He was pretty much an outlier. At that time in my experience, Australia was incredibly sexist. My interest in computers and my interest in horses both led to me being bullied and marginalized for different reasons. I hated it.

Rachel Chalmers:

Sydney is objectively gorgeous and I love going back there and I still have a lot of friends back there, but I was a skinny, nerdy, not at all sporty bookish kid. I had to get out. And despite my dad's reasonably good gig, there were four of us, and we were living in the Northern Beaches, which is a very expensive part of Sydney and there wasn't any money and I was the youngest. The only way I was going to get out was by getting a scholarship and going to study overseas.

Rachel Chalmers:

I was academically pretty strong, so I did my undergrad at Sydney. I did math and archeology and ancient history, but the subject I was strongest in was literature. And I knew if I went to get that scholarship, I had to double down on the thing I was best at. So I did my honors year in English lit, won the University Medal and the Wentworth Traveling Scholarship and got out of dodge. I went as far as you can go. The antipode, the opposite point from Sydney is actually in the Atlantic ocean a bit north and west of Ireland. So it's literally as far as I could go on land.

Melinda Byerley:

And so you went to Trinity College. Was that the first time you'd left Australia?

Rachel Chalmers:

It was. I was 22 years old, I was on a big plane for the first time. I'd flown down to Tasmania before, but I had my first passport. We changed planes through Bangkok and then Frankfurt. And then I'll never forget flying down into Ireland through the cloud cover obviously, and seeing the green land underneath me and getting out. And I didn't go home again for another year and a half. It was like going to the moon.

Melinda Byerley:

Dublin is such a magical city. I've been there. It's really interesting to me.

Rachel Chalmers:

It's fascinating. It's changed a ton. A lot of money came in both from the tax incentives and from Europe. I got there before all of that happened before the Celtic Tiger thing. And Temple Bar was still cheap and full of downmarket pubs and I fell in with—

Melinda Byerley:

The Troubles were still happening. This was before the Good Friday ... Long before the Good Friday accord.

Rachel Chalmers:

Derry Girls, the BBC comedy actually puts tears in my eyes because I'm in the background somewhere. I've traveled up to Derry with my traveling theater troupe that I fell in with—because that's the kind of thing that happens to you in Dublin. And yeah, the Troubles were still on fire. When I was there, it was another country. And it was a transformative experience for me.

Rachel Chalmers:

So here I was, I'd grown up in this very sporty, very real estate-obsessed, not at all interested in books, not at all interested in the arts culture on the Northern beaches of Sydney. And I landed in the middle of Dublin where everyone's a writer and everyone's a standup comedian and everyone plays an instrument. And I was just immersed in the opposite of my life for a year and a half. And it was the most amazing opportunity and it changed everything that came after.

Rachel Chalmers:

But you asked how it changed my attitude to tech, and here's how. I love this story. The Irish are sporty too. This was the year of the World Cup in which Ireland actually beat Norway in one game. But I couldn't feign interest in soccer even for my new friends, the Irish. And so we're over at a friend's house and there's a lime green and orange magazine sitting on the floor of his apartment and I pick it up and I start looking through it. And it's an early issue of WIRED magazine.

Melinda Byerley:

Wow.

Rachel Chalmers:

And I had actually made this particular group of friends through the student computing resource group who ran these amazing labs. They had a DEC VAX VMS which lived in the arches under DART. So, Dublin Area Rapid Transit, the trains are called DART. And we'd be there at three in the morning writing essays. And the trains would go over and shake the computers. That was my computer lab. This was the early days of Usenet so I'd made friends all over the world. I was sending long emails back to my dad. I was learning how to navigate VI. And this bunch of friends were who I went and watched the soccer with. And I picked up the copy of WIRED magazine. And I was like, "San Francisco has writers and computers. I could go there and maybe I wouldn't be the weird one."

Melinda Byerley:

To put it bluntly, yeah. You fit right in.

Rachel Chalmers:

Yeah.

Melinda Byerley:

That was my next question, how you transitioned to writing about information technology. You've helped me go there. So you decide to go to San Francisco. Do you have a job when you get there? You come in and then what?

Rachel Chalmers:

It took me a couple of years. So, from Sydney, I went back to Australia. My sister was having her first child, Kelly, my niece, who's awesome. So I was there when Kelly was born. I got myself a job and I got a job by continually nagging the editor of a new computer magazine every week until he finally gave in and hired me.

