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THE TECH NOMAD

Sherry Turkle on the power of talking (face to face)

By **Ethan Gilsdorf** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 02, 2015

“Who in this cafe is talking?”

Sherry Turkle looks around a trendy coffee shop in Downtown Crossing. The walls are lined with old tomes, a thematic decorative touch, but the books aren’t meant to be read. Aside from Turkle and a guest, one other couple is chatting. Most patrons are hunched over laptops and smart phones, working, texting, or watching something on a screen.

“So, we’ve got four people talking,” she sighs. “Two groups of two. OK, that’s not very good.”



JOE TABACCA FOR THE BOSTON
GLOBE

Turkle, 67, professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a prolific author, wants to have a conversation. About conversation — and why so few people seem interested in having, or are able to have, that face-to-face anymore.

The crisis of conversation is at the heart of Turkle’s new book, “Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age.” With it, she hopes to spark a discussion about what we lose when we settle for fleeting texts, sound bites, and status updates, instead of pursuing meaningful, nuanced human connection.

“I had a question. All these people were saying, I’d rather text than talk,” says Turkle. “What happens if in business, in education, in romance, and child-rearing, you text rather than talk?”

A sociologist and clinical psychologist, Turkle has studied the link between conversation and empathy, and how conversation supports self-reflection. In her new book, out Tuesday, she argues that our reliance on our devices endangers our ability to cultivate friendships, raise healthy kids, nurture intimate relationships, succeed on the job, and engage in civic discourse. “Fortunately, there was a flood of quantitative studies that supported what I was saying.”

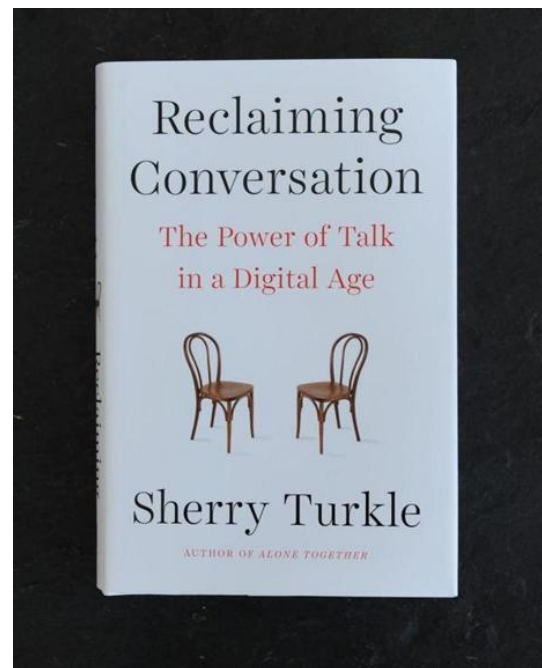
The Boston-based Turkle finished writing “Reclaiming Conversation” in New York while she was on sabbatical. She has written several other books that explore, as she puts it, the intersection of “technology and identity,” including “The Second Self,” “Life on the Screen,” and “Alone Together.”

Telling stories of individuals, “Reclaiming Conversation” explores technology’s insidious effects on chitchat. There’s the father who — estranged from his child — accompanies her on a school field trip, only to spend it uploading photos and status updates rather than engaging her in conversation. There’s the college sophomore who’s terrified to apologize to her roommate in person. Instead, she “talks” to her using Google Chat.

Then there’s Turkle’s own experience of how digital life affects her interactions with students. She implores them to visit her during office hours, but they won’t. Instead, they send e-mails. They think e-mail allows them to “ask the perfect question so I can give them the perfect, more valuable answer,” says Turkle, who speaks slowly and methodically, sometimes pausing for effect. Face to face, her feisty manner belies the restrained tone of her book. “What am I supposed to do,” she continues, “sit there at my machine trying to be perfect?”

“

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She laments not only the “transactional” nature of communication, but the demise of conversational give-and-take, its wrong turns and discoveries that build understanding.

She also tracks more subtle effects of technology.

“If I put my phone on the table,” she says, gesturing at an iPhone in front of her, “the nature of the conversation will change.”

Discussion, she says, becomes more superficial. People will shy away from serious talk. She cites a 2015 study by the Pew Research Center: 89 percent of all cellphone users report taking out their phones during their most recent social interaction, and 82 percent of them said it detracted from their conversations. But they did it anyway.

While there’s warning and weariness in her voice, she insists “the book is not anti-technology. It’s pro-conversation.” And she welcomes all rebuttals. “I want to hear the positive argument for robot dolls. I want to hear the positive argument for kids who don’t have conversations with their parents.”

Which is not to say that Turkle is some cranky technophobe. “I’ll pit my iPhone against anyone else’s,” she says. “I’m very ‘phone.’” She’s as susceptible to technology’s siren song as the next person. But unlike most of us, Turkle is not willing to accept the way our devices limit our communication.

Despite the evidence she’s compiled, Turkle insists the situation is not all doom and gloom. The solution is simple: Talk to each other.

“It is time to make the course corrections,” she writes. “We have everything we need to begin. We have each other.”

On Sunday, Turkle appears at The Fenway Forum, presented by HUBweek and held at Faneuil Hall. HUBweek is founded by The Boston Globe, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard University, and Massachusetts General Hospital.

On Oct. 16, Turkle [comes to the Brattle Theatre](#), Cambridge, for a book talk and signing.

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