***Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk In A Digital Age***

Sherry Turkle

Why a book on conversation? We're talking all the time. We text and post and chat. We may even begin to feel more at home in the world of our screens. Among family and friends, among colleagues and lovers, we turn to our phones instead of each other. We readily admit we would rather send an electronic message or mail than to commit a face-to-face meeting or telephone call.

The new mediated life has gotten us into trouble. Face-to face-conversation is the most human- and humanizing- thing we do. Fully present to one another, we learn to listen. It's where we develop the capacity for empathy. It's where we experience the joy of being heard, of being understood. And conversation advances self-reflection, the conversations with ourselves that are the cornerstone of early development and continue throughout life.

But these days we find ways around conversation. We hide from each other even as we're constantly connected to each other. For our own screens, we are tempted to be present ourselves as we would like to be. Of course, performance is part of any meeting, anywhere, but online and at our leisure, it is easy to compose, edit, and improve as we revise.

We say we turn to our phones when we're “bored.” And we often find ourselves bored because we have become accustomed to a constant feed of connection, information, and entertainment. We are forever elsewhere. At class or at church or business meetings, we pay attention to what interests us and then when it doesn't, we look to our devices to find something that does.

It all adds up to a flight from conversation- at least from conversation that is open-ended and spontaneous, conversation in which we play with ideas, in which we allow ourselves to be fully present and vulnerable. Yet these are the conversations where empathy and intimacy flourish and social action gains strength. But these conversations require time and space, and we say we're too busy. Technology is implicated as an assault on empathy.

Despite the seriousness of our moment, I write with optimism. Once aware, we can begin to rethink our practices. When we do, conversation is there to reclaim. For the failing connections of our digital world, it is the talking cure.

**“They Make Acquaintances, but Their Connections Seem Superficial”**

I was contacted by the Dean of the Holbrooke School, a middle school in upstate New York. I was asked to consult with its faculty about what they saw as a disturbance in their students’ friendship patterns. In her invitation, the Dean put it this way: “Students don't seem to be making friendships as before. They make acquaintances, but their connections seem superficial.”

As the Holbrooke middle schoolers began to spend more time texting, they lost practice in face-to-face talk. That means last practice in the emphasis arts- learning to make contact, to listen, and to attend to others. Reclaiming conversation is a step toward reclaiming our most fundamental human values.

Mobile technology is here to stay, along with all the wonders it brings. Yet it is time for us to consider how it may get in the way of other things we hold dear- and how once we recognize this, we can take action: *We can both redesign technology and change how we bring it into our lives*.

**A Partisan of Conversation**

I have spent my professional life as a student of conversation, trained as a sociologist, a teacher, and a clinical psychologist. These vocations have made me a partisan of conversation because they have taught me to appreciate the work that conversation can do- from Socratic classrooms to small talk around watercoolers.

In the classroom, conversations carry more than the details of a subject; teachers are there to help students learn how to ask questions and be dissatisfied with easy answers. More than this, conversations with a good teacher communicates that learning isn't all about the answers. It's about what the answers mean. Conversations help students build narratives- whether about gun control or the Civil War- that will allow them to learn and remember in a way that has meaning for them. Without these narratives, you can learn a new fact but not know what to do with it, how to make sense of it all. In therapy, conversation explores the meanings of the relationships that animate our lives. It attends to pauses, hesitations, associations, the things that are said through silence. It commits to a kind of conversation that doesn't give “advice” but helps people discover what they have hidden from themselves so they can find their inner compass.

When I hear lovers say that they prefer to “talk” by editing a text on their smartphones, when I hear families say that they air their differences on email to avoid face-to-face tension, when I hear corporate vice-presidents describe business meetings as “down time for emptying your inbox,” I hear a desire for distraction, comfort, and efficiency. But I also know that things moves won't allow conversation to do the work it can do.

**The Virtuous Circle**

We are being silenced by our technologies- in a way, “cured of talking.” These silences- often in the presence of our children- have led to a crisis of empathy that has diminished us at home, at work, and in public life. I've said that the remedy, most simply, is a talking cure. This book is my case for conversation.

I begin my case by turning to someone many people think of- mistakenly- as a hermit who tried to get away from talk. In 1845, Henry David Thoreau moved to a cabin on Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, to learn to live more “deliberately”- away from the crush of random chatter. But the cabin furniture he chose to secure that ambition suggest no simple “retreat.” He said that in his cabin there were “three chairs- one for solitude, two for friendship, and three for society.”

These three chairs plot the points on a virtuous circle that links conversation to the capacity for empathy and for self-reflection. In solitude we find ourselves; we prepare ourselves to come to conversation with something to say that is authentic, ours. When we are secure in ourselves we are able to listen to other people and really hear what they have to say. And then in conversation with other people we become better at inner dialogue.

Of course, this virtuous circle is an ideal type, but taking that into account, it works. Solitude reinforces a secret sense of self, and with that, the capacity for empathy. Technology disrupts this virtuous circle. Research shows that people are uncomfortable if left alone with their thoughts, even for a few minutes.

These days, we see that when people are alone at a stop sign or in the checkout line at the supermarket, they seem almost panicked and they reach for their phones. We are so accustomed to being always connected that being alone seems like a problem technology could solve.

And this is where the virtuous circle breaks down: afraid of being alone, we struggle to pay attention to ourselves. And what suffers is our ability to pay attention to each other. If we can't find our own center, we lose confidence in what we have to offer others.

Or you can work the circle the other way: we struggle to pay attention to each other, and what suffers is our ability to know ourselves.

We face a flight from conversation that is also a flight from self-reflection, empathy, and mentorship- the virtues of the Thoreau’s three chairs. *But this flight is not inevitable. When the virtuous circle is broken, conversation cures.*

**Generations**

When these new generations consider the idea of having a “flight from conversation,” they often ask, “Is that really a problem? If you text or iChat, isn't that ‘talking’? And besides, you can get your message ‘right.’ What's wrong with that?” When I talk with them about open-ended conversation, some ask me to specify its “value proposition.” Some tell me that conversation seems like “hard work,” with many invitations, often treacherous, to imperfection, loss of control, and boredom. Why are these worth fighting for?

