



Transcript from BBC Radio 4's *Four Thought* with Julia Unwin

- Speaker 1: This is the B.B.C.
- Olly Mann: Hello. I'm Olly Mann, and this is Four Thought, recorded this week at the Shambala Festival in Northamptonshire. Or, as the audience heckled en masse to correct me, The Shambala Festival. Even on a laid-back Sunday afternoon, in a wigwam called the Imaginarium, our Radio 4 audience is always primed for corrections and clarifications.
- Olly Mann: Shambala. Anyway, it being a festival in a field, I had extremely patchy 4G signal on my SmartPhone, which I found strangely liberating. And I'm not sure why, since we rely on technology so much, why might we feel relieved by its absence? Is it because artificial intelligence isn't kind to us?
- Olly Mann: Our speaker this week, former Chief Executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, asks whether evolution in automation is harming our everyday human connections. Her name is Julia Unwin, and here she is.
- Julia Unwin: Thank you. 10 years ago, one of my children became seriously ill. In my busy, active, speedy professional life, I simply had to stop. I entered a whole new world of transactions. Blood tests, X-rays, hospital appointments, complicated treatment plans. I messed up. We faltered, we missed appointments. I got confused by the drug charts, and I couldn't concentrate when they told me difficult things.
- Julia Unwin: Some members of the family were angry, some couldn't talk about it, others just wanted reassurance it couldn't possibly happen to them. In the end, my child had a good recovery, but what I remember now most about that time are the relationships. The teacher at school who first noticed that something was not quite right. The nurses who remembered my name, and managed not to call me "Mum." The hospital porter who twinkled, teased, flirted with both of us, and made us laugh as we walked down the endlessly long corridor





to the operating theatre. The hospital receptionist who always managed to tell us how good we were looking, when it was clearly, clearly, not true.

Julia Unwin: What united all those gestures was their humanity, and their recognition of our humanity. And understanding that we were more than a sick teenager and an upset family, we were a complex mix of feelings and fears, and if we were going to get through this, we needed to be treated as the people we were, not the conditions we showed.

Julia Unwin: All that was a decade ago. My child has made a fine recovery. And today, as I go to my GP for something much less serious and check in via a reception screen, which recognizes me by my date of birth and my post code, and I pick up my automated prescription, I do wonder whether in the interests of speed and efficiency, the kindness that helped our joint recovery might now be much more difficult to find.

Julia Unwin: Our lives are increasingly transactional and automated. A tap of a card, a wave of an e-ticket on a mobile phone. A daily life mediated by machines, technology, and increasingly fewer human contacts. Machines make a lot of transactions and decisions for us, empowering us to move ever faster. Speed is of the essence, they say, and it's wonderful for so many things. The convenience of easily finding out what's going on can be great. The ability to be contacted at any time of the day or night can make us feel connected, and the ease and efficiency of automated transaction can be liberating and allow us time to do much, much more interesting things.

Julia Unwin: But our lives are more complicated than that. We feel fear. We feel envy. Sometimes we're sad and sometimes we want to celebrate. We get angry, we get anxious. We need the human touch. Our concern for those we love is not simply an automated checklist. It's freighted with complexity and challenge. Our knowledge of the world is messy, and comes through our life experience much more than it does from our Twitter feed.

Julia Unwin: The great boast of the masters of the tech world is that they move fast and that they break things. And many things needed breaking. The disruption has been felt in every single part of our lives. But there are some things we do not want broken, and the biggest of these is human connection. It's the relationships, not the transactions that get us through the tough times. Even the very best of times, it's kindness, love, human connection, that brings joy



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and makes life worth living. What really matters to us is who we love and how we share, not what we do and how fast we do it.

Julia Unwin: Mostly, we all want the same things. Norman Kirk, the prime minister of New Zealand way back in the '70s, put it so elegantly. "People don't want much. Someone to love, somewhere to live, something to do, and something to hope for."

