

# Tech Talks: Tech for Seniors

## Reclaiming Conversation & Alone Together

by Sherry Turkle

Center for Learning in Retirement - Fall 2017

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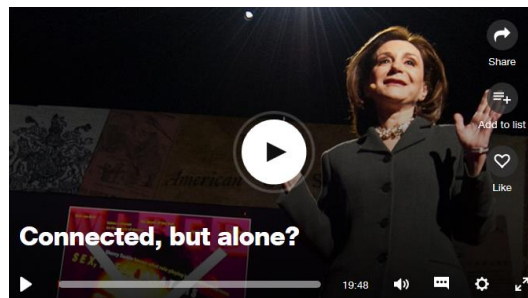
# Introduction

- [Sherry Turkle](#) (born June 18, 1948) is the Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She obtained a BA in Social Studies and later a Ph.D. in Sociology and Personality Psychology at Harvard University.
  - [\*The Second Self: Computers and The Human Spirit\*](#) '84
  - [\*Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet\*](#) '97
  - [\*Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other\*](#) '12
  - [\*Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age\*](#) '15

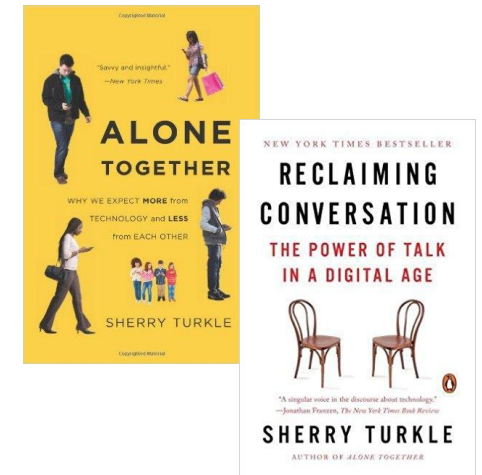


## [TED Talk 2012](#)

(19:48)



As we expect more from technology, do we expect less from each other? Sherry Turkle studies how our devices and online personas are redefining human connection and communication -- and asks us to think deeply about the new kinds of connection we want to have.



# Introduction

- Reclaiming Conversation

- A robotic moment: we are vulnerable, we experience ‘pretend empathy’ as the real thing, but robots can’t empathize.
- We have outsourced the thing we do best – understanding each other, taking care of each other.
- Older people are supposed to be talking, and younger people are supposed to be listening – this is the compact between generations.
- Looking to technology to repair the empathy gap is a problem we didn’t need to have in the first place. But sometimes it can be easier to build an app than have a conversation.
- It is time “to acknowledge the unintended consequences of technologies to which we are vulnerable, to respect the resilience that has always been ours.”

# Summary

- Reclaiming Conversation

- Long an enthusiast for the promise of technology, the author investigates a troubling consequence: at work, at home, in politics and love, we have sacrificed conversation for mere connection.
- At the dinner table, children compete with smartphones for their parents' attention. At work, we retreat to our screens, foregoing the water-cooler conversation that once made us more productive and engaged.
- Online, we share opinions that our 'friends' will agree with, avoiding real conflicts and solutions of the public square.
- When we turn to our devices instead of to one another, the cost is high; a loss of empathy.
- But the good news is: conversation cures... the time is right to reclaim conversation.

# Overview

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# Thoreau's 3 chairs



- **“I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship, three for society.” (1845)**
- **The three chairs plot points on a virtuous circle that links conversation to the capacity for empathy and self-reflection.**
- **Technology disrupts this virtuous circle. Disruption begins with solitude.**
- **Solitude – reinforces a secure sense of self, and the capacity for empathy.**
  - **If we can't find our own center, we lose confidence in what we have to offer others.**
  - **A flight from conversation is a flight from self-reflection, empathy and mentorship.**
  - **But flight isn't inevitable. When the virtuous circle is broken, conversation cures.**

# Not anti-tech, but pro-conversation

- We miss out on necessary conversations when we divide our attention between people we're with and the world on our phones.
- Or when we go to our phones instead of claiming a quiet moment.
- Our mobile devices grant 3 wishes:
  - We will always be heard
  - We can put our attention wherever we want it to be
  - We will never have to be alone
    - And in turn, we'll never have to be bored...
- When we invest in conversation we get a payoff in self-knowledge, empathy and the experience of community.

