Walden Three?

Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in the Digital Age by Sherry Turkle.

Penguin Press, 2015. 448 pages. Hardcover, $27.95.

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In Sherry Turkle's book *Alone Together* (2011), the precursor to *Reclaiming Conversation* (2015)*,* she discussed a kind of paradigm shift that has taken place in understanding the psychological impact of computer-mediated communication. Based on her research over the last forty years, she concluded that these machines, as once hopeful places of self-exploration and endless possibility, now threaten to become tools of isolation and alienation. As someone who also does research as a social psychologist in the field of mobile communication studies, I was profoundly moved by Turkle's compelling argument in both *Alone Together* and *Reclaiming Conversation* that overreliance on our mobile devices denies us important face-to-face experiences that are needed for generating authentic connection. Our ability to connect to others through face-to-face interaction is a critical component to relationship development and to the expression of empathy.

Turkle reminds us, almost paradoxically, we may start out utilizing technology as a means of sewing up the holes we discover in the maintenance of close social ties. For example, sitting alone in a hotel room may feel lonely and so we may turn to our devices to remind us of home and those we love. Our ability to connect to others in this way, via mobile device, is "better than nothing". This deceptively simple notion, that connecting

via device is better than not connecting at all, then structures our dependence on these devices and works to create situations where it soon feels like using these devices is "better than anything" (p. 349).

Turkle wants us to acknowledge that engagement with technology feels magical and *is* deceptive, which then skews our perception towards only being focused on what that magic reveals to us. This skewed perception then makes it difficult for us to see what we are missing. Mobile device users justify their use by acknowledging the ease with which communication can take place and that the device is always "at hand" to be used to reach out to others. It does not take long for the quick, packaged, seemingly less vulnerable interactions that can occur via one's device (thanks to text messaging and social media posts) to then become a safe alternative to the belabored, messy and emotionally risky encounters involved with face-to-face communication. What then goes missing is "the face", the person, the human encounter and this loss, according to Turkle, poses serious threats to our psychological well-being as individuals and as a society.

In *Reclaiming Conversation,* Turkle begins to explore the consequences of prioritizing mobile-mediated and computer-mediated communication over face-to-face communication. But more than that, Turkle bears witness to the astonishing reality that with the birth of digital natives (people born into technology-saturated lives) comes whole generations of people that do not know what it is truly like to engage in face-to-face interaction devoid of electronic devices and devoid of a sense of being always-on, always connected (*virtually, at least*) to "others". Absent of true solitude, digital natives live in a world of constant interruption, where "'interruption' is the beginning of a connection" (p. 172, *Alone Together*). This kind of connection feels frenetic, loose, and

surface. To Turkle, this kind of connection is diminished in its quality and carries with it significant risks to essential benefits of communication that extend beyond merely being heard or responded to. In prioritizing the ease and speed of which we can send and receive short messages, we have lost any understanding of the power of conversation. *Reclaiming Conversation* (2015) has arrived to do just that: to reclaim conversation – something to Turkle that is so simple yet critically important to do at this historical moment. To reclaim conversation, however, is not "to reject technology, but to find ourselves" (p. 361).

Reclaiming Conversation (2015) feels like a continuation of *Alone Together* (2011) and what Turkle was preparing us for in that book and so she lets us have it, right on the first page of *Reclaiming Conversation:* "Face-to-face conversation is the most human – and humanizing – thing we do. Fully present to one another, we learn to listen" (p. 3). Turkle believes that the loss of conversation is a blow to the development of the empathic arts. Again, as a professor and research psychologist, not unlike Turkle, perhaps I am biased towards the power of conversation in the development of the skills of empathy because I am part of a "talking trade". We use conversation to gain understanding of the world around us and we use conversation to teach and to build communities of learning. Where I may diverge from Turkle is in my understanding that perhaps technology can be used to expand this art and not to diminish it. I know that I stand to fall into the trap that Turkle sets in that it may sound like I am proposing that "it is easier to build an app than have a conversation" (p. 361) but I am not.