Julia Unwin: A lot has changed since then, but people and our shared humanity have not changed. It's still connection, love, hope, security, belonging, that we want and need. And that's true for the high-flying businessman, for the harassed father managing to make ends meet, for the sick teenager, or for the recently arrived refugee. Someone to love, somewhere to live, something to do, and something to hope for.

Julia Unwin: In the last 30 years, our focus on professionalism, efficiency, risk-management, has enabled us to improve our public and our commercial services radically. But at the same time, they've crowded out the space for kindness and for relationships. Systems are designed to follow clear rules and boundaries which minimize risk, but maybe, maybe inhibit human relationships.

Julia Unwin: Care and health services operating under pressure reduce time available to the very bare bones, leaving no time to take an interest in patients' wider lives. Banking is done online. Supermarkets deliver groceries to our door at the click of a button. News is available in every conceivable form, at every moment of the day, and our public space often feels designed to avoid human contact.

Julia Unwin: Policies to design out crime can result in designing out people. Removing places to sit and simply be makes it so much less likely we'll bump into our neighbors. Play areas that charge for entrance may provide fantastic opportunities for some, but they don't provide a place for the parents to mix and make friends.

Julia Unwin: Systems are speedy, sometimes highly personalized and targeted, but they don't provide human connection, and we need human contact. We're motivated by love, and yet we design environments as if this is not true. Each



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individual service improvement is designed to make our lives better, but collectively they reduce the space for kindness to flourish.

Julia Unwin: Now, there's a lot of talk at the moment about loneliness, and I welcome that it's being explored in depth by Radio 4's "All in the Mind." It's no longer seen as just a matter for private grief and shame, but a social issue affecting people of all ages, and we all have a role to play in resolving it.

Julia Unwin: Over the past 18 months, I've been talking to people across the U.K. about kindness as a value that could improve how we live. And I've encountered a range of reactions and responses, but mainly people want to talk. They sometimes feel it uncomfortable. It is an uncomfortable subject, but they know that it matters.

Julia Unwin: Sometimes they talk about the people who they think need to be kinder and, funnily enough, they're often talking about the very people who, in my experience, show the greatest kindness in the most challenging of situations. The hospital cleaner. The carer. The teaching assistant. People valiantly, and against the odds, providing care.

Julia Unwin: But of course, it isn't about them. Neither the elderly patient, nor the care assistant looking after them. It's about all of us. It's about the connections that we need in our daily lives, the human contact, the recognition that we are more than customers or service users, patients, tenants, residents. We're rounded, complicated, contradictory people, who don't always respond in the neatest, most tidy way.

Julia Unwin: If we lose the space for relationships and human connections, all of our lives are diminished. Now, this could be just an interesting set of observations and it would tell us nothing new. It could sound nostalgic for a slower, smaller world where people had time to talk. But it's not. It's not nostalgic at all. The past was definitely not a kinder, more gentle place. Small communities can be toxic and unwelcoming for anyone different. Attitudes can be punitive and judgment both harsh and swift. Try telling a young girl accidentally pregnant in 1940 she lived in kinder place. Remember the appalling hostility faced by the young men and women who arrived in the Windrush, and put aside all thoughts of nostalgia.



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Julia Unwin: But if we recognize that our capacity for connection is what makes us human, then we do need to respond with urgency and intent, because our world is being transformed as I speak by the power of artificial intelligence, which has the potential to transform all our lives for better. Technology has brought us unimaginable advantages. It gives us the ability to communicate across the world. It gives voice to people who are frequently unheard and ignored. But. But it has its shadow side, and that shadow side is seen in what it means for our human connection.

Julia Unwin: The power of the algorithm to personalize is well-known to all of us. Advertising is precisely targeted. We all know that if you browse on the Internet for a holiday in Scotland, you'll be getting information about Scotland for a long time to come. Companies know more about us than our nearest and dearest. Data analytics can provide accurate predictions about how we'll respond to what drug, how people living in particular post codes may respond to some new initiative, the price we're willing to pay for what item.