Many of the things we all struggle with in love and work can be helped by conversation. Without conversation, studies show that we are less empathic, less connected, less creative and fulfilled. But to generations that grew up using their phones to text and message, *these studies may be describing losses they don’t feel*. They didn't grow up with a lot of face-to-face talk.

Of course, across generations, there are those who do not need to be convinced of the value of conversation. But even these partisans of conversation often surprise me. So many of them seemed defeated. I am particularly struck by parents who say they want their children to stop texting at dinner but don't feel they can object when the phones come out. They fear that they are too late with their admonishments, that they will be left behind if they don't embrace the new.

It is not enough to ask your children to put away their phones. You have to model this behavior and put away *your* phone. If children don't learn how to listen, to stand up for themselves and negotiate with others in classrooms or at family dinner, when will they learn the give-and-take that is necessary for good relationships or, for that matter, for the debate of citizens in a democracy? Reclaiming conversation begins with the acknowledgement that speaking and listening with attention are skills. They can be taught. They take practice and that practice can start now. In your home, in the classroom, at your job.

**Stepping Up, Not Stepping Back**

There are at least two audiences for this book. One audience needs to be persuaded that a flight from conversation suggests a problem and not an evolution. And it is a problem with a solution: if we make space for our conversation, we come back to each other and we come back to ourselves.

And for the audience that feels defeated, whose members mourn an “inevitable” flight from conversation and see themselves as bystanders, I make another case: this is the wrong time to step back. Those who understand how conversation works- no matter what their age- need to step up and pass on what they know.

*We can step up in our families and friendships, but there are also the public conversations of Thoreau’s chair*. *These conversations, too, need mentors.* Here I think of teachers and students: the classroom is a special space where students can see how thinking happens. College faculty are often shy about asking students to put away their devices in classrooms. A student with an open laptop will multitask in class. This will degrade the performance not only of the student with the open machine but of all the students around him for her. These days, faculty are less deferential. Many begin the semester by announcing a device-free classroom policy or specifically set aside class time for “tools down” conversation.

**The Moment Is Right to Reclaim Conversation**

When I published *Alone Together*, a book critical of our inattention to each other in our always-connected lives, I knew I was describing complications that most people did not want to see. As a culture, we were smitten with our technology. Like young lovers, we were afraid that too much talking would spoil the romance. But now, only a few years later, the atmosphere has changed. We are ready to talk. When we have our mobile devices with us, we see that we turn away from our children, romantic partners, and work colleagues. We are ready to reconsider the too-simple enthusiasm of “the more connected we are, the better off we are.”

We have learned that we get a neurochemical high from connecting. We recognize that we crave a feeling of being “always on” that keeps us from doing our best, being our best. So we allow ourselves a certain disenchantment with what technology has made possible.

We recognize that we need things that social media inhibit. My previous work described an evolving problem; this book is a call to action. It is time to make the course corrections. We have everything we need to begin. We have each other.

**THE FLIGHT FROM CONVERSATION**

**Even a Silent Phone Disconnects Us**

Studies show that the mere presence of a phone on the table (even a phone turned off) changes what people talk about. If we think we might be interrupted, we keep conversation light, on topics of little controversy or consequence. And conversations with phones on the landscape block empathic connection. If two people are speaking and there is a phone on a nearby desk, each feels less connected to the other than when there is no phone present. *Even a silent phone disconnects us*.

So it is not surprising that in the past twenty years we've seen a 40 percent decline in the markers for empathy among college students. It is a trend that researchers linked to the new presence of digital communications.

Why do we spend so much time messaging each other if we end up feeling less connected to each other? In the short term, online communication makes us feel more in charge of our time and self-presentation. If we text rather than talk, we can have each other in amounts we can control. And texting and email and posting let us present the self we want to be. We can edit and retouch.

But human relationships are rich, messy, and demanding. When we clean them up with technology, *we move from conversation to the efficiency of mere connection*. I fear we forget the difference. And we forget that children who grow up in a world of digital devices don't know that there is a difference or that things were ever different. Studies show that when children hear less adult talk, they talk less. If we turn toward our phones and away from our children, we will start them off with a deficit of which they will be unaware. It won't be only about how much they talk. It will be about how much they understand the people they're talking with.

**I’d Rather Text than Talk**

For many, a sentiment has become a litany, captured by the phrase “I'd rather text than talk.” What people really mean is not only that they like to text but also that they don't like a certain kind of talk. They shy away from open-ended conversation. For most purposes, and sometimes even intimate ones, they would rather send a text message than hear a voice on the phone or be opposite someone face-to-face.

When I ask, “What's wrong with conversation?” answers are forthcoming. A young man in his senior year of high school makes things clear: “What's wrong with conversation? I'll tell you what's wrong with conversation! It takes place in real time and you can't control what you're going to say.”

This reticence about conversation in “real time” is not confined to the young. Across generations, people struggle to control what feels like an endless stream of “incoming” information to assimilate and act on and interactions to manage. Handling things online feels like the beginnings have a solution: at least we can answer questions at our convenience and edit our response to get them “right.”

We slip into thinking that always being connected is going to make us less lonely. But we are at risk because it is actually the reverse: If we are unable to be alone, we will be more lonely. And if we don't teach our children to be alone, they will only know how to be lonely.

Yet these days, so many people- adults and children- become anxious without a constant feed of online stimulation. In a quiet moment, they take out their phones, check their messages, send a text. They cannot tolerate time that some people I interviewed derisively termed “boring” or “a lull.”

**“My Tiny God”**

I'm not suggesting that we turn away from our devices. To the contrary, I'm suggesting that we look more closely at them to begin a more self-aware relationship with them.