Turkle describes how conversations build narratives that then build meaning. Depth of knowledge, critical appraisal, and the ability to ask questions and to explore

curiosities are all heavily reliant on conversation. The meaningfulness of experience comes into focus and takes on significance when we are able to tell someone our story. When perusing social media and blogs, people still tell their stories. In my most recent work, I have focused on how people use their intimate relationships with their mobile devices to generate meaning around loss experiences. Narratives are important, but perhaps we are doing too much "telling" and not enough listening. We learn so much about expectations, etiquette, and social schemas; what to avoid in life and what to aspire to by listening to the stories that others tell us. Turkle advises that our desire for the self-centered distraction, comfort, and efficiency that mobile communication devices bring may then not allow for the necessary work that conversation needs to do. We may do a lot of responding via our digital devices but how do we indicate to others that we are really listening. The devices themselves may be restricting us and in this she says that we are being silenced by our technology and cured of conversations. Turkle's work emphasizes text-based messaging via mobile device and the ways in which users relate to the devices like companions. She does not really explore the possibilities of the ways in which these devices can simulate face-to-face interaction (as in the use of real-time video messaging) and the ways in which people exchange user created content to express emotions and extend intimacy (Hjorth & Lim, 2012). Perhaps the issue is not face-to-face conversations vs. mobile mediated communication but instead its in valuing synchronous over asynchronous communication. The immediacy of the face-to-face, the demand of response and the spontaneity of reaction are all lost in the more packaged forms of digital communication.

Turkle's philosophy stems from her research at MIT where she discovered early on that computers and mobile devices could give us the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship and then the illusion of friendship without the demands of intimacy (Turkle, 2011). The demands of intimacy are in our responsiveness to the other. Our responsiveness requires that we are listening, that we are paying close attention, that we have the ability to place ourselves in someone else's shoes. According to Turkle, computers and simulations only train people how to work within the parameters (and limitations) of the technological design. Despite our belief that we are connected to others, when communicating via devices we are actually talking machine to machine and therefore we become quite adept at knowing how to relate to machines. Turkle believes that it is only time with people that will train people on how to be in relationship with other *people* and this is done through conversation. Yet has the integration of technology into our everyday lives caused us to not value relationships and to not develop intimacy in our lives? What if our emotional attachment to our devices is actually indicative of the emotional attachment we feel towards the people and content that populates our digital worlds and not simply our desire to be machine-like or to let the machines take over? Are we either with people or with machines? I think that we are actually now always with people with machines. As these machines become more wearable and less noticeable, we will have a harder time discerning where the person begins and the machine ends. We can no longer view these as two separate realms of interaction but in fact interactions of simultaneity and perpetuity. And for as much as these machines shape the user, these machines are shaped by the user as well. In essence, I believe, that the devices are ambiguous stimuli that we write upon and our attachment to

our devices may be more related to our need to feel continually connected to our loved ones than some fault in the design. We may crave uninterrupted connection so much that we may prioritize our connection via device over our connection to those with whom we are face-to-face (Vincent, 2006). The psychological association of mobile communication with intimate and significant relationships may make it harder to turn away from our devices when we are face-to-face with others (even significant others). This is not to say that every communication via mobile device is important or meaningful, in fact, most interactions/notifications may be trivial. Mobile media users may also feel overwhelmed in the amount of social and emotional demands that they have to manage which includes FoMO (Fear of Missing Out)(Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013). All this may lead to people appearing disconnected from the here and now while face-to-face with others when in actuality they may be deeply connected to those not present.

Turkle acknowledges, especially in *Alone Together*, the powerful psychological pull of devices. Through my work I have demonstrated how we do utilize mobile devices to cultivate intimate spaces, within our devices, that serve a multitude of psychological needs. Sharing the content of one's phone with intimate partners, may increase a sense of intimacy between people (Pew Research Center, 2014). For some, the phone comes to represent their most intimate and inner space, and to share that secretive and not readily shared space with others can be seen as significant and may be generally avoided. And yet, technology and its promise of seamless connection alongside ceaseless distractions and entertainment set us up to be uncomfortable to be alone with our thoughts. Mobile media help magnify the notion that unless others witness something then it did not happen; the dominant dictum of social media as "pics or it didn't happen" only works to

further validate this point. Our fears of being alone, of being disconnected, of missing out and our reach for technology to soothe these fears distracts us so much, Turkle observes, that we then fail to pay attention to those with whom we are face-to-face and, in the end, we fail to know ourselves.