# Online life

- Does technology make emotions easy?
  - The short answer – no!
  - Social media can make emotional life very hard...
- On social media, everyone learns to share the positive
  - But negative emotions require processing in more parts of the brain
  - Time spent online doesn't provide practice with more complex processing
- Youth are learning the wrong life lessons online
  - Experience negative emotions rather than normal parts of life, coping
  - Distraction and interruption take you away from other people
- Good news – conversation cures
  - Atrophy can be counteracted through face-to-face conversation, interaction



# Solitude

- ‘Screens’ don’t encourage solitude
  - And they don’t teach the richness of human conversation
- Online, we become accustomed to nearly guaranteed results, something that the ups and downs of solitude can’t promise.
  - Conversation – never perfect, but perfect isn’t the point.
  - Simulation – fearful of not being in control, but control isn’t the point.
- Screens rev kids up, the ‘concrete worlds’ slow them down
  - Children need time to think, use their imagination, make up their own worlds
- Encourage children to use ‘screens’ for creative endeavors
  - Programming, building their own games, robotics – ex. STEM camps

# Never a dull moment

- A way to think about conversation, one that is less about information and more about creating a space to be explored.
  - You're interested in hearing how another person approaches things
  - This is a 'whole person conversation' – you try to read your friends differently
  - Look into their face, attend to their body language
  - Allow for silence
- Facebook, texting, Instagram, Snapchat, Vine... and all the 'friendship technologies' (Glass, 'smart' wearables...) make you less vulnerable to ever feeling alone.
- And then there's the smartphone 'security blanket' – phones give us a way to look busy, and you never have to be truly alone.

# 7-minute rule

- This is a good one. This is 'rule' our youth are using today:
  - 7-minutes is the amount of time you have to wait to see if something interesting is going to happen in a conversation.
  - It's the amount of time you have to wait before you should give up and take out your phone.
  - If you want a 'real conversation', you have to be willing to wait 7-minutes.
- Really? What will they think of next??

# Empathy & community

- The ‘empathy machine’ – training wheels for empathy
  - Development of empathy needs face-to-face conversation, it needs eye contact
  - Repeated thousands of times to a child, it transmits our capacity for love
  - Parts of the brain that allow us to process another person’s feelings and intentions are activated by eye contact – emoticons don’t have the same effect
- To keep what we cherish about conversation, we have to design for our vulnerabilities
  - Design phones to intentionally ‘release’ us after a transaction
  - Construct social environments that support our intentions
- We’ll go further in reclaiming conversation if we create environments that support conversation

# Unitasking and Deep Attention

- The multitasking myth: we move quickly from one task to another, but performance degrades for each new task
  - We think we're doing better but we're actually doing worse and worse
- Reality: we're faced with technologies to which we're vulnerable
  - Design technologies that comprehend/counteract these vulnerabilities
  - Multitasking is seductive, we need to promote 'unitasking'
- The opposite of unitasking is '[hyper attention](#)'
  - To look back to 'deep attention' in the classroom is "unhelpfully nostalgic"
  - Choices: change students to fit the educational environment, or change the environment
  - '[Google jockeying](#)', '[back-channeling](#)' – examples of 'hyper attention' learning environments
- Grazing – where the learner picks up things here and there, capturing bits and pieces
  - In practice, grazing makes it hard to develop a narrative to frame events

Devices are a fact of life, part of our creative lives. The goal is to use them with greater intention.

