SHERRY TURKLE

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In *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, Turkle argues that while technology enables communication it also encourages a flight from conversation—we accept mere connection rather than sustained, engaged conversation and the empathy developed by such interactions. Turkle argues for reversing this trend, seeing conversation as a talking cure for the isolation that inevitably results from cold connections via technology, returning us to modes of relating that contribute to personal development and to the health of the public sphere.

Turkle offers an overview of this argument in "The Empathy Diaries," presented here, which serves as the introduction to her book. She explains the impetus for this project, which originated in part with a visit to a middle school in which the faculty were concerned that the students were making only superficial connections with their peers. She turns to nineteenth-century author and philosopher Henry David Thoreau, whose use of three chairs in his isolated cabin on Walden Pond worked as a model for the "virtuous circle" (para. 29) of conversation. Turkle explains that the ubiquity of technology has removed us from this circle and offers suggestions on how we may return to it in order to better connect to ourselves, to others, and to the world around us.

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▶ CONNECTIONS: *Appiah, Chen, Haynes, James, Jamison, Konnikova, Liu, Ma, Watters, Yoshino*

The Empathy Diaries

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 commit to a face-to-face meeting or a telephone call.

This 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 on our screens, we are tempted to 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. There is now a word in the dictionary called "phubbing." It means maintaining eye contact while texting. My students tell me they do it all the time and that it's not that hard.

We begin to think of ourselves as a tribe of one, loyal to our own party. We check our messages during a quiet moment or when the pull of the online world simply feels irresistible. Even children text each other rather than talk face-to-face with friends — or, for that matter, rather than daydream, where they can take time alone with their thoughts.

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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. These are the conversations in which the creative collaborations of education and business thrive.

But these conversations require time and space, and we say we're too busy. Distracted at our dinner tables and living rooms, at our business meetings, and on our streets, we find traces of a new "silent spring" — a term Rachel Carson coined when we were ready to see that with technological change had come an assault on our environment. Now, we have arrived at another moment of recognition. This time, technology is implicated in an assault on empathy. We have learned that even a silent phone inhibits conversations that matter. The very sight of a phone on the landscape leaves us feeling less connected to each other, less invested in each other.

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"

In December 2013, 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."

The case of the superficial acquaintances in middle school was compelling. It was of a piece with what I was hearing in other schools, about older students. And so it was decided that I would join the Holbrooke teachers on a faculty retreat. I brought along a new notebook; after an hour, I wrote on its cover "The Empathy Diaries."

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For that's what the Holbrooke teachers are thinking about. Children at Holbrooke are not developing empathy in the way that years of teaching suggested they would. Ava Reade, the dean of the school, says that she rarely intervenes in student social arrangements, but recently she had to. A seventh-grader tried to exclude a classmate from a school social event. Reade called the remiss seventh-grader into her office and asked why it happened. The girl didn't have much to say:

> *[The seventh-grader] was almost robotic in her response. She said, "I don't have feelings about this." She couldn't read the signals that the other student was hurt.*
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> *These kids aren't cruel. But they are not emotionally developed. Twelve-year-olds play on the playground like eight-year-olds. The way they exclude one another is the way eight-year-olds would play. They don't seem able to put themselves in the place of other children. They say to other students: "You can't play with us."*
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> *They are not developing that way of relating where they listen and learn how to look at each other and hear each other.*

The Holbrooke teachers are enthusiastic users of educational technology. But on their retreat, they follow what some call the precautionary principle: "Indication of harm, not proof of harm, is our call to action." These teachers believe they see indications of harm. It is a struggle to get children to talk to each other in class, to directly address each other. It is a struggle to get them to meet with faculty. And one teacher observes: "The [students] sit in the dining hall and look at their phones. When they share things together, what they are sharing is what is on their phones." Is this the new conversation? If so, it is not doing the work of the old conversation. As these teachers see it, the old conversation taught empathy. These students seem to understand each other less.

I was invited to Holbrooke because for many decades I have studied children's development in technological culture. I began in the late 1970s, when a few schools were experimenting with personal computers in classrooms or special computer laboratories. I work on this question still, when many children come to school with a tablet or laptop of their own, or one their school has issued.

From the beginning, I found that children used the digital world to play with issues of identity. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, children used simple programming as an expressive medium. A thirteen-year-old who had programmed a graphical world of her own said: "When you program a computer, you put a little piece of your mind into the computer's mind and you come to see yourself differently." Later, when personal computers became portals to online games, children experimented with identity by building avatars. The particulars changed with new games and new computers, but something essential remained constant: Virtual space is a place to explore the self.

Also constant was the anxiety of adults around children and machines. From the beginning, teachers and parents worried that computers were *too* compelling.

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They watched, unhappy, as children became lost in games and forgot about the people around them, preferring, at long stretches, the worlds in the machine.

One sixteen-year-old describes this refuge: "On computers, if things are unpredictable, it's in a predictable way." Programmable worlds can be made exciting, but they also offer new possibilities for a kind of experience that some began to call friction-free. Newton's laws need not apply. Virtual objects can be made to simply glide along. And you, too, can glide along if that's how things are programmed. In virtual worlds, you can face challenging encounters—with scoundrels and wizards and spells—that you know for sure will work out in the end. Or you can die and be reborn. Real people, with their unpredictable ways, can seem difficult to contend with after one has spent a stretch in simulation.

Real people demand responses to what they are feeling. And not just any response.

From the early days, I saw that computers offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship and then, as the programs got really good, the illusion of friendship without the demands of intimacy. Because, face-to-face, people ask for things that computers never do. With people, things go best if you pay close attention and know how to put yourself in someone else's shoes. Real people demand responses to what they are feeling. And not just any response.