Melinda Byerley:

I love these stories. I love these persistent stories.

Rachel Chalmers:

(Laughs) From there, I went to another magazine and they actually used a newswire. They pulled stuff down off a newsletter that was published originally by fax, but by the time I came around, in email, we would just take these stories and adapt to them and run them. So one day I called the editor of that newsletter, John Abbott, who's an English computer journalist, still a really great friend, just a phenomenal person in the industry. I called him and said, "Can I have a job?" And he said, "Yes." And the reason I'd finally made that move was I met a boy in Australia who was clearly going to end up in California. He was a really profoundly gifted programmer, and I decided I wasn't going to get left behind. So I got this job with John. We flew out together. John picked us up from the airport. I kept Jeremy until he found his first job. And now he's a big muckety-muck at Facebook and I'm still kicking around writing about computers.

Melinda Byerley:

In those early days, did you pick your stories or did the editors assign them?

Rachel Chalmers:

So, I started out at Computerwire and then a bunch of us left to form 451, which was an industry analyst company that competed with Gartner and Forrester. It still does. It just got acquired by Standard & Poor a couple of years ago. We had a little bit of scope just when we started 451 to write about whatever we wanted, but the commercial realities of the analyst industry are really interesting. Most people in tech see it from the outside. They're like, "Oh, we have to get in the Gartner Magic Quadrant. We have to be up and to the right." From inside industry analysis, it's a little bit easier to make money than it is in journalism, but not much. You have to sell your writing to somebody. Gartner does great business and so

do Forrester and IDC, selling to IT shops. So the IT shops didn't want to talk to us, a little startup with no track record.

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah. Nobody ever went broke by going by Gartner's recommendation.

Rachel Chalmers:

It turned out that what we could do was write about really early stage startups that were too small to be worth Gartner's attention and sell that research to venture capitalists (VC). So, we branched out in the end but we made all of our early business selling to the big Silicon Valley VC firms and writing primarily around super early stage companies. And I got further and further into infrastructure because that was always where my heart had been. So I became the first analyst to write about companies like VMware and Cloudera and Splunk. It was a fantastic experience.

Melinda Byerley:

That was my next question, was what are some of the early spots that you found? The ones that are like, "I knew you when." Those are three big ones.

Rachel Chalmers:

Yeah. So Cloudera is one of my favorites. This story actually goes back aways. So, Jeremy, my partner, had a really good friend, Michael Kyle, who studied at Harvard with Margo Seltzer, who was one of the founders of Sleepycat Software, which was founded to commercialize Berkeley DB. So Jeremy introduced me to Margo at USENIX, the big Unix conference one year. And I started to cover Sleepycat Software and I got to know Mike Olson, and we ended up pretty good friends. We still are. And so when he sold Sleepycat to Oracle, I said, "Call me when you start your next thing." And the next thing was Cloudera to commercialize Hadoop. And if I have a regret, it's that at one point I was bugging Mike to give me a job at Cloudera and that conversation didn't go anywhere, but it would have been nice. I would have been in the first 10 or 15 people on board.

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah. People say things like, "Were you early at X?" And it's like, "Not early enough." It's like there's early and then there's really early. That was life-changing early.

Speaker 1:

[Ad break]

Melinda Byerley:

For people who don't understand how the analyst industry works—you and I have talked about this, so I think you can sum it up really well—What is the analyst role, what do they do and do well, and maybe how that's changed a little bit?

Rachel Chalmers:

Yeah, it has changed a lot. So there's different functions that analysts
can perform. And you've got to understand that I got into this before the web was what it is now. And so we literally got Computerwire on a fax when I was in Australia.

Melinda Byerley:

You couldn't research your own software. Your people had to do it for you because you couldn't-

Rachel Chalmers:

Exactly, exactly. And so Gartner was founded pretty much directly on the lines of a Wall Street analyst company to just know about all of these stocks that didn't really merit attention by journalists because they weren't sufficiently newsworthy, but that were still incredibly important for business. So you take that analogy and you apply it to the wild and wooly world of the West Coast, where you've got all of these venture funded startups.

Rachel Chalmers:

And you have this really interesting newsbit where what I ended up just going and talking to all of the early stage companies I could find in my space of enterprise infrastructure. And trying to figure out who was the real deal and who was a charlatan and which companies were going to take off and which were going to do all right for a few years and get acquired by CA or HP and which were going to fly into a mountain.