# MOOCs

- An educational technology perfectly suited to the sensibilities of hyper-attention (massive open online courses).
- The hope is to make the ‘classroom’ a space for project-based learning and a new kind of conversation, more dynamic than before.
- Ex. Prof. Nagy’s “[The Ancient Greek Hero](#) in 24 Hours” ([edX course](#))
  - The ‘C’ in MOOC stands for content, conversation, and community
  - Graduates of the ‘Hero’ MOOC can participate in a community known as ‘Hour 25’
  - Hour 25 has regular virtual meetings, guest speakers, a blog site and ongoing discussions
- Still, students do better in face-to-face courses than online

# Lecture

- The oldest form of instruction
- One most likely to have a passive student and active teacher
- It where students come together and form a small community
- Students watch a professor thinking on his/her feet, thinking aloud
- The lectures you never forget:
  - [Randy Pausch's Last Lecture](#) – Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams (2007)
- A lecture has other virtues:
  - It disciplines a teacher to integrate content
  - It teaches students to seize the opportunity to discuss and challenge 'live'
- Question: Would good actors make better online education teachers?

# Screens

- The new law office: fewer informal meetings, less time in the cafeteria, more time alone with screens
- Screens get in the way of sociability, and courtesy
- Alone in the office, they listen to a call AND work on their screens
- Face-to-face conversation is sacrificed for multitasking
- Reality: lawyers that spent more time face-to-face with clients brought in the most business. Now how much lawyers 'socialize' is part of their performance review
- Fact: for productive work, conversation counts – what makes us productive is our interaction with other people



# Device free

- Design for conversation:
  - Google – how long to stand in cafeteria line to maximize conversation
    - 3-4 minutes – long enough to meet a new person, but not feel like you're wasting time
  - Stan Hammond – 'forces' his employees to talk
    - Start the workday with coffee and treats laid out
    - Office on 3 floors, but all get off on same floor – food and comfortable seats provided
  - Vincent Castell – spaces for privacy, quiet places to gather – 20% of office space devoted to food, with bar-stool seating
    - Each day starts with an open, device-free stand-up meeting
    - Big changes in amount and types of conversations happening
- Conversation is the path to a capacity for empathy, which in turn paves a path forward to greater productivity

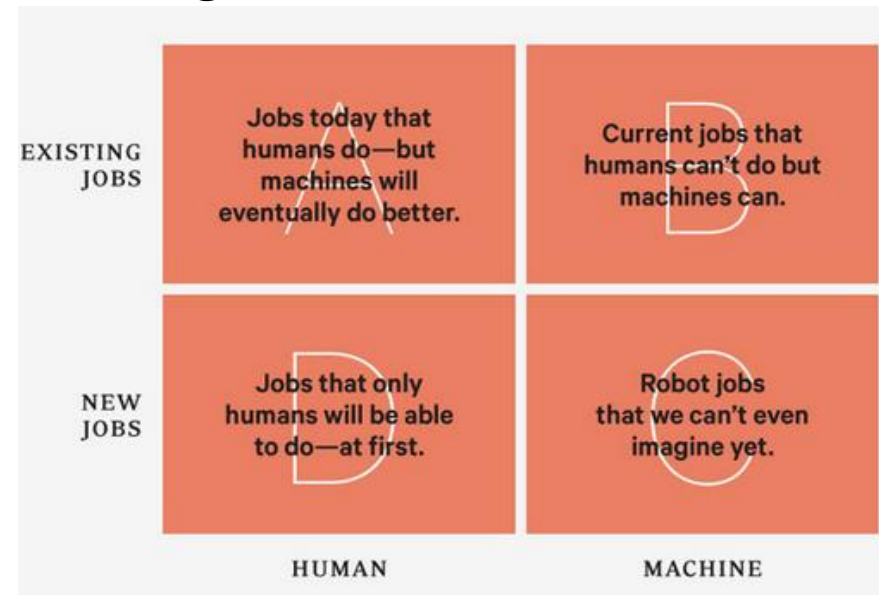
# Thoreau's 4<sup>th</sup> chair

- For Thoreau, walking was a kind of shared solitude, a way to “shake off the village” and find himself, sometimes in the company of others
- These days, we have a ‘digital village’, one that demands performance, speed, and self-disclosure, to shake off
- Today, we take many walks in which we don't look around, not at the scenery, not at our companions. We are heads-down in our phones.
- But we can come back to what is important. We can use our technology with greater intention.
- Thoreau's 4<sup>th</sup> chair: a second ‘nature’ of our own making – the world of the artificial and virtual
  - Question: Who do we become when we talk to machines?