Sharon, thirty-four, is taken aback when she hears a friend refer to her smart phone as “my tiny god.” The comment makes Sharon wonder about her own relationship with her phone. Are there ways in which she treats her own phone as a god? Perhaps.

As Sharon talks with me, it becomes clear that her main concern is how social media is shaping her sense of herself. She worries that she is spending too much time “performing” a better version of herself- one that will play well to her followers. She begins by saying that all interactions, certainly, have an element of performance. But online, she feels involved in her performances to the point that she has lost track of what is performance and what is not.

*I spend my time online wanting to be seen as a witty, intelligent, involved, and having the right ironic distance from everything. Self-reflection should be more about, well, who I am, warts and all, how I really see myself. I worry that I'm giving up the responsibility for who I am to how other people see me. I'm not being rigorous about knowing my own mind, my own thoughts. You get lost in your performance. On Twitter, on Facebook, I'm geared toward showing my best self, showing me to be invulnerable or with as little vulnerability as possible.*

Research tells us that being comfortable with our vulnerabilities is central to our happiness, our creativity, and even our productivity. Yet life on social media encourages us to show ourselves, as Sharon puts it, as “invulnerable or with as little vulnerability as possible.” Torn between our desire to express an authentic self and the pressure to show our best selves online, it is not surprising that frequent use of social media leads to feelings of depression and social anxiety.

Research shows that those who use social media the most have difficulty reading human emotions, including their own. But the same research gives cause for optimism: We are resilient. Face-to face-conversation leads to greater self-esteem and an improved ability to deal with others. Again, conversation cures.

This book says you don't have to give up your phone. But if you understand its profound effects on you, you can approach your phone with greater intention and choose to live differently with it.

**Pro-Conversation**

My argument is not anti-technology. It's pro-conversation. We miss out on necessary conversations when we divide our attention between the people we're with and the world on our phone. Or when we go to our phones instead of claiming a quiet moment for ourselves. We have convinced ourselves that surfing the web is the same as day dreaming. That it provides the same space for self-reflection. It doesn't.

It's time to put technology in its place and reclaim conversation. That journey begins with a better understanding of what conversation accomplishes and how technology can get in its way.

**The Three Wishes**

Our mobile devices seem to grant three wishes, as though gifts from a benevolent genie: first, that we will always be heard; second, that we can put our attention wherever we want it to be; and third, that we will never have to be alone. And the granting of these three wishes implies another reward: that we will never have to be bored. But in creative conversations, in conversations in which people get to really know each other, you usually have to tolerate a bit of boredom. Conversations of discovery tend to have long silences. But these days, people often tell me that silence is a “lull” from which they want to escape.

In the midst of our great experiment with technology, we are often caught between what we know we should do and the urge to check our phones. Across generations, we let technology take us away from conversation yet yearn for what we've lost. We reach for a moment of correction, an opportunity to recapture things we know by heart. When we invest in conversation, we get a payoff of self-knowledge, empathy, and the experience of community.

By now, several “generations” have children that have grown up expecting parents and caretakers to be only half there. Many parents text at breakfast and dinner, and parents and babysitters ignore children when they take them to playgrounds and parks. In these new silences at meals and at playtime, caretakers are not modeling the skills of relationship, which are the same as the skills for conversation.

The first generation of children that grew up with smartphones are at the beginning of their careers, but employers report that they come to work with unexpected phobias and anxieties. They don't know how to begin and end conversations. They have a hard time with eye contact. They say that talking on the telephone makes them anxious. It is worth asking a hard question: Are we unintentionally depriving our children of tools they need at the very moment they need them?

**Table Manners 2.0**

Young people tell me it would be nice to have the attention of their friends at meals but that this has become an unrealistic expectation. Social norms work against it, plus “you don't really want to give up what's coming in on your phone.” For anyone who grew up with texting, “continuous partial attention” is the new normal, but many are aware of the price they pay for its routines.

I interview college students who text continuously in each other's presence yet tell me they cherish the moments when their friends put down their phones. For them, what counts is a special moment when you are with a friend who gets a text but chooses to ignore it, silencing his or her phone instead. For one woman, a college sophomore, “It's very special when someone turns away from a text to turn to a person.” For a senior man, “If someone gets a text and apologizes and silences it [their phone], that sends a signal that they are there, they are listening to you.”

A junior admits that she wants to ask her friends to put away their phones at meals but she can't do it because she would be socially out of line. “It's hard to ask someone to give you their undivided attention.” Young people recognize that full attention is important, yet they are unwilling to give it to each other.

**“I’m Sorry,” Hit Send**

In this atmosphere, we indulge a preference to apologize by text. It has always been hard to sit down and say you're sorry when you've made a mistake. Now we have alternatives that we find less stressful: we can send a photo with an annotation, or we can send a text or an email. We don't have to apologize to each other; we can type, “I'm sorry.” And hit send. But face-to-face, you get to see that you have hurt the other person. The other person gets to see that you are upset. It is this realization that triggers the beginning of forgiveness.

A face-to-face apology is an occasion to practice empathic skills. So a lot is at stake when we move away from face-to-face apologies. If we don't put children in the situations that teach empathy (and a face-to face-apology is one of these), it is not surprising that they have difficulty seeing the effects of their words on others.

The “empathy gap” starts with young children and continues throughout our life. A graduate student in economics comments on what is missing when her friends apologize by text. She calls it an “artificial truce.”

*The texted “I'm sorry” means, on the one hand, “I no longer want to have tension with you; let's be okay,” and at the same time says, “I'm not going to be next to you while you go through your feelings; just let me know when our troubles are over.” “When I have a fight with my boyfriend and the fight ends with an “I'm sorry” text, it is 100 percent certain that the specific fight will come back again. It hasn't been resolved.”*

**“I Would Never Do This Face-to-Face. It’s Too Emotional.”**

Gretchen is a college sophomore who sits in my office and tells me she is having a hard time concentrating on her schoolwork. It's roommate trouble. When we speak, Gretchen is distracted. Her grades are a disaster. I ask Gretchen if she is comfortable going home now; it's close to dinner time and her roommate is probably at the dorm, no more than a ten minute walk from my office. Gretchen looks confused as though my question has no meaning. “I'm going to talk to her on Gchat,” she says. “I would never do this face-to-face. It's too emotional.”