Rachel Chalmers:

And so it turned out to be the most incredible training for everything I've gone on to do since. I wrote a hundred thousand words a year for 13 years and I still draw on that pattern recognition every day. It was the perfect combination of wanting to be a writer and being obsessed with computers. It was a really great gig.

Melinda Byerley:

Why enterprise infrastructure?

Rachel Chalmers:

I love the place where the software meets the hardware. I love Unix. I love the operating systems. My partner Jeremy knew John Lyons, who wrote the Lyons books, which are an annotated edition of one of the early Unix operating systems. And Jeremy has the original photocopied versions of the Lyons books because they were banned by the Unix copyright holders. And so you had to photocopy them and bind them and hand them secretly like samizdat literature.

Rachel Chalmers:

And seeing that code, it's like seeing DNA structures for the first time. Understanding Unix means that you understand software that's running on the rovers on Mars. It means you understand software that's still running in my Android phones sitting next to me. For somebody who was always trying to figure out how the world worked and what the deep patterns of the world were, infrastructure software, it was just catnip. It was like, "If you understand this, you'll understand all of the things that depend on this."

Melinda Byerley:

What do you think the great challenges are in enterprise software, what do you think makes it so challenging?

Rachel Chalmers:

So the work I do now is around corporate innovation and it's super interesting. I've come to look at it through a risk lens heavily influenced by one of my mentor gurus, Sam Ramji. A corporation is a company, literally a bunch of people, like a theater company who come together to collectively hedge risk. We'll figure out a way to sell a product and we'll split the proceeds so that we all have enough to live on. And we'll keep selling that product and we'll have some measure of security and stability for us and our kids, right?

Melinda Byerley:

I love that analogy by the way. I love it.

Rachel Chalmers:

And then you have this entity existing in an incredibly dynamic and competitive market. And all of the competitors, every YC company is looking at the big incumbents, going, "How can I eat their lunch, how can I bring them down?" So, I now work with the big enterprises to try and get them to be a little bit more paranoid and to understand that their biggest risk is not doing anything, and to try and get them to nurture positive changes and start up entities within themselves as a vaccine to inoculate themselves against the risk of disruption.

Rachel Chalmers:

And even if we can't build new billion dollar businesses within enterprises—because that's really hard—at least we can hopefully train a cohort, a generation of folks who understand how startup works, who understand how important it is to have a direct relationship with your customer and to understand the value that your product delivers and the reasons that customers buy your products, which brings me back to your question, "why is enterprise software so hard?"

Rachel Chalmers:

As enterprises grow and become more and more highly specialized, there's all of these layers between your engineers and your customers. Everything has to get routed through sales and marketing. So that intimate relationship that a startup has where they build something that their customer tells them it's terrible and they build something else and their customer says, "Well, it's slightly less terrible," that gets lost in an enterprise because of all of the layers of insulation.

Rachel Chalmers:

And so for me, going into those engineers and getting them to do customer discovery and reach out to real humans who might want to purchase a good or product from them, that leads to epiphanies. And it's so great to support that and to see people have that insight and say, "Oh, we could build this thing which I thought was relatively trivial because it's not that engineering complex but it would serve this enormous number of customers who don't have access to the thing and it would make their jobs

enormously easier." So, I would say enterprise has just accumulated
a lot of scar tissue over time. They become cynical like humans. They have seen a lot of things fail. They lose their curiosity and willingness to take risks. And I try to keep them young. I'm the snail mucin that you smear on the face of an old corporation to try and keep it dewy.

Melinda Byerley:

(Laughs) I love this because it's something we see it in our clients too. And the people that are drawn to startups and the people that are drawn to enterprises are different. If you are risk-averse, you're more likely to be drawn to the enterprise. How do you do that? I know we could probably talk for hours about how do you do that, but how do you help... How do you get past that, those layers of scar tissue and cynicism? And to be totally honest, I have them too, meaning—

Rachel Chalmers:

Yes. Oh yeah. Yeah.

Melinda Byerley:

I remember seeing Optimizely when it was first—and I was into AB testing, right, I pushed PayPal to implement AB testing and I actually ended up speaking at one of Optimizely's first user meetups—but the very first time I saw Optimizely, I said, there's no way. This can't exist, right, it's not possible that you can do this. This is really hard to do and do well. And it turned out of course I was wrong, which is why I'm not a billionaire.