# Kelly – Better Than Human

- Subtitle: [Why Robots Will and Must – Take Our Jobs](#)
- “Before the end of this century, 70 percent of today’s occupations will likewise be replaced by automation.”
- Machines are acquiring smarts. Consider Baxter...
  - it can look around and indicate where it is looking
  - anyone can train Baxter
  - Baxter is cheap
- Kelly’s ‘Robot Replacement’ chart

Let the robots take the jobs, and let them help us dream up new work that matters.



# Kelly's 7 Stages of Robot Replacement

**1. A robot/computer cannot possibly do the tasks I do.**

*[Later.]*

**2. OK, it can do a lot of them, but it can't do everything I do.**

*[Later.]*

**3. OK, it can do everything I do, except it needs me when it breaks down, which is often.**

*[Later.]*

**4. OK, it operates flawlessly on routine stuff, but I need to train it for new tasks.**

*[Later.]*

**5. OK, it can have my old boring job, because it's obvious that was not a job that humans were meant to do.**

*[Later.]*

**6. Wow, now that robots are doing my old job, my new job is much more fun and pays more!**

*[Later.]*

**7. I am so glad a robot/computer cannot possibly do what I do now.**

# Design for vulnerabilities

- Technology has gotten us into trouble and technology can get us out
  - How about 'empathy apps' to teach compassion and consideration, or
  - Computer games that reward collaboration rather than violence
- Not so fast. It's easier to build an app than to have a conversation
  - Yes, we should design technology to account for our vulnerabilities
  - But to bridge the empathy gap, parents need to create 'sacred spaces' and 'technology timeouts' to reclaim conversation
  - College students and CEOs need to put phones away and pay attention
- When people give themselves the time for self-reflection, they come to a deeper regard for what they can offer others
- This is the moment, to reclaim our attention – for solitude, for friendship, for society...

# Other References

- [How Technology is Hijacking Your Mind — from a Magician and Google Design Ethicist — Tristan Harris](#)
  - **Hijack #1: If You Control the Menu, You Control the Choices**
  - **Hijack #2: Put a Slot Machine In a Billion Pockets**
  - **Hijack #3: Fear of Missing Something Important (FOMSI)**
  - **Hijack #4: Social Approval**
  - **Hijack #5: Social Reciprocity (Tit-for-tat)**
  - **Hijack #6: Bottomless bowls, Infinite Feeds, and Autoplay**
  - **Hijack #7: Instant Interruption vs. “Respectful” Delivery**
  - **Hijack #8: Bundling Your Reasons with Their Reasons**
  - **Hijack #9: Inconvenient Choices**
  - **Hijack #10: Forecasting Errors, “Foot in the Door” strategies**

We need our smartphones, notifications screens and web browsers to be exoskeletons for our minds and interpersonal relationships that put our values, not our impulses, first. [People’s time is valuable](#). And we should protect it with the same rigor as privacy and other digital rights.

