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Technology: Our Greatest Inhibitor

Humans need technology. I don't mean devices such as printers or automatic doors I mean phones and computers. In more recent years, many people have become glued to and almost completely reliant on their phones for even the most simple of tasks. Unfortunately, some have become so attached to their phones to the point where they need them for even the most basic parts of being human, such as communicating with each other and even feeling happy or satisfied. In her book, *The Empathy Diaries*, Sherry Turkle, a professor of social studies at MIT, addresses humanity's ever-growing need for screens and constant stimulation, as well as the problems it causes for meaningful conversations. Turkle urges 21st-century readers to "reclaim conversation" so they can connect on deeper levels and in more meaningful ways, away from screens. I believe people are unwilling to "reclaim conversation" because reclaiming conversation means setting digital technology to the side, and most rely on it to fuel their need to feel their illusion of happiness or satisfaction.

Because of people's need to feel happy or satisfied, content like positive stories online has become much more enticing to those looking to their phones or computers for a quick boredom killer to better their mood. As a result, they have developed a hint of a confirmation bias toward screens. Despite the fact Turkle never writes about confirmation bias, she alludes to it when she

writes, “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” (349). Providing a bit of context, people with a confirmation bias tend to search for or interpret information to verify and support their existing point of view on a subject (which in this case are phones and computers) rather than finding a different view that may cause discomfort. In the quotation above, when Turkle says “We like to hear these positive stories because they do not discourage us in our pursuit of the new.” It shows we gravitate towards information that supports our beliefs, making us happy. Thus, we ignore the negative stories that make us feel bad. When we find information that makes us happy, we take it as a sign of how technology is, as stated by Turkle, a “proof of progress” and we should feel good about using it – justifying our unhealthy desire to constantly be behind our screens, rotting away in the illusion of happiness and satisfaction it brings us. Consequently, a bias toward technology is formed, making it nearly impossible for people to believe their constant use of it isn’t healthy. For that reason, they become unwilling to leave their devices behind to reconnect with people around them.

Completing a challenging task can prove to be very difficult. Especially when the option of making the dreaded task easier presents itself, even if the use of said option is frowned upon. Turkle talks about an experiment conducted that is fairly similar to the unwanted tasks that we struggle with, Turkle writes, “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.” (348). It is astonishing how people

can't sit for 15 minutes without some form of stimulation. These people were so bored after just 6 minutes of having nothing to do they decided it would be better to "harm" themselves than to sit there and be bored the remaining time. In all fairness, I have no room to criticize the people who chose to shock themselves; I too have been molded by technology to do whatever I can to cure boredom. Both the unwanted tasks needing completion and the experiment Turkle mentions are perfect examples of our struggle to reconnect with each other. The much-needed, however undesired, task in this case is: putting away the screens in order to make strong, deep connections with other people which will make us happy and satisfied in the long run. But many people are unwilling to put forth the effort into putting their phone down, instead, they choose the option that is easy but looked disapproved of: continuing to hide behind their phone giving them only the illusion of happiness and satisfaction, but it's instant and endless.

The heavy reliance and deep connections we developed with technology haven't come without consequences. Arguably the most heavily impacted aspect is our ability to communicate with each other or rather our inability to communicate, as well as our ability to be by ourselves, Turkle took note of this when she wrote, "We are so accustomed to being always connected that being alone seems like a problem technology should solve." (348). Many people look to their phones or computers to fix their problems because that's all they know how to do. These are the people who would be unwilling to put technology aside and make genuine human connections. Assuming their phone will do it for them just like it always has, and until that time comes all they can do is continuously crawl back to the only way they can find (what they believe is) true happiness and satisfaction. When in reality, it's just an illusion of the real feelings. It never truly makes them happy or satisfied and leaves them wanting more so they keep coming back to it, thinking this time will be different.

The idea that the need for digital technology is created from the need to feel even the illusion of happiness or satisfaction, and the reliance a large bit of the population has on technology to fix their problems and entertain them, is the major aspect of why Turkle's urges toward 21st-century readers to "reclaim conversation" may not work. There are just too many people out there who aren't willing or ready to give up the full support of technology to make meaningful connections with the people around them. It's not that reclaiming conversation will never work, it's just that technology is still new and dazzling, so most people aren't ready to accept the realization that while technology helps us, it's also one of our greatest inhibitors.

Works Cited

Turkle, Sherry. *The Empathy Diaries: A Memoir*. *Emerging: Contemporary Readings for Writers*. Edited by Barclay Barrios, Florida Atlantic University, Penguin Press, 2022, pp 343-352.