Julia Unwin: But you and I know that we've sacrificed quite a lot of privacy for our everyday convenience. The algorithm and its terribly clever use of data doesn't humanize. It doesn't allow the teacher to see the grief of a young schoolboy whose grandmother has died. It doesn't enable the care worker to see the glimmer of excitement when a piece of music, or a scent, or a lipstick reminds the care home resident of another life. It doesn't allow for the warmth and the humanity we all need.

Julia Unwin: The rules of the algorithm may seem to allow for fairness. They allow us to say that decisions made by these very clever machines can be exposed and justified. But they don't allow us to use our discretion and our autonomy, and this matters. It matters to people planning the economic future of the place I live. It matters to people thinking about how to encourage me to invest more sensibly for my old age. It matters to those designing our public spaces.

Julia Unwin: Our technological revolution assumes that doing things faster is always good. It believes the myth that productivity is about the speed of production. It doesn't recognize that in our modern world the services we want are not always those that work the fastest, that we want the interaction of the human touch. And while many of our services are faster and more accessible, do we really want to replace cafes and restaurants with vending machines?



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Do we really want to be washed and put to bed very quickly when we're old and frail? And while all of this may not matter when you're buying a train ticket, using an ATM, it matters very much when you're lost and frightened and in need of help.

Julia Unwin: Our lives have been enormously improved since I started work in the mid-seventies. We can do things so much faster and better than ever before. We understand so much that was previously hidden. Technological and digital advances will continue to play a huge role. There's a very lazy narrative that describes our world as just unkind, as uncaring. But research, conducted by the Carnegie U.K. Trust, shows this is simply not true. There's really good news. The evidence shows we currently experience more kindness than you'd assume from reading some newspapers. But the world is moving at great speed, and now is the time to take stock of how technology and the policies of efficiency and regulation have affected our relationships as citizens, and our humanity as professionals.

Julia Unwin: We invest very heavily in artificial intelligence, and we progress every day in our understanding the benefits and opportunities that that brings. We don't invest so heavily in our emotional intelligence. Unless we invest as much in our emotional intelligence, we'll end up in a very barren world in which more of us will be profoundly unhappy. The real tragedy will be that as we move faster and break things, what we actually break is our capacity for kindness.

Julia Unwin: Thank you.

Olly Mann: Thank you, Julia. And since you were seeking kindness, I should say that was excellent.

Julia Unwin: Thank you. I had a kind audience.

Olly Mann: At a music festival like this, as you walk around, it's a very different ... Deliberately, a very differently designed kind of space, isn't it, to the public spaces you were describing in your talk? Do you think there are actually lessons from this kind of environment, where people are designing what they see as a utopia for a weekend? Do you think there are lessons about that, that should be applied to the way that our normal lives are run?



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- Julia Unwin: Well, it's interesting. I was reflecting on this as I arrived, and for many of you, and certainly for me, the arrival at a place like this can feel a bit irritating. It's a bit messy. You don't know where you're going. The signs are all a bit confused. We have become so used to a highly polished environment in which we whiz through things very quickly.
- Julia Unwin: And I did, while I was speaking, look around and think "how refreshing." There are not many people in that position of looking at their phones all the time, but it made me realize how used I have become to that. To being in environments where people are more connected to their phones. To being in environments where, yes, it is easier, but you talk to fewer people as you go and you make fewer connections.
- Julia Unwin: I think I've got very used to a very speedy, very efficient life, and in many ways I really like that. And I'll confess, stumbling through the mud here, getting lost, I thought, "Oh. Why can't it be more organized?" But, actually, there is something-
- Olly Mann: I did find my way here on Google Maps, by the way, so it was a-
- Julia Unwin: Did you?
- Olly Mann: I like to mix and match.
- Julia Unwin: It kept cutting out for me. This is extremely well-organized without the use of a lot of technology. And I find Google Maps cut out all the time.
- Olly Mann: I suppose, though, some of the services we've become used to actually couldn't really be replaced by people. An example that I'm thinking of is, last week I had a tarpaulin stolen from my front drive. It was worth 20 quid. I felt like a crime had been committed upon my house, so I wanted to report it. But actually, I didn't want to waste police time with that, because it's worth 20 quid and in my area, you can actually go on a website and say, "This happened." And I thought, "That's useful, because I'm helping the community. People will know that that happened. It's on the record." I didn't need to speak to someone about that. I've become used to the idea that I'd be wasting their time if I did.



