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# Conversations Unplugged

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**Sherry Turkle**, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015 ).

In his message for World Communications Day 2015, Pope Francis noted, “The great challenge facing us today is to *learn once again how to talk to one another*, not simply how to generate and consume information.”[i] That directive is precisely the purpose of Turkle’s extensive research and sensible advice in the present book. Turkle is a trained sociologist and clinical psychologist, and she has studied people’s relationships with technology for more than thirty years. What concerns her is the loss of face-to-face conversation in favor of convenient but superficial connection via technological devices. While she sees and defends the many benefits of technology, she also argues that we master our all-too-indulgent devices (and ourselves), so that we don’t miss out on deep relationships with our fellow human beings.

The centrifugal pull away from conversation into our computers is a pull toward “distraction, comfort, and efficiency” (9). Immersed in this way of being, our brains rewire themselves, and we become what we think (110). Some people are so caught in this mental state—and are therefore so uncomfortable being without distraction—that in one study, people chose to administer electrical shocks to themselves after just six minutes of boredom (10).

Whatever happened to the joy of solitude? The solitude of daydreaming is not the same thing as surfing the internet for distractions *outside* ourselves (25). It is within solitude that you learn who you are, so that “you can see others for who they are, not for who you need them to be” (46). Solitude gives us to ourselves in “self-consciousness” and “self-determination,”[ii] so that we can give ourselves away to others in relationships.

Perhaps it’s so hard to be alone because as a society we are so lonely. “Attachment enables solitude” (65). We need to talk to one another again, seeking to bond on a deeper level. “If we make space for conversation, we come back to each other and we come back to ourselves” (14).

Should we fail to do so, it is alarming to consider that the next generation might not realize what it is they are missing. Children sometimes doubt whether their parents are more resourceful than the internet and some actually prefer to search the internet. They want just the facts, not “lifelong relationship” (116). However, internet searches can only result in what you ask for—what you know you’re missing, that is. Left to their own devices, can children come to the conclusion that they are missing out on conversation?

Sadly, there’s also a movement toward robotic intimacy. “People tell me [Turkle] that if a machine

could give them the ‘feeling’ of being intimately understood, that might be understanding enough. Or intimacy enough” (52). Perhaps “talking to a machine doesn’t feel like much of a downgrade” because we have developed “habits that have us treating human beings as almost-machines,” Turkle points out (345). Besides, people spending large portions of their lives with machines are practicing interacting with machines—it’s what they know, and it’s safer than the unpredictable nature of human interactions (352). Is it any wonder that some people end up ultimately preferring the robots?

If conversation is taken to mean a dialogue that is “open-ended and spontaneous, conversation in which we play with ideas, in which we allow ourselves to be fully present and vulnerable,” then even in communication with other humans, technology is often at odds with conversation (4). “To converse, you don’t just have to perform turn taking, you have to listen to someone else, to read their body, their voice, their tone, and their silences. You bring your concern and experience to bear, and you expect the same from others” (45). Technology always hampers parts of this. Texting, for example, deprives us of eye contact, body language, tone of voice, facial expressions and so much presence; messages can be edited without an awkward pause; and they can be ignored entirely, unlike a person standing before you.

“Without conversation, studies show that we are less empathic, less connected, less creative and fulfilled” (13). School aged children are at least as affected as the modern office worker, whom we will address next. Students are not as emotionally developed as their same-age peers of previous generations (5). One study found a “40 percent drop in empathy among college students in the past twenty years, as measured by standard psychological tests,” and, although alternative explanations are possible, the authors of that study suggested that the decline could be attributed to a decline in face-to-face time among students (171). Other studies “show a decline in the ability to form secure attachments—the kind where you trust and share your life” (180). Students form superficial relationships, lack empathy, and don’t seem that interested in one another (161). They are “rushed, impatient, not interested in the process, unable to be alone with their thoughts” (76), and “can’t concentrate” (164). Where time with people teaches children to be with people, time with the computer teaches children to be with their computers (7), so what they tend to talk about with their peers when they finally get around to it is, well, what’s on their phones (161).

The modern workplace is no better. Here communication comes “in a relentless stream” that keeps people “scattered and *dependent*” (279, emphasis in original), but then employers aren’t paying people to stay calm (280). They aren’t paying people to stop checking work emails and texts after hours either. So instead of staying calm, and instead of being an individual with a face and a personal presence, employees differentiate themselves the only way that technology allows—by working faster and for longer hours (288). Even though “the experience of boredom is directly linked to creativity and innovation” (39), employers and employees will need a complete change of mindset before boredom will be allowed back in the building and employees leave their work at work.

The fact that this frenzied, hectic state follows us everywhere damages every other area of our lives. The simple presence of a phone (even turned off) on the table lightens the dinner conversation, since we think we might be interrupted (21). “Every time you check your phone in company, what you gain is a hit of stimulation, a neurochemical shot, and what you lose is what a friend, teacher, parent, lover, or co-worker just said, meant, felt” (40). It is no wonder that the children of the smart phone generation—now graduating from college—want conversation to be something they can drop in and out of (a.k.a. superficial), seek out multitasking (addictive as it is), and have trouble with depression, social anxiety, and reading human emotions (42).

Entire lives are disintegrating, but we might not notice, since we are simultaneously losing the ability to tell a coherent story. People tell stories according to the medium at hand, which means we tell stories likely to be ‘followed’ on Twitter or ‘liked’ on Facebook, neither of which media allows for very complex stories (89). Unknowingly, our ‘friends’ and ‘followers’ are training and rewarding us for telling our life stories in entertaining and superficial ways (95), to put on our best faces (109). This is wholly different from the way conversations unfold, always unique to your history and to the history of the person with whom you are speaking, opening us to a much deeper self-understanding (98). Conversations encourage listening, respect, and talking through deeper feelings (109).

Exacerbating the problem of not being able to tell stories, the multitasking lifestyle “puts us into a state similar to vigilance, one of continual alert” in which “we can follow only the most rudimentary arguments” (257). The ability to follow arguments and to tell stories is necessary to understanding history, having a context for the information you find online, and for making a democracy work (222). Following an argument or a story would also make it more likely that someone could see the dangers of a phone that always offers more distractions, more neurochemical hits.

Turkle peppers the book with sensible recommendations for parents, schools, and employers. One helpful solution Turkle suggests is putting pressure on technology developers until they offer us something different, something that isn’t “designed to keep us at our phones” all day (126). For individuals, the way forward is clear to Turkle: “*Protect your creativity. Take your time and take quiet time. Find your own agenda and keep your own pace*” (319). Make your use of technology intentional, limited to the times when it frees you to be present to the humans around you. Then, practice being present to yourself and to others. Practice conversation.

[i]  
[https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150123\\_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20150123_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html).

[ii] John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, trans. M. Waldstein (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), TOB 6:2, p. 151.

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