Turkle provides evidence from research that she has done with teens, alongside her many anecdotes, that our diminished ability to hold a face-to-face conversation threatens our ability to develop empathy and as a result is creating an empathy gap in the growth and moral development of children and young adults. In a chilling description of a pretty typical childhood bullying incident, a school dean that Turkle interviewed described how when the student that had hurt the feelings of another student was confronted by her wrongdoing and asked what she thought of her actions and their impact on her target, the child responded, "I have no feelings about that". Are we creating a world of "no feelings", no emotional response to the suffering of others? A world devoid of or deficient in empathy and are our devices to blame? Turkle believes that reclaiming conversation is our best defense against this happening and writes this book as her case for conversation.

To make her case, Turkle takes us to Henry David Thoreau's cabin on Walden Pond. Although Thoreau's move to his cabin in the woods could be viewed as a retreat away from the noisy demands of society, in his cabin he laid three chairs: one for solitude, two for friendship, and three for society. These three chairs work as a metaphor for Turkle in her desire to link conversation to the capacity for empathy. She begins with the *one-chair conversation*s, the chair of solitude, of conscious retreat, the gathering of self. This solitude is necessary as Erich Fromm and others have pointed out as a means

through which we get to know ourselves. Solitude is critical for our ability to form a cohesive and coherent sense of self, which is necessary for being able to engage in authentic conversation with others. Despite our urge to equate solitude with isolation, solitude is made distinct in that the intention to be alone is in anticipation and in preparation of regaining our ties to others.

The *two-chair conversations* are with friends, family and romantic partners. These are the conversations that we have with loved ones, face-to-face. The *three-chair conversations* are those happening in the social world: at work, at school, in public. Turkle then proposes *fourth-chair conversations*, conversations where we are not only encouraged to talk to others through machines but to engage in conversation with the devices themselves. In this, *Reclaiming Conversation* could be subtitled *Walden Three*. Previous "Waldens" served as a commentary and a call to arms to move society towards its highest good. Thoreau compelled us: "Simplicity, simplicity, simplicity! I say, let your affairs be as two or three, and not a hundred or a thousand; instead of a million count half a dozen, and keep your accounts on your thumb-nail… Simplify, simplify".

In *Walden Two,* B.F. Skinner's attempt at using a technology of behavior to breed to a fairer and more just society, Skinner aimed to exploit the contingencies of reinforcement as the means through which all behavior could be shaped to move actors away from undesirable behaviors towards more desirable ones. As Skinner noted in the preface of the 1976 printing of *Walden Two:* "The choice is clear: either we do nothing and allow a miserable and probably catastrophic future to overtake us, or we use our knowledge about human behavior to create a social environment in which we shall live

productive and creative lives and do so without jeopardizing the chances that those who follow us will be able to do the same".

Turkle continues this tradition in *Reclaiming Conversation* and uses what she knows about human behavior to almost goad us into the face-to-face conversation. And I feel as though she is talking to "us" those of us over 30, middle-class, privileged, Western, educated consumers of mobile and computer technology who know what it is like to live without it (or at least less of it). "We" also may have a better understanding of the meaningfulness of solitude which Turkle understands to be the building block of empathy because in solitude our sense of self is reinforced and conversations with others allow us to later reflect on ourselves, when we are alone. Turkle implores "us" that now is not the time to step back and to feel defeated by what we may perceive as a loss, but that now is the time to step up and fight for conversation, be mentors around the skills that feel lost in the newer generations and the skills that we may still have. Turkle acknowledges the other audience, one of digital natives who have not experienced life without technology (they are often the focus of her interviews and inquiries), as the ones that may need to be convinced that the flight from conversation is a problem and not an evolution in human interaction.

Digital natives struggle to understand how anyone would think that face-to-face conversation is better than most text-based interactions where one can have unlimited pauses and edit "what they say" before they say it. Again, face-to-face conversation seems too risky, too real. And while mediated communication may be preferred when imagining oneself as engaged in the use of devices, everyone, digital natives included, appears affected by being physically present amidst the use of mobile devices by another.