Time in simulation gets children ready for more time in simulation. Time with people teaches children how to be in a relationship, beginning with the ability to have a conversation. And this brings me back to the anxieties of the Holbrooke teachers. As the Holbrooke middle schoolers began to spend more time texting, they lost practice in face-to-face talk. That means lost practice in the empathic arts—learning to make eye contact, to listen, and to attend to others. Conversation is on the path toward the experience of intimacy, community, and communion. 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 water coolers.

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My mentor, the sociologist David Riesman, called these vocations "the talking trades." He was right. They rely on conversation and they approach it with high expectations. Each has an answer to the question: What is the work of conversation?

Sociologists and anthropologists use conversation to make sense of the web of relationships at home, at work, and in public life. When things go right, the social scientist's interview becomes an open, easy exchange. This often happens after trust has been established, when the researcher's notebook has been closed, when people who only a few minutes earlier had been "participants" in "your study" realize that there is something in this for them. Your question becomes their question as well. A conversation begins.

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 communicate 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. 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.

Conversations in these traditions have a lot in common. When they work best, people don't just speak but listen, both to others and to themselves. They allow themselves to be vulnerable. They are fully present and open to where things might go.

You don't need to be in the talking trades to recognize the work conversation can do. I have asked people of all ages and circumstances to tell me about their most important conversations—with children, with friends, with spouses, partners, lovers, and colleagues. It was a question people wanted to answer. They offered the conversation when they fell in love, when they realized that their parents were vulnerable and needed their care, when they understood that their children were no longer children. They offered the conversation when they were confirmed in a career choice because a mentor gave them a chance to run with a quirky idea.

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With all of this in mind, 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 "downtime for emptying your inbox," I hear a desire for distraction, comfort, and efficiency. But I also know that these 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 suggests 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 secure sense of self, and with that, the capacity for empathy. Then, conversation with others provides rich material for self-reflection. Just as alone we prepare to talk together, together we learn how to engage in a more productive solitude.

Technology disrupts this virtuous circle.

The disruptions begin with solitude, Thoreau's first chair. Recent research shows that people are uncomfortable if left alone with their thoughts, even for a few minutes. In one experiment, people were asked to sit quietly—without a phone or a book—for fifteen minutes. At the start of the experiment, they were also asked if they would consider administering electroshocks to themselves if they became bored. They said absolutely not: No matter what, shocking themselves would be out of the question. But after just six minutes alone, a good number of them were doing just that.

These results are stunning, but in a way, not surprising. 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 should 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 Thoreau's three chairs. *But this flight is not inevitable. When the virtuous circle is broken, conversation cures.*

For there is good news. Despite the pull of our technology, we are resilient. For example, in only five days at a summer camp that bans all electronic devices, children show an increased capacity for empathy as measured by their ability to identify the feelings of others by looking at photographs and videos of people's faces. In my own research at a device-free summer camp, I hear what this resiliency sounds like.

At a nightly cabin chat, a group of fourteen-year-old boys talk about a recent three-day wilderness hike. One can imagine that not that many years ago the most exciting aspect of that hike might have been the idea of "roughing it" or the beauty of unspoiled nature. These days, what makes the biggest impression is time without a phone, what one boy calls "time where you have nothing to do but think quietly and talk to your friends." Another boy uses the cabin chat to reflect on his new taste for silence: "Don't people know that sometimes you can just look out the window of a car and see the world go by and it's wonderful?"

Crossroads

Just as some people will ask, "Why a book about conversation? We're talking all the time," some will say, "Why bring up the negative? You must know about all the wonderful new conversations that happen on the net!" I do know. I've gone to a reunion of my

sixth-grade class from PS 216 Brooklyn that could never have happened if not for Facebook. Texts from my daughter, when she was twenty-three, made her seem closer to home even when she took a job on another coast. These from fall 2014: "Hi! I REALLY like *Life After Life*!" "Where do I get challah?" "My roommate and I are going to the party as Elsa and Anna from *Frozen*." 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.

Most relationships are a blend of online and off-line interaction. Courtships take place via text. Political debates are sparked and social movements mobilize on websites. Why not focus on the positive—a celebration of these new exchanges?

Because these are the stories we tell each other to explain why our technologies are proof of progress. We like to hear these positive stories because they do not discourage us in our pursuit of the new—our new comforts, our new distractions, our new forms of commerce. And we like to hear them because if these are the only stories that matter, then we don't have to attend to other feelings that persist—that we are somehow more lonely than before, that our children are less empathic than they should be for their age, and that it seems nearly impossible to have an uninterrupted conversation at a family dinner.

We catch ourselves not looking into the eyes of our children or taking the time to talk with them just to have a few more hits of our email. Will we summon our attention if, a decade later, fearful of being alone but anxious about attachment, our children show us what it looks like to pay the price? It makes no sense to "match" this disturbing possibility with a happy story about Facebook friendship or Twitter exchanges. This isn't a game in which we can cross our fingers and hope that the good will outweigh the bad. We want to take the good and also make the changes necessary so that we don't pay a price that no technology is worth.

Generations

I remember the generation that first encountered networked personal computers in the 1980s and 1990s. These were machines you "went to" when you wanted to play games, or write, or work with spreadsheets, or send email. Computers offered aids to productivity and many new pleasures—but they did not suggest that text might displace talk.

Only a few years later, there would be cohorts of children who grew up with smartphones, social media, and chatty digital assistants. Today, these children, no longer children, are our teachers, businesspeople, doctors, and parents.

When these new generations consider the idea of 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?