



SUNDAY BOOK REVIEW

Sherry Turkle's 'Reclaiming Conversation'

By JONATHAN FRANZEN SEPT. 28, 2015

Sherry Turkle is a singular voice in the discourse about technology. She's a skeptic who was once a believer, a clinical psychologist among the industry shills and the literary hand-wringers, an empiricist among the cherry-picking anecdotalists, a moderate among the extremists, a realist among the fantasists, a humanist but not a Luddite: a grown-up. She holds an endowed chair at M.I.T. and is on close collegial terms with the roboticists and affective-computing engineers who work there. Unlike Jaron Lanier, who bears the stodgy weight of being a Microsoft guy, or Evgeny Morozov, whose perspective is Belarussian, Turkle is a trusted and respected insider. As such, she serves as a kind of conscience for the tech world.

Turkle's previous book, "Alone Together," was a damning report on human relationships in the digital age. By observing people's interactions with robots, and by interviewing them about their computers and phones, she charted the ways in which new technologies render older values obsolete. When we replace human caregivers with robots, or talking with texting, we begin by arguing that the replacements are "better than nothing" but end up considering them "better than anything" — cleaner, less risky, less demanding. Paralleling this shift is a growing preference for the virtual over the real. Robots don't care about people, but Turkle's subjects were shockingly quick to settle for the feeling of being cared for and, similarly, to prefer the sense of community that social media deliver, because it comes without the hazards

and commitments of a real-world community. In her interviews, again and again, Turkle observed a deep disappointment with human beings, who are flawed and forgetful, needy and unpredictable, in ways that machines are wired not to be.

Her new book, “Reclaiming Conversation,” extends her critique, with less emphasis on robots and more on the dissatisfaction with technology reported by her recent interview subjects. She takes their dissatisfaction as a hopeful sign, and her book is straightforwardly a call to arms: Our rapturous submission to digital technology has led to an atrophying of human capacities like empathy and self-reflection, and the time has come to reassert ourselves, behave like adults and put technology in its place. As in “Alone Together,” Turkle’s argument derives its power from the breadth of her research and the acuity of her psychological insight. The people she interviews have adopted new technologies in pursuit of greater control, only to feel controlled by them. The likably idealized selves that they’ve created with social media leave their real selves all the more isolated. They communicate incessantly but are afraid of face-to-face conversations; they worry, often nostalgically, that they’re missing out on something fundamental.

Conversation is Turkle’s organizing principle because so much of what constitutes humanity is threatened when we replace it with electronic communication. Conversation presupposes solitude, for example, because it’s in solitude that we learn to think for ourselves and develop a stable sense of self, which is essential for taking other people as they are. (If we’re unable to be separated from our smartphones, Turkle says, we consume other people “in bits and pieces; it is as though we use them as spare parts to support our fragile selves.”) Through the conversational attention of parents, children acquire a sense of enduring connectedness and a habit of talking about their feelings, rather than simply acting on them. (Turkle believes that regular family conversations help “inoculate” children against bullying.) When you speak to people in person, you’re forced to recognize their full human reality,

which is where empathy begins. (A recent study shows a steep decline in empathy, as measured by standard psychological tests, among college students of the smartphone generation.) And conversation carries the risk of boredom, the condition that smartphones have taught us most to fear, which is also the condition in which patience and imagination are developed.

Turkle examines every aspect of conversation — with the self in solitude, with family and friends, with teachers and romantic partners, with colleagues and clients, with the larger polity — and reports on the electronic erosion of each. Facebook, Tinder, MOOCs, compulsive texting, the tyranny of office email, and shallow online social activism all come in for paddling. But the most moving and representative section of the book concerns the demise of family conversation. According to Turkle’s young interviewees, the vicious circle works like this: “Parents give their children phones. Children can’t get their parents’ attention away from their phones, so children take refuge in their own devices. Then, parents use their children’s absorption with phones as permission to have their own phones out as much as they wish.” For Turkle, the onus lies squarely on the parents: “The most realistic way to disrupt this circle is to have parents step up to their responsibilities as mentors.” She acknowledges that this can be difficult; that parents feel afraid of falling behind their children technologically; that conversation with young children takes patience and practice; that it’s easier to demonstrate parental love by snapping lots of pictures and posting them to Facebook. But, unlike in “Alone Together,” where Turkle was content to diagnose, the tone of “Reclaiming Conversation” is therapeutic and hortatory. She calls on parents to understand what’s at stake in family conversations — “the development of trust and self-esteem,” “the capacity for empathy, friendship and intimacy” — and to recognize their own vulnerability to the enchantments of tech. “Accept your vulnerability,” she says. “Remove the temptation.”

“Reclaiming Conversation” is best appreciated as a sophisticated self-help book. It makes a compelling case that children develop better, students learn

better and employees perform better when their mentors set good examples and carve out spaces for face-to-face interactions. Less compelling is Turkle's call for collective action. She believes that we can and must design technology "that demands that we use it with greater intention." She writes approvingly of a smartphone interface that "instead of encouraging us to stay connected as long as possible, would encourage us to disengage." But an interface like this would threaten almost every business model in Silicon Valley, where enormous market capitalizations are predicated on keeping consumers riveted to their devices. Turkle hopes that consumer demand, which has forced the food industry to create healthier products, might eventually force the tech industry to do the same. But the analogy is imperfect. Food companies make money by selling something essential, not by placing targeted advertising in a pork chop or by mining the data that a person provides while eating it. The analogy is also politically unsettling. Since platforms that discourage engagement are less profitable, they would have to charge a premium that only affluent, well-educated consumers of the sort that shop at Whole Foods are likely to pay.

Although "Reclaiming Conversation" touches on the politics of privacy and labor-saving robots, Turkle shies from the more radical implications of her findings. When she notes that Steve Jobs forbade tablets and smartphones at the dinner table and encouraged his family to talk about books and history, or when she cites Mozart, Kafka and Picasso on the value of undistracted solitude, she's describing the habits of highly effective people. And, indeed, the family that is doing well enough to buy and read her new book may learn to limit its exposure to technology and do even better. But what of the great mass of people too anxious or lonely to resist the lure of tech, too poor or overworked to escape the vicious circles? Matthew Crawford, in "The World Beyond Your Head," contrasts the world of a "peon" airport lounge — saturated in advertising, filled with mesmerizing screens — with the quiet, ad-free world of a business lounge: "To engage in playful, inventive thinking, and possibly create wealth for oneself during those idle hours spent at an airport,

requires silence. But other people’s minds, over in the peon lounge (or at the bus stop), can be treated as a resource — a standing reserve of purchasing power.” Our digital technologies aren’t politically neutral. The young person who cannot or will not be alone, converse with family, go out with friends, attend a lecture or perform a job without monitoring her smartphone is an emblem of our economy’s leechlike attachment to our very bodies. Digital technology is capitalism in hyperdrive, injecting its logic of consumption and promotion, of monetization and efficiency, into every waking minute.

It’s tempting to correlate the rise of “digital democracy” with steeply rising levels of income inequality; to see more than just an irony. But maybe the erosion of humane values is a price that most people are willing to pay for the “costless” convenience of Google, the comforts of Facebook and the reliable company of iPhones. The appeal of “Reclaiming Conversation” lies in its evocation of a time, not so long ago, when conversation and privacy and nuanced debate weren’t boutique luxuries. It’s not Turkle’s fault that her book can be read as a handbook for the privileged. She’s addressing a middle class in which she herself grew up, invoking a depth of human potential that used to be widespread. But the middle, as we know, is disappearing.

RECLAIMING CONVERSATION

The Power of Talk in a Digital Age

By Sherry Turkle

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