Stephen Colbert- political talk show host- asked me a profound question during an appearance on his show: “Don't all these little tweets, these little sips of online connection, add up to one big gulp of real conversation?” My answer was no. Many sips of connection don't add up to a gulp of conversation.

Connecting in sips may work for gathering discrete bits of information or for saying “I am thinking about you.” or even for saying “I love you.” But connecting for sips doesn't work so well for an apology. It doesn't work so well when we are called upon to see things from another’s point of view. In these cases, we have to listen. We have to respond in real time. In these exchanges we show our temperament and character. We build trust.

Face -to-face conversation unfolds slowly. It teaches patience. We attend to tone and nuance. When we communicate on our digital devices, we learn different habits.

**Interruptions? “This Is My life.”**

Students keep returning to the idea that digital conversations are valuable because they are “low risk.” The students talk about how when they are online, they can edit messages before sending them. And whether the text is to a potential employer or a romantic prospect, if it's important, they often ask friends to go over their writing to help ensure they are getting it “right.”

When people say they’re “addicted” to their phones, they are not only saying that they want what their phones provide. They are also saying that they don't want what their phones allow them to avoid. The thing I hear most is that going to your phone makes it easier to avoid boredom or anxiety. But both of these may signal that you are learning something new, something alive and disruptive. You may be stretching yourself in a new direction. Boredom and anxiety are signs to attend more closely to things, not to turn away.

We don't live in a silent world of no talk. But we drop in and out of the talk we have. And we have very little patience for talk that demands sustained attention. When talk becomes difficult or when talk turns to quiet, we've given ourselves permission to go elsewhere. To avoid life's challenges and boring bits.

**Life's Boring Bits**

A young father, thirty-four, tells me when he gives his two-year old daughter a bath, he finds it boring. And he's feeling guilty. Just a few nights earlier, instead of sitting patiently with her, talking and singing to her, as he did with his older children, he began to check email on his phone. And it wasn't the first time. “I know I shouldn't but I do,” he says. “That bath time should be a time for relaxing with my daughter. But I can't do it. I'm on and off my phone the whole time. I find the downtime of her bath boring.”

Every time you check your phone in company, what you gain is a hit of stimulation, and a neurochemical shot, and what you lose is what a friend, teacher, parent, lover, or co-worker just said, meant, felt.

**Does Technology Make Emotions Easy?**

Technology does not make emotions easy. Social media can make emotional life very hard indeed.

If you are only partially present, it's easy to miss out on the emotional and nonverbal subtext of what people are saying to you. And you were not focusing on your own feelings either.

The emotional tone of social media is another possible source of trouble. You can feel disappointed if something you share on Facebook doesn't get the number of positive reactions you want, but you train yourself to post what will please.

In the “thumbs-up” world of online life, young people learn the wrong life lessons. Among the wrong lessons they learned: First, negative emotions are something that unsuccessful kids have rather than normal parts of life that need to be addressed and coped with; second, it is natural to allow distraction and interruption to take you away from other people.

*This is a lot of bad news. But here again, there is good news as well: conversation cures*. Clifford Nass, who was a cognitive psychologist and communications professor at Stanford University stated, “Technology does not provide a sentimental education. People do.” Nass compares the parts of the brain that process emotion to a muscle: they can atrophy if not exercised, and can be strengthened through face-to-face conversation.

**Technology Does Not Provide a Sentimental Education**

Reclaiming conversation begins with reclaiming our attention. These days, average American adults check their phones every six and a half minutes. College students who are using any form of media are likely to be using four at a time. If students are on Facebook, they're also on Netflix, a music blog, and their class reading.

Hyperconnected, we imagine ourselves more efficient, but we are deceived. Multitasking degrades our performance at everything we do, all the while giving us the feeling that we are doing better at everything. So it makes us less productive no matter how good it makes us feel. Frequent multitasking is associated with depression, social anxiety, and trouble reading human emotions.

We are wired to crave instant gratification, a fast pace, and unpredictability. That is, we are wired to crave what neuroscientists call “the seeking drive,” the kind of experience that scrolling through a Twitter feed provides. And people who chronically multitask train their brains to crave multitasking. Those who multitask most frequently don't get better at it; they just want more of it. This means that conversation, the kind that demands focus, becomes more and more difficult.

We could say we are “addicted to multitasking,” but this is not the most helpful way to frame the problem. Our phones are part of our media ecology. We have to find a way to make our lives better with our phones. I prefer to think in terms of technological affordances- what technology makes possible (and often attractive and easy)- and human vulnerabilities. If you are addicted, you have to get off your drug. If you are vulnerable, you can work to be less vulnerable.

A sixteen-year-old boy tells his mother that he has just received a text from his best friend. His friend's father has died. He tells his mother that he has texted his friend to say he is sorry. His mother, almost uncomprehending, asks, “Why didn't you call?” She is thinking about consolation. The boy says, “It isn't my place to interrupt him. He's too sad to talk on the phone.” The boy assumes that conversation is intrusive even at moments that beg for intimacy.

One high school senior talks about a plan to put himself on a self-improvement program. He is going to “force himself” to use the telephone. I ask him why. “It might,” he says, “be a way to teach myself to have a conversation… rather than spending my life in awkward silence.

In the chapters that follow, I look at the kinds of conversation Thoreau envisaged when he described the three chairs in his cabin. The story begins with *one-chair conversations*, those of solitude. Solitude does not necessarily mean being alone. It is a state of conscious retreat, a gathering of the self. The capacity for solitude makes relationships with others more authentic. Because you know who you are, you can see others for who they are, not for who you need them to be. So solitude enables richer conversation. But our current way of life undermines our capacity for solitude.