Rachel Chalmers:

No, you're right. That it's very hard to do and to do well.

Melinda Byerley:

I just didn't believe it. I didn't believe that it could actually exist until I saw it in front of me. This is the magic part, if you will, of VC, of corporate innovation that I'm really intensely interested in, because you need the pattern recognition but at the same time, you can't let it close you off.

Rachel Chalmers:

So I have a somewhat contrarian view of this. As you know, from long conversations that we've had in the past, I had almost the same reaction to LaunchDarkly that you did to Optimizely. Very similar products, feature flagging. I was like, "It seems kind of niche."

Melinda Byerley:

Everybody builds it themselves. Yeah.

Rachel Chalmers:

But the person who pitched it to me was Edith Harbaugh. And if you know, Edith, she is a literal force of nature. She runs 50 mile endurance runs for fun. She's run the Western States trail, which goes up and over the Sierras. She's—

Melinda Byerley:

I had the misfortune of following in her shoes at a company. I had to take her job when she left. It was not pretty. (Laughs)

Rachel Chalmers:

Edith is a monster. She's terrifying. I love her. She can have my kidney. And that's what it is for me. And this is not true for everyone who's worked in institutional VC. I would say it's not even true of a large minority. But for me, it's all about the people. And the thing that I learned from my dad and from my early forays into technology was a line that Lee Pace says in Halt and Catch Fire: "Computers aren't the thing, they're the thing that gets you to the thing. And the thing is people." So when I think about corporate innovation, it's true of a whole company that it has scar tissue and it's cynical. But not everyone who's drawn to that company because they're risk-averse is risk-averse by temperament. Risk aversion is one of the big five temperamental traits. But if you're a single mom or if you're a woman of color, a large corporation is a much smarter choice than an early stage startup for thousands of reasons that we all know painfully well.

Melinda Byerley:

Yep. Agreed.

Rachel Chalmers:

And so if you are doing a corporate innovation practice and you find the young women and the young women of color and the people who are sending remittances back to India to support their parents, there's a very high likelihood that some of those people are going to be actually highly risk tolerant in ways that they can't necessarily express through their career, but they certainly could through their work. And so I've had enormous success zeroing in on those folks, the entrepreneurial folks who for whatever reason are embedded in a large risk averse company and amplifying them and giving them space to grow.

Melinda Byerley:

How does that happen with the executives? Because they talk about this a lot, right? The corporates say, "We're all about innovation." And the bigger they get, the more I roll my eyes at it, we're all about innovation. And then you're like, "Aha." Well, we all remember what happened with IBM and Microsoft.

Rachel Chalmers:

Yeah. Yeah.

Melinda Byerley:

How does that happen, how do you get through to them?

Rachel Chalmers:

It's a constant struggle. It is. And many, many people are not swayed by my chump for reasons I find it unfathomable.

Melinda Byerley:

Because they're not very bright.

Rachel Chalmers:

And again, I have to find the ones who even if they don't quite see it my way, at least have enough of an overlap. The thing that I'm not pushing—because I've spent 25 years in Silicon Valley and I don't believe it anymore—is Peter Thiel's "let's find natural monopolies and crush unions and take away workers' rights and build billions of dollars by destroying other things of value." I think that's a death cult. I think that's a completely self-sabotaging way to spend your working life. So I am glomming onto the principles of human-centered design and saying, "What if we did human-centered innovation, what if we built things that actual people actually want to need?" And the way we do that is by connecting people to people, by finding those entrepreneurs within larger corporations and putting them together with their potential customers and waiting for the magic to happen.

Melinda Byerley:

You mean strip mining regulation isn't sustainable?

Rachel Chalmers:

Regulation is a finite resource. Eventually, we're going to reach peak regulation and then it'll be all over. We'll have to find renewable sources of regulation.

Melinda Byerley:

I'm fascinated by this because the analogy just came to me. The Peter Thiel model is very much like strip mining.

Rachel Chalmers:

It absolutely is.

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah. Take what you can get and move on versus planting something and building it and growing and nurturing it—which I'm personally drawn to as well, the hard way, if you will. I don't like growth hacking. I like doing marketing the hard way: figuring out who your customers are and building good messaging that supports that.

