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This Is America

The case for progress

Textual Relations

Some suggestions for Americans who these days are incessantly interruptible.
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Review of Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age. By Sherry Turkle. Penguin Press. 448pp. $27.95

Two years ago, during a hearing of the Foreign Relations Committee on U.S. military intervention in the civil war in Syria, John McCain grew restless. He began playing poker on his iPhone. Outed by the media, McCain tweeted: “Scandal. Caught playing iPhone game at 3 hour + Senate hearing – worst of all I lost!”

Senator McCain is scarcely an icon of the digital age. But like him, millions of Americans these days are distracted by technology. They email, text and tweet; they use Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat. And, according to Sherry Turkle, they embrace multitasking, even though open screens actually degrade the performance of virtually every person who can see them.

In Reclaiming Conversation, Turkle, a professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT and the author of three books on digital culture (The Second Self, Life on the
*Screen,* and *Alone Together*) reprises her concerns about the downside of technology on family life, romantic relationships, friendships, education, work, and the public square. In our zeal for “connection,” she maintains that we have sacrificed conversation — and, to no small extent, our capacity for self-reflection, empathy, and genuine intimacy.

By now, much of Turkle’s critique may seem familiar. But it is no less compelling. By shifting the focus from reflection to self-presentation (through face friends’ tallies, status updates, and pictures of beautiful, happy people in sunny, sumptuous settings, she reminds us, social media sites inhibit inner dialogue and in-depth exchanges. They quantify and commodify relationships in what the historian Christopher Lasch once called “the banality of self-awareness.” Tethered to iPhones, Americans in the twenty-first century are also incessantly interruptible, increasingly unwilling and unable to lose themselves in the present or to enjoy their own company. Their textual relationships eviscerate or eliminate complexity in the name of accessibility and brevity — and make it possible to avoid taking the risks inherent in face-to-face contact.

At times, however, Turkle seems too quick to dismiss the upside of digital culture. Social media, after all, has mobilized tens and hundreds of thousands of people to social and political action, by contributing to a presidential campaign, donating to disaster relief, and taking to the streets during the Arab Spring. The new connectivity also allows grandparents and grandchildren, distant cousins, and former college roommates to stay in touch.

Turkle is surely right that relationships that matter are messy and that a capacity of listen and respond in real time to disagreements and emotional explosions fosters empathy. As she acknowledges, however, “fighting by text” can free parents and children, spouses and partners to be more honest while making sure they are “saying” what they want to say (especially if they know how to use texting punctuation that, as Turkle indicates, can convey tone of voice and body posture). Deliberation and distance, moreover, do not always constitute evidence of insincerity. Some situations need a cooling off period — and textual exchanges can pave the way for meaningful face-to-face conversations.

In my view, Turkle exaggerates the “phone phobia” of young people. Her claims that lecture classes in colleges and universities stimulate students to voice and defend their opinions more than online courses and that students avoid office hours because they are anxious about the give-and-take with professors are questionable.

All that said, *Reclaiming Conversation* conveys a vitally important — and urgent — message. We have, to no small extent, abandoned conversation in our lives. If we are to live more fulfilled lives, we can and must “disconnect to connect.” Turkle suggests some next steps and guideposts. She advocates the creation of “sacred spaces” for conversation (e.g. no devices at dinner, in the kitchen, in the car). I’d add a proposal that every person have at least one meal a week that lasts at least ninety minutes with someone (or some ones) he or she loves in which experiences and feelings are shared; runs and power walks be iTuneless; and two days per week be “screen free.”

Turkle encourages conversations with people with decidedly different views and, more generally, a commitment to learn from moments of friction. She emphasizes that unitasking
increases performance and decreases stress. And she wants employers to create opportunities for conversation by providing all-day cafeterias and company outings, a “phones off” rule for meetings, and a directive that emails need not be answered at night.

It’s a start. Since teenagers now text at least 100 times a day (and their elders are not far behind); and, since, on average, office workers are distracted electronically every three minutes (and need twenty-three minutes to get on track), we have got a mountain to climb. “It is not a moment to reject technology, but to find ourselves,” Turkle concludes. And to draw on the resilience “that has always been ours” by reclaiming “artless, risky, face-to-face” conversation “in the nick of time.”