The difficulty users have switching modes between face-to-face interaction and mediated communication may also undermine the argument of the benefit of face-to-face conversation. In fact, most face-to-face interaction is now interrupted by the presence of mobile technology and those interruptions lead to missed connections and challenges in negotiating the social expectations of those with whom the user is face-to-face alongside the demands of those being communicated with remotely.

It is worth remarking that Turkle's book is devoid of extensive empirical research outside of her own to support her theoretical assertions. In my own attempts to discover such work, I came across a study by Przybylski and Weinstein (2013) who found that just the mere presence of a mobile phone can interfere with human relationships, especially when discussing meaningful topics. This study utilized a 2 (mobile phone absent vs. mobile phone present) X2 (casual vs. meaningful conversation) design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of these four conditions. In the mobile phone present condition, the phone was visible, resting on a notebook, out of the participants' direct visual field. It was a non-descript phone not belonging to either participant and it was not used or touched during the experiment. In the mobile phone absent condition, a notebook replaced the phone on the table. In the casual conversation condition, participants were asked to discuss their thoughts and feelings about plastic holiday trees. In the meaningful conversation, participants were asked to discuss the most meaningful events that happened in the participants' lives in the last year. After the conversation was completed they were asked to fill out measures that included the Empathic Concern Scale with items such as: 'To what extent do you think your partner accurately understood your thoughts

and feelings about the topic?'' There was statistically significant less empathic concern in the meaningful conversation condition, given the *mere presence* of a phone.

Although we often turn to mobile devices as our preferred means of communication, the presence of a mobile device may make people feel less heard by those with whom they are face-to-face. (Cumiskey, 2005). Feeling unheard or ignored by someone could leave the impression that that one's conversational partner is not empathetic. People read intentionality into mobile phone use differently depending on their perspective. There is a paradoxical interpretation of use depending on whether one is the user of the technology or if one is the observer to someone else's use. We have a tendency to interpret our own use as necessary, expedient, and useful while the use by others as rude, impersonal, and obnoxious. Yet, as I have pointed out in my work, if we understand what it means to be the user of mobile phones and to be ignored by others' use, then we have the experience of being both perpetrator and victim of the resultant social costs of mobile phone use. Where we think there are gains to be had, there are also losses. It is from this paradoxical point of view that we function and relate to others whom we know "love" their devices, but from whom we desire face-to-face conversation and "real-time" relationships. The feelings of awkwardness when someone breaks from conversing with us to then give attention to a device and the times in which conversational partners attempt to "split" their attention between conversing with us and interacting with a glowing screen, may cause us to "lose face". Turkle describes the ways in which people prefer texting to talking: as a means to avoid face-to-face confrontation, as form of controlled communication aimed at saving face, and as a means to collect documentary evidence to revisit and reflect upon. Turkle sees this, however, as a flight

from conversation and towards maintaining mere connection, not a significant bond. But

is this a fair assessment? Turkle notes the struggle that people are literally faced with

when they want their face-to-face companions to put down their devices and to give them

their sole attention. Demanding this kind of attention feels now like overstepping, rude,

like an imposition on one's rights. Turkle interprets this as being indicative as a slight

against what makes us human but is it rude to privilege those with whom we are face-to-

face with over those who are virtually co-present? Why is it only important to engage

with those in close proximity to us and to not to include those close ties that we carry

with us through our devices? These multiple domains of social influence are difficult to

study and yet their impact is felt in most social situations (Cumiskey & Ling, 2015). As

Turkle states: "Phones exert a seductive undertow…the story of conversation today is a

story of conflict on a landscape of clear expectations" (p.31). The troubled landscape is

one of multiple social domains where the presence of a person must now compete with

the virtual presence of others via one's devices. And this could be about the most

primitive receptors in our brains and the ways in which we need to read the faces of those

that we are face-to-face with. Maintaining eye contact with conversational partners

indicates a desire for interaction and for the establishment of intimacy and

connection(Argyle & Dean, 1965). Lack of eye contact is linked with the development of

psychopathy (Dadds et al., 2012). Turkle underscores this by pointing out that eye contact

is the most powerful path to authentic human connection. The exchange of a mutual

unbroken gaze with a stranger increases intimacy (Kellerman, Lewis, & Laird, 1989).