Rachel Chalmers:

That's exactly right. The Peter Thiel model is extractive of humans as well. We don't even need to name all of the people he's left in his wake. I don't want to be one of those people. I've hit burnout in my career. Burnout is like concussion. If you've had it once, you're way more susceptible to getting it again. And the Nagoski sisters who run this amazing podcast about the Feminist Survival Project point out that the cure for burnout is not self care. It's all of us caring for each other. And so the opposite of that death cult is, honestly, not to sound hokey, but things like indigenous wisdom, where we take care of the land.

We don't extract all of its resources. We make sure that they regenerate and that they're there for the next generation.

Rachel Chalmers:

So, I do try to garden and not strip mine. And that means that I can't promise executives guaranteed billion dollar outcomes. Of course no one can, but plenty of people are saying that they can. And that makes it harder for me to sell the services that I am building. On the other hand, the services that I'm building do have real value in that we create real products that real people will buy. It's slow tech by analogy with slow food and slow fashion.

Melinda Byerley:

I remember Adam Nash giving me that advice once and saying—it wasn't even on the podcast, it was separate, and I remember because I lamented this—I said, "It seems like all of the quote bad people are getting rich." And he basically said, "Find the people that resonate with what you believe in and focus on them." And that sounds like what you're doing. It's like, rather than waste your time trying to convert people who are not going to see it your way, you look for those who at least share your basic fundamental values and then work to build something together.

Rachel Chalmers:

That's exactly what I tried to do. And my good friend, Gus Andrews, who wrote Keep Calm and Log On, the way she puts it is "find the others." Like in a science fiction movie where the team is falling apart and someone says to someone else, "You've got to find the others." That's what we have to do. We have to put our little misfit ragtag band spec together. We have to—

Melinda Byerley:

I love the movie Contact for that reason. I always feel like this podcast and other things are like that little message we send out into the universe, seeking the people who might share.

Rachel Chalmers:

And to go super deep again, I believe mine is a minority view. I believe it may always be a minority view, but I consciously identify with hundreds of years of people who have kept literature alive, who have kept illuminated manuscripts alive, who have kept workers' rights and the rights of women alive. I see the Quakers as my ancestors. I see the monks on Iona and Lindisfarne, the people who created the Book of Kells in Trinity College Library as my ancestors. We don't have to win. Almost by definition, if we win, we'll become part of the other team. But we have to keep faith. We have to keep hope alive. We have to keep belief in an alternative way of being in the world alive.

Melinda Byerley:

You're going to love In The Heights if you haven't already seen it.

Rachel Chalmers:

Yes. We saw it in London. It was amazing.

Melinda Byerley:

Yeah, it's amazing. So you and I have connected over the years, especially around the issues facing women in tech. How have they changed since you started your career? And this is a question I love, so what's getting better and what's getting worse?

Rachel Chalmers:

Oh man, why don't you ask me an easy one?

Melinda Byerley:

(Laughs) Because then the podcast would be over in five minutes.

Rachel Chalmers:

Yeah. So, we've always been here. Women have been technology since the beginning. We've been science-fiction since the beginning. Ada Lovelace and Grace Hopper and Delia Derbyshire have always been here. And when computers started to be recognized as something that was creating real value, the dudes came in and the money guys came in. So, during the second World war, a computer was actually a woman that was implementing the algorithms.

Melinda Byerley:

As we saw in Hidden Figures, right?

Rachel Chalmers:

And Job Title. Right.

Melinda Byerley:

That was right. Yeah, the women were the computers. Yep. The people who computed.

Rachel Chalmers:

Come fair child and the fair children and the invention of venture capital and suddenly it's a dude's game and the women gradually get pushed out—but only out of the official narrative. We've always been here. We're still here. My arc was almost identical to most of the mid-career feminists I know. I was the cool girl. I could find my way around a programming language. I had a lot of male friends growing up. It took me a long time to realize that I was the token. I was girl Smurf. I was allowed to be in the group because there's one place for a woman. I was Princess Leia. And it was when I was in my thirties that I started to be somebody that people told about their experience of sexual harassment, their experiences of discrimination in the workplace, their experiences of much, much, much worse.