These days, being alone feels like a problem that needs to be solved, and people try to solve it with technology. But here, digital connection is more a symptom than a cure. It expresses but it doesn't solve the underlying problem- a discomfort with being alone.

A love of solitude and self-reflection enables sociability. Many think of Thoreau as a recluse. He was anything but. Thoreau’s *two-chair conversations* are with friends, family, and romantic partners.

And then there are *three-chair conversations*, conversations in the social world. this involves examples from the world of work. I look at my own kind of workplace, the world of education, and also the business and corporate world. Both domains face similar threats to their cultures of conversation. In classrooms and offices, the cultural expectation for multitasking subverts conversation and constant interruption threatens achievement.

**Paths Forward**

Even Silicon Valley parents who work for social media companies tell me that they send their children to technology-free schools in the hope that this will give their children greater emotional and intellectual range. Many were surprised to learn that Steve Jobs did not encourage his own children's use of iPads or iPhones. His biographer reports that in Jobs family, the focus was on conversation: “Every evening Steve made the point of having dinner at the big, long table in their kitchen, discussing books and history and a variety of things. No one ever pulled out an iPad or computer.” Our technological mandarins don't always live the life they build for others. They go on vacation spots deemed “device-free” (that don't allow phones, tablets, or laptops).

Apps for sociability may increase sociability on apps; what children are missing, however, is an ease with each other face-to-face, the context in which empathy is born.

**Solitude**

In 2013, Louis C.K. brought an accessory for solitude, especially for children, to a late-night television audience. He began by telling Conan O'Brien how he explains to his two daughters why they can't have cell phones. He set the stage by making it clear that when it comes to his children, he takes the long view: “I'm not raising the children. I'm raising the grown-ups that they're going to be.” For him, phones are “toxic, especially for kids.”

*They don't look at people when they talk to them. And they don't build the empathy. You know, kids are mean. And it's because they're trying it out. They look at a kid and they go, “You're a fat.” and then they see the kids face scrunch up and they go, “Ooh, that doesn't feel good to make a person do that”… But when they write “You're a fat,” then they go, “Mmm, that was fun. I like that.”*

*You need to build an ability to just be yourself and not be doing something. That's what the phones are taking away. The ability to just sit there. That's just being a person… Because underneath everything in your life there is that thing, that empty, forever empty. That knowledge that it's all for nothing and you're alone. It's down there. And sometimes when things clear away and you're not watching and you're in your car and you start going, Ooh, here it comes that I’m alone, like it starts to visit on you just like the sadness. Life is tremendously sad…. That's why we text and drive. Pretty much 100 percent of people driving are texting. And they're killing and murdering each other with their cars. But people are willing to risk taking their life and ruining another because they don't want to be alone for a second…. I was alone in my car and a Bruce Springsteen song came on… and I heard it and it gave me a kind of fall, back-to- school-depression feeling and it made me feel really sad and so I went, “Okay, I'm getting really sad,” so I had to get the phone and write “Hi” to, like, fifty people…. Anyway, I started to get that sad feeling and reached for the phone and then I said, “You know what: Don't. Just be sad. Just stand in the way of it and let it hit you like a truck.”*

*So I pulled over and I just cried my eyes out. I cried so much and it was beautiful…. Sadness is poetic…. You are lucky to live sad moments. And then I had happy feelings because when you let yourself have sad feelings your body has like antibodies that come rushing in to meet the sad feelings. But because we don't want that first feeling of sad, we push it away with our phones. So you never feel completely happy or completely sad. You just feel kind of satisfied with your products. And then… you die.*

*So that's why I don't want to get a phone for my kids.*

**The Virtues of Solitude**

Solitude doesn't necessarily mean a lack of activity. You know you are experiencing solitude when what you are doing brings you back to yourself. The writer Susan Cain has persuasively argued that solitude is important for introverts and that introverts are significant numbers among us. Solitude is important for everyone, including the most extroverted people. It's time you become familiar and comfortable with yourself.

These days, we mistake time for the net for solitude. It isn't. In fact, solitude is challenged by our habit of turning to our screens rather than inward. And it is challenged by our culture of continual sharing. People who grew up with social media will often say that they don't feel like themselves; indeed, they sometimes can't *feel* themselves, and less they are posting, messaging, or texting. Sometimes people say that they need to share a thought or feeling in order to think it, feel it. This is the sensibility of “I share, therefore I am.” Or otherwise put: “I want to have a feeling; I need to send a text.”

**“Alone With”**

Paul Tillich has a beautiful formulation: “Language… has created the word ‘loneliness’ to express the pain of being alone. And it created the word ‘solitude’ to express the glory of being alone.” Loneliness is painful, emotionally and even physically, born from a “want of intimacy” when we need it most, in early childhood. Solitude- the capacity to be contentedly and constructively alone- is built from successful human connection at just that time. But if we don't have experience with solitude- and this is often the case today- we start to equate loneliness and solitude. If we don't know the satisfaction of solitude, we only know the panic of loneliness. Instead of using time alone to think (or not to think), we think of filling it with digital connection.

Time alone is not, most say, something their parents taught them to value. If we care about solitude, we have to communicate this to our children. They are not going to pick it up on their own. And more than telling our children that we value solitude, we have to show them that we think it is important by finding some for ourselves.

**Disconnection Anxiety**

We have testimony about solitude from the most creative among us. For Mozart, “When I am, as it were, completely myself, entirely alone, and of good cheer- say, traveling in a carriage or walking after a good meal or during the night when I cannot sleep- it is on such occasions that my ideas flow best and most abundantly.” For Thomas Mann, “Solitude gives birth to the original in us, To beauty unfamiliar and perilous- to poetry.” For Picasso, “Without great solitude, no serious work is possible.”

