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Scrolling Past Empathy: Is Face-to-Face Conversation an Old Trend?

Do you check your phone at the dinner table? Engage in “phubbing”? Glance at your phone immediately when you hear the ring of a notification? Technology consumes the lives of modern society, and it is becoming evident that its presence is hurting the nature of face-to-face conversation. “The Empathy Diaries” written by Sherry Turkle, PhD in sociology from Harvard University, explores this recent crisis coined as the “flight from conversation” (344). Through a well-crafted essay, Turkle argues that there is a degradation of genuine conversation in the recent generation that is caused from an increase focus of technological communication. This lack of in-person conversation has tangible negatives effects on youth and their ability to self-reflect and feel empathy towards others. I agree with Turkle’s argument that there is clear flight from conversation that is having detrimental effects on children’s abilities to develop necessary social skills, however it seems as though Turkle’s inherent bias undermines the connective power that a technological conversation can have. In addition, when it comes to her ultimate call to action, the help of older generations is crucial as 21st century readers would be unable “reclaim conversation” on their own due to a lack of realization of the problem.

Especially to the current generation, in-person interactions are viewed as awkward and uncomfortable, yet Turkle explains that it is the unpredictable nature of an in-person conversation that allows one to develop crucial social skills, such as empathy. Phones have

become an outlet to avoid interactions. When sitting in a waiting room, walking past someone on the sidewalk, or waiting for a class to start, it has become our initial reaction to glance at our phones aimlessly, in hopes of avoiding eye contact or awkward small talk. When elaborating on this idea of phones acting as a hiding place, Turkle writes, "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" (344). As Turkle alludes, conversations via technology are easy: you have time to craft every response, you can choose your level of engagement, and they avoid any effort required in real conversation such as eye-contact, reading body language, and generating quick responses. One of Turkle's teenage interviewees put it best: "'On computers, if things are unpredictable, it's in a predictable way'" (346). However, there is a clear danger with being accustomed to this type of communication, we become unable to participate in the in-person counterpart. If we don't constantly engage in real conversation and lack ample practice, we become undeveloped in the skills they provide like empathy and intimacy, which results in an inability to foster genuine connections with others.

Turkle does appreciate the benefits technological communication can have, especially in situations of distance, however her generational bias seems to undermine the connection that can be produced from an over-the-phone conversation. When describing text threads she shared with her daughter who lives across the country from her, Turkle writes:

> All of a sudden, with no warning, on my phone, in my hand, there will be a reference to a book or a food or a Halloween costume that reminds me of our intimacy and infuses my

> day with her presence. This is pleasurable and to be cherished. The problem comes if these "reminders" of intimacy lead us away from intimacy itself (349).

Through the singling out and enunciation of "reminders" in reference to the texts and phone calls she receives from her daughter, Turkle draws a clear contradiction between technological conversation and true intimacy; that the two cannot exist with one another. Yet, I feel that it crucial to examine how Turkle's age may produce bias on this front. Sherry Turkle, age 76, is a part of the "Baby Boomer" generation; she grew up in a time in which the technological conversation we use at ease today was at its very primordial stages and didn't hold a fraction of the value it holds currently. However, from a Gen Z perspective, with technology being a fundamental part of my everyday routine and a staple way to communicate, I view technological conversations as holding more power and connection than Turkle believes. I agree that a conversation over the phone lacks several aspects unique to in-person communication, but I disagree in the sense that technological conversations are completely void of intimacy and connection. I acknowledge that I may hold my own personal generational bias and naivety, yet when speaking over the phone there is the capacity for ideas being shared, memories made, and laughs had. These aren't merely reminders. There is intimacy and connection in these conversations. Is it the same as that of a face-to-face conversation? Not necessarily. Yet, does it exist and should be acknowledged? Yes.

Despite technological conversation having the ability to foster some form of intimacy and connection, it by no means acts as a reasonable alternative to in-person conversation and a newfound reliance on it is having detrimental effects on empathy. However, when it comes to addressing the issue of the deterioration of real conversation, it is crucial to employ the aid of older generations and of those who know how to communicate genuinely and effectively as there

is an unawareness of the issue in today's youth. Turkle highlights this blindness when she writes, "Without conversation, studies show that we are less empathic, less connected, less creative and fulfilled. We are diminished, in retreat. But to generations that grew 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" (350). Turkle continues by stating soon after in the text that this group of people "needs to be persuaded that a flight from conversation suggests a problem and not an evolution" (350). In simpler terms, it's a near impossible feat to help those who don't know they need help. Kids my age find it habitual to check their phones while driving, text someone who is in the same room as them, and participate in "rotting," a trendy term referring to taking time to aimlessly scroll on social media for long periods. Therefore, the first step in mending conversation is convincing 21st century readers that a problem exists, and this must come from an outside perspective who can recognize this issue.

The next step to taking back conversation relies on the modeling of healthy technology use and proper in-person conversation. Parents are quick to criticize their children's phone use yet scroll on Facebook when sitting in the living room with their volume at full, are unresponsive to others while watching a show they like, or checks their phones during meetings. They are not exempt from exhibiting their own unhealthy technological habits. Turkle expands upon this idea by stating:

> 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

> acknowledgment that speaking and listening with attention are skills. They can be taught (350).

How can we expect 21st century children to communicate effectively, exhibit empathy, and attentively listen to themselves and others if they have never been taught to do so? With the proper help, guidance, and education from older generations, children can be made aware of the problem and gain the proper skills to engage in face-to-face conversation. However, fixing this problem remains unfeasible if the expectations remain that children must solve this problem on their own, despite an obvious naivety of the existence of the issue.

The deterioration of in-person conversation is a pressing issue that is provoking a lack of essential social skills, such as empathy, seen in the current, technology-engulfed generations. However, the negative effects resulting from this issue are not inevitable or irreversible. Yet, change cannot begin to occur without awareness of the presence and the severity of the issue coming to light. There needs to be the recognition that a fear of awkward small talk, an avoidance of eye contact, and being able to talk and text simultaneously are not normal behaviors. To gain this recognition, the aid of others, specifically those who grew up without the chokehold of technology, must teach the 21st century to communicate. Technological conversation is not devoid of intimacy and connection; however, it cannot be a replacement of face-to-face communication, a trend that is being observed today. We thrive off communication and the emotions it fosters. Through a devout connection to our phones, we are robbing ourselves of that connection and the immense benefits it provides.

Works Cited

Turkle, Sherry. “The Empathy Diaries.” *Emerging: Contemporary Readings for Writers,* edited by Barclay Barrios, Bedford/St.Martin’s, 2022, pp. 343-353.