Rachel Chalmers:

And so I ended up on the executive board of a non-profit, supporting women in open technology and culture. One of the things we did was we curated a timeline of incidents on a now archived blog called Geek Feminism. And so every time Richard Stillman, who would get up and say something appalling at a conference, or there would be a revelation that a VC had behaved inappropriately, we would log it on the

timeline of incidents and it just got more and more dense, the more
and more incidents we added to it. I still have early career women coming to me and saying, "I don't know if the VC wants to invest in my company or if he was hitting on me." I would love to say that things have gotten better, but those conversations weigh on me all the time.

Rachel Chalmers:

The fundamental evidence shows us that fewer than 5% of VC backed companies are led by women and fewer than 1% led by other underrepresented minorities, including all of our Hispanic founders and all of our African-American founders. And that's just ridiculous. We are literally leaving money on the table. It's the opposite of a meritocracy. We talk this great game about how genius is evenly distributed and it could come in many forms, but when it comes down to actually signing checks, it's always Steve from Stanford who gets the investment. We are literally running about the most inefficient tech industry you can imagine. And that's unbelievably frustrating.

Rachel Chalmers:

And there have been many efforts over the years, including things like Project Include. All of the amazing work that Freada Kapor has done, all of the amazing work that my old boss, Alexis de raat St. James has done with Merian Ventures to try and address this. But, it's hard to see how the enormous structural change that needs to happen is going to happen because, fundamentally, we're going to have to build our own sources of finance.

Rachel Chalmers:

What happened in Australia was that the startup scene finally kicked off when we had homegrown millionaires and billionaires courtesy of Atlassian able to provide that angel funding. Now that Melinda Gates and Mackenzie Bezos are finally free, maybe we'll start to see that happening for women in the technology industry as well.

Melinda Byerley:

I have a few questions to close out our time together. And the first is, this is a new question I've been adding for reasons which will become obvious, and it's to ask, how has the pandemic changed you, what will you take with you going forward, and what are you glad to leave behind?

Rachel Chalmers:

First up, a moment to think of all of the people that we've lost, 600,000 Americans. It's completely staggering.

Melinda Byerley:

And many, many more outside of our borders, right?

Rachel Chalmers:

And many, many more. And if you don't already follow the Twitter account Faces of COVID, maybe it isn't as personal to you, but I strongly encourage you to go and look at those faces. So there's that. There's all of that loss of life, of potential, of love, of family. Just unfathomable. All of that said, my family was the

luckiest in the world. We spent two years renovating the only house
in San Francisco we could afford, only to move in two weeks before shelter-in-place started.

Melinda Byerley:

That is pretty lucky.

Rachel Chalmers:

So, we moved from 900 square feet with two teenagers to a 2200 three-floor house. I've got a garden. I've literally been gardening over the course of the pandemic. I've been trained to raise guide dog puppies. I've been riding my horses, Lenny and Russell. Honestly, Melinda, I know you're a fellow introvert. It's been so great having my partner and my kids around all the time. Being able to do a work meeting and then go and play with my cats or sit in my garden, it's just been wonderful.

Rachel Chalmers:

And a lot of my physical pain and chronic exhaustion have just resolved themselves because I'm not commuting to Palo Alto for an hour a day. Or if I have eight hour blocks of meetings, at least I can stop and drink a glass of water between them. So it's been a much, much more humane life for me. I don't ever want to go back to work in an office. If I can stay working from home forever, I'll be happy as a lark. I also have doubled down on my life-long belief in science. These vaccines are a miracle and will save countless lives. And notably were developed by a woman who truly deeply believed in the mRNA approach to vaccines and was soundly ignored for most of her career and earning $60,000 a year up until last year as an adjunct.

Melinda Byerley:

Hopefully she'll get the Nobel Prize.

Rachel Chalmers:

Hopefully. She deserves it.

Melinda Byerley:

Bill Gates and Warren Buffet have been very open about the role of luck in their success. So I always like to ask people what they think. I say, "If Bill Gates and Warren Buffet can talk about the role of luck in their lives, so can we all." So, what kind of role does luck or fate play in your life? You talked about picking up the WIRED magazine. That's a good example.

Rachel Chalmers:

I was so unbelievably lucky in my choice of parents.

Melinda Byerley:

As Bill Gates has said too, right?