It is not surprising that privacy allows for greater creativity. When we let our focus shift away from the people and things around us, we are better able to think critically about our own thoughts, a process psychologist call meta-cognition. Everyone has this potential. The important thing is to nurture it. The danger is that in a life of constant connection, we lose the capacity to do so.

People don't know what to do with time alone. They can't concentrate; they say they are bored, and boredom becomes a reason to turn to their phones for a game or a text or a Facebook update. But mostly, it is anxiety that leads them back to their phones. They want to feel a part of things.

**Where Empathy Begins**

While our brains are wired for talk, we can also train them to do deep reading, the kind that demands concentration on a sustained narrative thread with complex characters. Generations of English teachers stated that reading certain fiction was “good for them.” It sounded like something teachers would say, no one really believed them in a literal sense. But now we know that literary fiction significantly improves empathic capacity, as measured by the ability to infer emotional states from peoples facial expressions. The English teachers were right, literally. First one identifies with the characters in a complex novel and then the effect generalizes.

**Lightbulb Moments and the Value of Your Inner World**

Machines present us with information at a volume and velocity that we try, unsuccessfully, to keep up with. But we try. And the effort means that we are often so busy communicating that we don't have time to think. K-12 Teachers and college professors use the same words to describe their students: rushed, impatient, not interested in process, and unable to be alone with their thoughts.

Reclaiming conversation begins with reclaiming our capacity for solitude. When we reach for a phone to push reverie away, we should get into the habit of asking why. Perhaps we are not moving toward our phones but away from something else. Are we hiding from anxiety? Are we hiding from a good idea that will demand difficult work? Are we hiding from a question that will take time to sort through?

We can cultivate a different attitude, beginning with our children, we can give them time without electronic devices. And we can give them more time alone.

You don't have to move to a cabin in the woods to get these benefits, but even a short amount of solitude lets people hear their own thoughts. It opens up for the space of self-reflection.

**Self-Reflection**

One of the rewards of solitude is an increased capacity for self-reflection- the conversations we have with ourselves in the hope of greater insight about who we are and what to be. Professionally, what is our vocation? Personally, what gives us purpose and meaning? In self-reflection, we come to understand ourselves better and we nurture our capacity for relationships.

The rewards of self-reflection take time to achieve- and of course we don't give ourselves much time these days.

**TWO CHAIRS**

**Families 2.0: The Work of Family Conversations**

In families, the flight from conversation adds up to a crisis in mentorship. We need family conversations because of the work they do- beginning with what we teach children about themselves and how to get along with other people. To join in conversation is to imagine another mind, to empathize, and to enjoy gesture, humor, and irony in the medium of talk. As with language, the capacity to learn these human subtleties is innate. But their development depends on the environment in which a child is placed. Of course, conversations at school and at play are crucial. But the family has the child first, over sustained time, and in the most highly charged emotional relationships. When adults listen during conversations, they show children how listening works. In family conversation, children learn that it is comforting and pleasurable to be heard and understood.

It is in family conversations that children have the greatest chance of learning that what other people are saying (and how they are saying it) is the key to what they are feeling. So family conversations are training ground for empathy. When an adult asks an upset child, “How are you feeling?” the adult can make it clear that anger and frustration are acceptable emotions; they are part of being a person. Upset feelings don't have to be hidden or denied. What matters is what you do with them.

When digital media encourage us to edit ourselves until we have said the “right thing,” we can lose sight of the important thing: Relationships deepen not only because we necessarily say anything in particular but because we are invested enough to show up for another conversation. In family conversations, children learn that what can matter most is not the information shared but the relationships sustained. It is hard to sustain those relationships if you are on your phone.

**Elsewhere: A Study of Distraction**

A young pediatrician, Jenny Radesky, began to notice that more and more parents and caregivers were using smartphones when they were with their children. “In restaurants, on mass transit, in playgrounds.” she says, “the phones were always there.” Radesky knew that attention to children during these kinds of moments was crucial: “the bread and butter of relationship building.”

With caretakers on their phones, Radesky thought, those crucial early conversations are disrupted. How disrupted? And how much are caretakers really on their phones? Radesky did a study of fifty-five adults who were watching over children as they ate meals together in fast-food restaurants. The results: Across the board, the adults paid more attention to their phones than to their children. Some adults interacted with children intermittently; most withdrew completely into their devices. For their part, children became passive and detached or began to seek adult attention in the futile bursts of bad behavior.

We see children learning that no matter what they do, they will not win adults away from technology. From infancy, the foundations for emotional stability and social fluency are developed when children make eye contact and interact with active, engaged faces. Infants deprived of eye contact and facing a parent’s “still face” become agitated, then withdrawn, then depressed. These days, neuroscientists speculate that when parents caring for children turn to their phones, they may “effectively simulate a still-face paradigm”- in their homes or out in a restaurant- with all of the attendant damaged. It is not surprising if children deprived of words, eye contact, and expressive faces become stiff and unresponsive with others.

If we don't look at our children and engage them in conversation, it is not surprising if they grow up awkward and withdrawn. And anxious about talk.

**The “Missing Chip” Hypothesis**

Instead of promoting the value of authenticity, social media encourages performance. Instead of teaching the rewards of vulnerability, it suggests that you put on your best face. And instead of learning how to listen, you learn what goes into an effective broadcast.

Children, even very young children, say they are unhappy with how much attention their parents give to phones.

Neuroscientists talk about the “use that or lose it” quality of our brains. Nicholas Carr, who introduced the notion of “the shallows” to help people think how their brains adapt to life on the web, said: “We become, neurologically, what we think.” If you don't use certain parts of the brain, they will fail to develop, or be connected more weakly. By extension, if young children do not use the parts of their brain activated by conversing with an attentive parent, they will fail to develop the appropriate circuitry. I think of this as the “missing chip” hypothesis. If young children are not engaged in conversation, they will start out a step behind in their development.

