Book review

Sherry Turkle’s Reclaiming Conversation

In the spirit of “connections,” author Sherry Turkle begins the “Contents” page of *Reclaiming Conversation* with this connection to a quote from Henry David Thoreau – “I had three chairs in my house’ one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society.” Turkle uses this quote as the framework for the organization of her book into six sections – “The Case for Conversation, One Chair, Two Chairs, Three Chairs, The Path Forward, and A Fourth Chair.” To understand her use of this quote and the book’s organization, you have to visit Thoreau’s *Walden* (or the book’s alternate title – *Life in the Woods*). Published in 1854, you may well recall the detailed account of his two years, beginning in 1845, living in a cabin he constructed himself outside Concord, Massachusetts; his experiment in “essential living.” There he fed himself by the labor of his own hands, reading, writing, and making friends of beast, birds, and fish, and welcoming the occasional visitors from town. It is in section #6, “Visitors,” that Thoreau speaks of the three chairs, and continues to explain:

“When visitors came in larger and unexpected numbers there was but the third chair for them all, but they generally economized the room by standing up. It is surprising how many great men and women a small house will contain. I have had twenty-five or thirty souls, with their bodies, at once under my roof, and yet we often parted without being aware that we had come very near to one another…. One inconvenience I sometimes experienced in so small a house, the difficulty of getting to a sufficient distance from my guest when we began to utter the big thoughts in big words. You want room for your thoughts to get into sailing trim and run a course or two before they make their port…. My ‘best’ room, however, my withdrawing room, always ready for company, on whose carpet the sun rarely fell, was the pine wood behind my house.” [Incidentally this is not the “fourth chair” of Turkle’s book; that is the age that looms ahead; of artificial intelligence where our conversations are with machines!]

It is in this spirit that Sherry Turkle counters our passions for technology and makes the case for face-to-face conversation, believing that conversation is the cornerstone for empathy as well as democracy. She believes it is conversation that sustains the best in education and in other fields of endeavor from business to the legal profession.

Turkle is a Professor of Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT and has spent the last 30 years studying the psychology of people’s relationships with technology. She has authored a trilogy of books on the subject beginning in 1997 with *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. Drawing on the brief descriptions of these books by Amazon, this first book is not about computers, but about people and how computers are causing us to reevaluate our identities in the age of the internet. She describes trends in computer design, in artificial intelligence (AI), and in people’s experiences of virtual environments that confirm a dramatic shift in our notions of self, other, machine, and world.

In 1984 she published the second book in this series, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*, based largely on interviews with young children, college students, engineers, AI scientists, hackers, and personal computer owners, Turkel discovers a new way that people are thinking about human emotion, thought, memory, and understanding.

Then in 2012 the third book of the trilogy was published, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. Again based on hundreds of interviews, she describes new unsettling relationships between friends, lovers, parents, and children, and new instabilities in how we understand privacy, community, and intimacy, leading to a new solitude, confusing tweets and wall posts with authentic communication.

The latest, fourth book on the subject came in 2015. Sherry Turkle’s *Reclaiming Conversation* is thoroughly researched with extensive footnotes, not just citing her numerous references, but with useful explanations accompanying her referring to these resources, fully 48 two-column pages worth. And like her other works, much of her analysis is based on ex-
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we find ourselves;
we prepare ourselves
to come to conversations
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.

There is so much here, I choose to share this lengthy quote to give you the essence of her plea for deep conversations among all of us, not at the total expense of the use of our technology, but to re-humanize us. Here is how she summarizes much of what she has to say about the “Power of Talk in a Digital Age:”

“We are being silenced by our technologies – in a way, ‘cured of talking.’ These silences – often in the presence of 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.’... [His] 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 conversations 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. The conversations 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 questions. 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 conversations 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 our 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?’”

In closing I return to Walden Pond, this time with a quote from E. O. Wilson, Pulitzer Prize-winning professor and honorary curator in entomology of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University. Wilson offered a similar message in his introduction to The Future of Life — still timely, though written in 2002! The 13-page prologue is a letter “to Henry” [Thoreau] and ends, “Affectionately, Edward.” Here Wilson states:

“You [Thoreau] brought me here. Our meeting could have just as well been a woodlot in Delaware, but here I am at the site of your cabin on the edge of Walden Pond. You [Thoreau] searched for essence 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 our 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?’”

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For more on the subject, click here to watch Sherry Turkle’s presentation at the 2012 TED Conference, “Connected, But Alone!”