People report that sustained eye contact makes a person *feel* listened to. Yet now, in the

presence of others, we deny them that human connection and shift our gaze to our

devices. The actual use of mobile phones may not be the problem; it is being in the presence of its use by others that is what is at stake here. Other people's mobile phone use in our presence diminishes our humanity because we feel as though we are not being looked at. And so we need to be more mindful of the faces we encounter and the way that lack of eye contact impacts us psychologically. The design of technology could help us with this. Wearing Google Glass has the ability of helping conversational partners maintain more eye contact because manipulation of one's device no longer requires looking down. However, the disconnected gaze, or the sideways glance can still disturb conversational flow and perceived intimacy.

Turkle reminds us that only focusing on what technology adds to our lives, we miss or give no time to what it takes away. For example, there is a commercial that promotes the most desired Internet connection is the one that is able to create an environment where those with whom you are face-to-face are ignored, forgotten about and supplanted by the dominance of the speed of technology. In fact the tagline of the commercial is "…get out of the past, get FiOS". (FiOS by Verizon Television Commercial, "Ahem" featuring Rashida Jones, accessed: 3/28/16). We may, in fact, be at this philosophical crossroads where the ghost in the machine is now replaced by the ghost in the shell. As Turkle points out, "I talk of our having arrived at a 'robotic moment', not because we have built robots that can be our companions but because we are willing to consider becoming theirs" (p. 51). Machine companionship, beyond just connecting to known others, is satisfying to many, and many may be unaware how sufficient they feel this companionship to be, even if it is just as a means to surf the Internet. But does the intimate space generated between person and their wireless connections then make it

harder for us to bridge the gap between ourselves and the strangers among us? Do companies have a moral imperative to consider the deleterious effects of their design in the promotion of new products? Turkle explores this as she consults with inventors on how we could generate smart technology that modifies the ways in which we use technology to use it more responsibly, with intention and to then help us to disengage when our intended task has been completed. We can also, as Turkle suggests in a very *Walden*-esque way, design our personal spaces in ways that privileges the face-to-face and encourages us to be our best selves.

I am left with the question of who is listening to Turkle? For this answer I turned to the Internet. She does have over 3.3 million views of her TED talk: "Connected, but alone?" (https://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together?language=en). She has a well-developed Wikipedia page. She has been interviewed by well-respected media outlets; she holds a distinguished position at M.I.T. But who is listening to her? It was amazing to me to note that my automatic methodology for assessing significance was to investigate how her work was being "discussed" online. And yet this may then be counter to her book's thesis. The legacy of Thoreau's *Walden* is that it became a document that supported a movement that was then adopted as a personal philosophy by many. Skinner's *Walden* Two inspired the real-world development of planned communities in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Some of these communities still exist today (Kuhlmann, 2005). For Thoreau and Skinner, their philosophies became their way of life and in the same way I think that Turkle wants us to adopt her ideas as more than just findings of her research. A life more in tune with what comes naturally to us, a life well-appointed to "acknowledge the unintended consequences of technologies… and to

remember who we are – creatures of history, of deep psychology, of complex relationships. Of conversations artless, risky and face-to-face" (p. 361). In this, I am compelled to want to have a conversation with Turkle, for, as she reminds us, there may be thoughts that can only come into fruition when we are in conversation with another. However, I do not want to deny the fact that conversations are happening all the time, everywhere and I am reluctant to agree that the only ones of value are those happening face-to-face. I will however agree that despite how real video conferencing applications can be and how easy it is to have a phone conversation while simultaneously completing other tasks, technology has some work to do to before it can be said that it can provide the same sentimental education that people do. Since reading *Reclaiming Conversation* I have become aware of being more responsible and active in my role as a fully present conversational partner. May we never forget that conversation is powerful. Conversation is not passive or blasé and talking to each other may in fact be the cure.

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