Teachers complain that students- from middle school and beyond- are less able than their peers of only a decade ago to read books that require sustained attention. Cognitive neuroscientist Mary-Anne Wolf studies this shift away from what she calls “deep reading.” Today, adults who grew up reading serious literature can *force* themselves to focus on long texts and reactivate the neural circuits for deep reading that they may have lost after spending more time online than with books. But children need to develop these circuits in the first place. Wolf suggests that to get children back to reading, the first, crucial step is to read to children and with them.

The parallels with conversation are clear. To get children back to conversation- and learning the empathic skills that come from conversation-the first, crucial step is to talk with children. These days, it is often children who seem least afraid to point out that technology is too often getting in the way.

**Dreaming a Different Life**

What we do know is that our phones are seductive. When our phones are around, we are vulnerable to ignoring the people we love. Given this, it doesn't make sense to bring a phone to dinner with your children. Accept your vulnerability. Remove the temptation.

Everyone thinks that everyone else is occupied and preoccupied. The most realistic way to disrupt this circle is to have parents step up to their responsibilities as mentors. They can't do this if they are texting or doing email while their children are trying to get their attention.

The young people I interview are in conflict. They talk about the Internet as a “hindrance to life.” They say they want a different kind of life for themselves. But for now, they lead the life their parents model. They carry their phones at all times. They sleep with their phones. Some post to their networks rather than talk to their parents when they need emotional support. They say it's easier, and besides, they are not confident they can command their parents’ attention for the amounts of time it takes to really sort things out. And some doubt if their parents have the needed resources to help them.

**Left to Their Own Devices**

A tearful conversation with your mother and a sad blog post are both a kind of performance, but they ask and offer very different things. Ideally, the conversation with your mother can teach how empathy works. It is an opportunity to watch her attend to how you look and sound. It is an opportunity to notice that when she pays attention to you, her responses will begin to mirror your tone and body language. You can observe that when she says, “I don't understand,” she leans forward, signaling that she is trying to put herself in your place. Children learn empathy by observing the efforts of others to be empathic toward them.

Why do parents turn to their phones and away from their children? They tell me that they simply become distracted by something they see online, often something that relates to work. And then one thing leads to another.

**When Knowing Better Is Not Doing Better**

Paradoxically, the technology that offers us so many new ways to connect to each other can also make it harder to find each other. Our phones exert a strong holding power and we want to stay with them. But our families need us. Interruptions enable us to avoid difficult feelings and awkward moments. They become a convenience. And overtime we have trained our brains to crave them. Of course, all of this makes it hard to settle down into conversation.

Indeed, for many parents, knowing their children's unhappiness is not enough to make them put down their phones. There is a flight from responsibility. It can be addressed.

First, parents need a fuller understanding of what is at stake in conversations with children- qualities like the development of trust and self-esteem, and they capacity for empathy, friendship, and intimacy.

Second, parents need to move beyond thinking of their own attachment to their phones and with simple metaphors of addiction or, more usually common a smiling reference to a “semi-addiction,” as in “I’m semi-addicted to my phone and can't do anything about it.” The fact is, we are all vulnerable to the emotional gratifications that our phones offer- and we are neurochemically rewarded when we attend to their constant stimulation.

Once we recognize the affordances of a technology- what a technology makes easy or attractive- we are in a position to look at our vulnerability with a clearer eye. If we feel “addicted to our phones,” it is not personal weakness. We are exhibiting a predictable response to a perfectly executed design. Looking at things through this lens might put us halfway to making new choices, needed changes.

In our families, we can take responsibility for using technology in the same way as we take responsibility for the food we eat: Despite advertising and marketing and the biochemical power of sugar, we recognize that healthy foods in healthy amounts serve our families’ best interests. And overtime, we have put pressure on food producers to change their offerings. Right now, the apps on our phones are designed to keep us at our phones. Their designers profit from our attention, not from how well the technology supports us in the lives we want to lead.

**The March of Generations with Their Generations of Technology**

Young people have moved away from wanting to put their energy into managing a Facebook-style profile to being more interested in ephemeral ten-second communications on Snapchat. They seem less interested in being defined by what they say *about* themselves and would rather be known as they are in the everyday, by how they behave and what they share. Snapchats and Instagram and the very short videos of Vine have become the media of the moment.

I am with a college senior who talks to me about FaceTime. She dismisses it: “We don't do that. You have to hold it [the phone] in front of your face with your arm; you can't do anything else.” Only a week later, a group of high school freshmen talked to me about the merits of FaceTime- they use it for after-school conversations with friends while running other apps on their iPads or iPhones. They *like* FaceTime because it allows them to multitask during conversations. Tired arms never come up.

**Phone Phobia**

It was in 2008-2009 that I first became aware of how averse a new generation was to talking on the phone. Jasper and his friends make elaborate plans to avoid it. They receive calls from college sports coaches who want to interview them. These are important calls. But the young men have their parents take the calls, and they, the college hopefuls send a follow-up email. As soon as young people saw a real alternative to the telephone call, they found ways around it, usually email.

I've followed this generations anxiety about voice calls through their college years and well into first jobs. In 2014, a group of junior and senior college women talk about the rigors of a phone call. One describes it as “the absolute worst…. I instantly become this awkward person. On the phone- I have to have little scripts in front of me.” For a second woman, a call is stressful because it needs “a reason… so I have to plan what I'm going to say so it doesn't sound awkward.” A third also needs to prepare with notes: “It all goes too fast on the phone. I can't imagine the person's face. I can't keep up. You have to be listening and responding in real time…. you have to be listening to the emotion in a person's voice.”

**The Sense of Empathy**

So many of us have friendships with people we could, with planning, see face-to-face but choose instead to “see” online. We become accustomed to experiencing this “convenience” as the normal way to spend time together.

Across generations, we get used to rerouting conversations- from sharing birthday wishes to sending condolences- to our screens. We no longer expect friends to show up and may not want them to. It starts to feel like too much emotional work.

Empathy is not merely about giving someone information or helping them find a support group. It's about convincing another person that you are there for the duration. Empathy means staying long enough for someone to believe that you want to know how they feel, not that you want to tell them what you would do in their circumstance. Empathy requires time and emotional discipline.