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- Julia Unwin: I think we've got to get much smarter at knowing what needs time from people, and what doesn't. I mean, clearly, an example I heard recently, if you're going to get your injections because you're going on a foreign holiday, does it matter that it's being done by somebody you've never met before? Of course not. If, as I was 10 years ago, you're taking a sick child every week somewhere, it's pretty nice if you're seeing the same person each time.
- Julia Unwin: So, this is not an argument against technology. Of course technology is fantastic. It's liberated us from some really hard work. I love the fact I don't have to shop every day like my grandmother did. It's fantastic. But there are times in our lives when we need that connection, and what I worry about is we're being reduced to people who are only seen technologically.
- Olly Mann: Okay. It'd be great to get some questions and thoughts from our audience. Who'd like to go first? Yes? Chap in the middle, there.
- Speaker 4: Have you heard of the idea of fully automated luxury communism? Wouldn't it be great if we could own the machines, and the machines could do work for us? We could reduce our work from 40 hours a week, like trade unionists have been wanting to do since the '30s? So just have more time for freedom of association, get the machines to do the work. I think work is [unimportant 00:17:22] and we should do way less of it, and just be free to do whatever we want. We work too much.
- Olly Mann: Home crowd there for that one. But, yeah. Go ahead, Julia.
- Julia Unwin: The big promise of technology was always that it would reduce the amount of work we were able to do. It seems to me it's changed what we do, it hasn't reduced it. In fact, many of us are working longer hours than ever before.
- Julia Unwin: We have lost a huge number of jobs, and they've tended to be the poorest-paid jobs in the places where people find it the hardest to get other jobs. So, I think we have to be cautious about celebrating that, because automation has reduced jobs in ... A million jobs have gone out of retail. That's a big shock in some parts of the country and for some [inaudible 00:18:09].
- Julia Unwin: But your main point is, can we take control of it? And I'm sure that's right. I'm sure we need to find ways where we hold technology and what we've described as artificial intelligence, as a common good. But currently, it



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belongs to very, very large companies who harvest our data and use it in ways that are currently out of our control. But I'm sure you're right. We ought to be fighting for it to be owned differently, and that's the primary point.

Olly Mann: So, yes. Chap in the middle over there.

Speaker 5: Hi. I think you somewhat touched on this a little bit already, but how much do you think it's the use of technology and not poor implementations? You talk about artificial intelligence, perhaps, making technology more personal or better at doing things in the future. And does technology not free up the people, so the carer in the hospital doesn't have to spend half their day filling out paperwork, but they can spend all of their time doing what people are good at, and dealing with the human side?

Julia Unwin: I hope that was the point I was making. I think technology can be massively liberating. There's a risk that we are relying on it for things which we don't want to lose, and we are substituting it in some places for human connection. So, yes. Your example is a hospital, and I started with a hospital example.

Julia Unwin: The fact that records are kept in much more accessible ways, now, should be really positive. The fact that sometimes when people are talking to you now, they're looking at their screen and not at you, or that in many environments now they're giving you the screen to complete yourself, may not be the most optimal way of using that technology.

Julia Unwin: But I would never blame the technology. It's always how we use it, and this goes back to the earlier question. It's how we control, and how we manage it. The technology itself can liberate us. Nobody in this room would want to go back to the days before a washing machine.

Olly Mann: Thank you very much. Julia Unwin, everybody.

Olly Mann: Well, that is nearly it for this week's show, but if you know an inspiring person with a story to tell or an idea to share and you think we should get them on, please get in touch at fourthought@bbc.co.uk. You are even allowed to nominate yourself.

Olly Mann: I've been Olly Mann. The producer is Charles Edwards and Peter Snowden, and we'll see you soon.



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