Rachel Chalmers:

I've talked about my dad who was just the absolute apple of my eye,
but my mum was also completely extraordinary. She was not only the first person in her family to go to college. She was, as far as I can tell, the first person of her family for at least a thousand years to leave the vicinity of 50 miles away from Warrington in the north of England to get on a boat and sail to Australia so that I would be born in Sydney. She was an extraordinary person. She dropped out of college because she had a lot of anxiety and trauma issues that were never fully treated, but she gave me my love of books. I talk a lot about the tech side that I got from my dad. The reading side, I absolutely got from my mother. Her people were animal people. So, the horses and the guide dogs and the cats, that's all her as well. She was dotty about animals.

Rachel Chalmers:

She had a very, very difficult life and died very tragically of cancer. But at the end of her life, she was surrounded by people who just unconditionally adored her. We had a palliative care room in the hospital where she spent her last few weeks. And the nurses would stick their heads in. We'd all be drinking gin and tonics and playing Mahjong. And they'd say, "It's like you're on a family holiday." And we were. Mum went out like a supernova and it was such a privilege to be at her deathbed. I can't even tell you. And as if that weren't enough, having my mom and my dad, I met my partner when I was 25 and I would handsomely have been voted “least likely ever to be happily married” of my high school class. But I met a man who, like my father, is extremely intelligent not only technically, but emotionally, who loves animals, who loves nature, who loves children, who indulges all of my ridiculous quirks. And we just had our 21st anniversary.

Melinda Byerley:

Congratulations.

Rachel Chalmers:

Yeah. So, in all the ways that really count, I've been the luckiest woman in the world.

Melinda Byerley:

Two more questions. First, what is something you wish you had learned earlier in your career, or as I like to say this, what is the thing, if I had grasped it sooner, would have saved me so much trouble?

Rachel Chalmers:

Honestly, I think just the fact that I'm pretty neurodivergent. It took me a long time to accept that language about myself, but when both of your kids end up with ADHD diagnoses, you and your husband tend to look at each other and go, "It's highly heritable."

Melinda Byerley:

It's more inheritable than height for the record. So, yeah.

Rachel Chalmers:

And then I look at my dad who for all of his virtues was decidedly odd. And I look at my brothers and I'm like, "Yeah, I think we probably score off the charts in certain measures of neurodivergence." So a lot of

the things I gave myself a hard time about when I was younger that I
saw as evidence of bad character actually matched pretty strongly to me just being different. I used to say that I identified as weird and I genuinely am. And I wish I hadn't tried to change myself to fit in. I wish I'd figured out earlier that all I needed to do was find the others.

Melinda Byerley:

Find the others. That is so true. That's such a great answer. And we spent so much of our time labeling people. Maybe it's taken me until this point in my life to just be fervently anti-label. Like, "Why do we have to judge it, why do we have to name it and label it? Can it just be, can't people just be who they are without the label?" So, I love that answer. And I also like to ask what's the best advice you've ever been given by someone else.

Rachel Chalmers:

My amazing professor at Trinity, Terrence Brown, who wrote a very good biography of Yeats, had two pieces of advice that I've been acting on ever since. Trinity was actually my second choice after I didn't get into Oxford. And when I told him that and I told him how disappointed I was that I didn't get into Oxford, he says, "You're not going to believe this but the centers of things are not actually all that interesting." I've found myself much happier seeking out interesting peripheries.

Melinda Byerley:

I love that.

Rachel Chalmers:

San Francisco is in many ways one of the most interesting peripheries in the world. In other ways, it's the center of things but I find myself even here seeking out interesting peripheries. The other piece of advice he gave me, this is political and not, he was a very devout Ulster Protestant. And for some reason or another, we were talking about why I left Australia and the fact that I didn't fit in there. And I can't remember how we got into the subject of abortion. But Terrence said to me, "It's a matter in which people of conscience can differ." And I've never forgotten that because it gave me a compassionate way to embrace difference and disagreement. It gave me a place from which to, as you say, not label people, but just to sit in that discomfort when we have conflicting views on something. And yet we can both be people of conscience. We can both be people who are acting from our deepest sincerest beliefs. It's been very hard in the last five years to really hold to that piece of advice but I think of that as a standard that I would like to reach.

Melinda Byerley:

Well done. Is there anything I should've asked you that I didn't?

Rachel Chalmers:

Melinda, you were extremely thorough. I feel scrubbed to the bone.

Melinda Byerley:

Well, with that, I will thank you for joining us and invite you back again.

Rachel Chalmers:

I would love to come back. Thank you.

Speaker 1:

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