The essayist William Deresiewicz said that as our communities have atrophied, we have moved from living in actual communities to making efforts to feel as though we are living in them. So, we talk about communities now, we have moved “from a relationship to a feeling.” We have moved from *being* in a community to having a *sense* of community. Have we moved from empathy to a *sense* of empathy? We need to pay close attention here. Artificial intelligences are being offered to us as sociable companions. They are being called a new kind of friend. If we are settling for a “sense of friendship” from people, the idea of machine companionship does seem like much of a fall. But what is at stake is precious, the most precious things that people know how to offer each other.

The psychologist Michael Csikszentmihalyi has studied the “real” conversations of friendship. Some friendships, he says, are built around conversations that provide validation. He calls these “reinforcement friendships”: They accomplish “what everyone likes… reciprocal attention paid to one another's ideas and idiosyncrasies.” What these friendships do best is support a self that needs to use other people as a mirror for a self that has not found itself.

But Thoreau spoke of more (“My friend is one… who takes me for what I am”), and Csikszentmihalyi writes about the possibility of more. These are friends who question each other’s dreams and desires and encourage each other to try out the new. “A true friend is someone we can occasionally be crazy with, someone who does not expect us to be always true to form. It is someone who shares our goal of self-realization, and therefore is willing to share the risk that any increase in complexity entails.”

Tellingly, Csikszentmihalyi describes a “true friend” by describing friendship in action- among other things, in conversation. He is describing intimacy.

**THREE CHAIRS**

**Education**

**The Myth of Multitasking**

When we think we are multitasking, our brains are actually moving quickly from one thing to the next, and our performance degrades for each new task we add to the mix. Multitasking gives us a neurochemical high so we think we are doing better and better when actually we are doing worse and worse. We've seen that not only do multitaskers have trouble deciding how to organize their time, but overtime, they “forget” how to read human emotions. Students- for example, my students- think that texting during class does not interrupt their understanding of class conversation, but they are wrong. The myth of multitasking is just that: a myth

And yet, multitasking is the norm in classrooms. By 2012, nine in ten college students said that they text in class.

In classrooms, the distracted are a distraction: studies show that when students are in class multitasking on laptops, everyone around them learns less. One college senior says, “I'll be in a great lecture and look over and see someone shopping for shoes and think to myself, ‘Are you kidding me?’ So I get mad at them, but then I get mad at myself for being self-righteous. But after I've gone through my cycle of indignation to self-hate, I realize that I have missed a minute of the lecture, and then I'm really mad.”

Writers, artists, scientists, and the literary scholars talk openly about disabling the Wi-Fi on their computers in order to get creative work done. In the acknowledgments of her most recent book, the novelist Zadie Smith thanks Freedom and SelfControl, programs that shut off connectivity on her Mac.

Laptops and smartphones are not things to remove. *They are facts of life and part of our creative lives. The goal is to use them with greater intention*.

Instead of thinking about addiction, it makes sense to confront the reality: We are faced with technologies to which we are extremely vulnerable and we don't always respect that fact. The path forward is to learn more about our vulnerabilities. Then, we can design the technology and the environments in which we use them with these insights in mind. For example, since we know that multitasking is seductive but not helpful to learning, it's up to us to promote “unitasking.”

**Guideposts**

People often say to me, “What next?” Every technology asks us to confront our human values. This is a good thing because it causes us to reaffirm what they are. From there it is easier to see next steps and guideposts. We are not looking for simple solutions. We are looking for beginnings.

*Remember the power of your phone*. *It's not an accessory*. It's a psychologically potent device that changes not just what you do but who you are. Don't automatically walk into every situation with a device in hand: When going to our phones is an option, we find it hard to turn back to each other, even when efficiency or politeness would suggest we do just that. The mere presence of a phone signals that your attention is divided, even if you don't intend it to be. It will limit the conversation in many ways: how you’ll listen, what will be discussed, the degree of connection you'll feel. Rich conversations have difficulty competing with even a silent phone. To clear a path of conversation, set aside laptops and tablets. Put away your phone.

*Slow down*. Some of the most crucial conversations you will ever have will be with yourself. To have them, you have to learn to listen to your own voice. A first step is to slow down sufficiently to make this possible.

Online life has ramped up the volume of what everyone sees on any day and the velocity with which it whizzes by. We are often too busy communicating to think, create, or collaborate. We come to online life with the exception that we can ask a question and get an almost immediate answer. In order to meet our expectations, we begin to ask simpler questions. If we end up dumbing down our communications and this makes it harder to approach complex problems.

*Protect your creativity. Take your time and take quiet time. Find your own agenda and keep your own pace*. Tutored by technology, we become reactive and transactional in our exchanges because this is what technology makes easy. We all struggle with this. But many successful people I've talked with say that a key to their achievement is that they don't even try to empty their email inbox. They set aside specific times to deal with their most important messages but never let an inbox set their agenda.

So if as a parent or teacher or employer you receive an email request, respond by saying that you need time to *think* about it. This seems a small thing, but it is too rarely done. To respond to an email by saying “I'm thinking” says that you value reflection and you don't let yourself be rushed just because technology can rush you. Emails and texts make quick responses possible; they don't make them wise.

*Create sacred spaces for conversation*. In the day-to-day family, carve them out- no devices at dinner, in the kitchen, or in the car. Introduce this idea to children when they are young so that it doesn't spring up as punitive but is set up as a baseline of family culture.

Remember that we teach the capacity for solitude by being quiet alongside children who have our attention. Design your environment to protect yourself against unnecessary interruptions. Take a neighborhood walk- alone or with family or friends- without devices. Experiment with an evening or weekend off the net as a regular part of your routine.

And just as families need these protected spaces, so do schools and universities and workplaces. Increasingly, there is a demand in universities for study and lounge space that is Wi-Fi free.

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