# Other References (continued)

- [Tech Companies Design Your Life, Here's Why You Should Care – Tristan Harris](#)
  - Invisibility of the New Normal
  - A New “Perfect” Choice on Life’s Menu
  - A Whole New Persuasive World
  - Acknowledging the Problem
  - A New Kind of Ergonomics
  - How to Change the Game
  - **What’s at stake is our Agency.** Our ability to live the lives we want to live, choose the way we want to choose, and relate to others the way we want to relate to them – through technology. *This is a design problem, not just a personal responsibility problem.*

# Other References (continued)

- [Distracted in 2016? Reboot Your Phone with Mindfulness – Tristan Harris](#)
  - **Tip #1: Create Your “Essential” Home Screen**
  - **Tip #2: Use your iPhone’s Consciousness Filter (Typing)**
  - **Tip #3: Plug the Leaks (Make Control Center Your Friend)**
  - **Tip #4: Two Pages of Apps, and Hide the Candy Wrappers**
    - **Extra Tip: Keep the M&Ms, but Hide the Wrappers**
  - **Tip #5: Only Get Notified When \*People\* Need Your Attention**
  - **Tip #6: Unambiguous Vibrations**
  - **Tip #7: Buy a Travel Alarm Clock or Charge Phone Outside**

Imagine if we lived in a world where our phones and Internet were *built to make our darwinian instincts work for us, instead of against us*. Imagine if these kinds of settings were the default, not something only a few people knew about.



# Other References (continued)

- [What is Time Well Spent \(Part I\): Design Distinctions - Tristan Harris](#)
  - **With Time Well Spent, we want technology that cares about helping us spend our time, and our lives, well**
  - **Explores the following aspects, before and after:**
    - **Stance**
    - **Ability to Disconnect**
    - **Quality of Attention**
    - **Measuring Success**
    - **Greenwashing**
    - **Design Goal**
    - **Respect**
    - **Model of User Behavior**
    - **Influencing Psychological Instincts**
    - **Minimizing Psychological Externalities**
    - **Menus and Framing**

# Other References (continued)

- [Is Technology Amplifying Human Potential, or Amusing Ourselves to Death? – Tristan Harris](#)

- **From [Amusing Ourselves to Death](#) – [Neil Postman](#) (1982)**

- What Orwell feared were those who would ban books.  
What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one.
- Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information.  
Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism.
- Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us.  
Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance.
- As Huxley remarked ... [they] *“failed to take into account man’s almost infinite appetite for distractions.”*



Huxley



Orwell

# Other References (continued)

- [Is your web browser a credit card for your time? - Tristan Harris](#)
  - The web browser isn't just a tool that gets you from A to B, it's also a medium that shapes the kinds of choices you make.
  - Today, web browsers are designed like credit cards. They make it easy to “swipe” the credit card for our time and take out a **loan against our future selves**.
  - *Software designers affect how **a billion people** make choices about spending their attention – more than [150 times every day](#).*
  - Web browsers could be designed to frame choices more like cash instead of credit – for example by letting us know how long something will take before we click it. (Ex. ‘*Estimated reading time: 4 minutes, 15 seconds*’)
  - Or help us by allowing us to “budget” how much time we'd like to spend on various sites or apps, and frame our choices in terms of how much cash (“time”) we have left towards that site.

# Happy and Unhappy Apps - [Tristan Harris](#)

## Apps that demand more screen time make us less happy.

We asked 200,000 users to rate apps after seeing how much time they spent on them. Here's what they said.

### Most Happy Apps

	% of Users Happy	Daily Usage (Minutes)
1. Calm	99% 😊	10
2. Google Calendar	99% 😊	3
3. Headspace	99% 😊	4
4. Insight Timer	99% 😊	20
5. The Weather	97% 😊	3
6. MyFitnessPal	97% 😊	8
7. Audible	97% 😊	8
8. Waze	96% 😊	19
9. Amazon Music	96% 😊	7
10. Podcasts	96% 😊	8

### Most Unhappy Apps

	% of Users Unhappy	Daily Usage (Minutes)
1. Grindr	77% 😞	61
2. Candy Crush Saga	71% 😞	46
3. Facebook	64% 😞	59
4. WeChat	62% 😞	97
5. Candy Crush	59% 😞	47
6. Reddit	58% 😞	56
7. Tweetbot	58% 😞	78
8. Weibo	57% 😞	73
9. Tinder	56% 😞	22
10. Subway Surf	56% 😞	32

Thoreau wrote, "I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendship and three for society." Turkle argues that just as Thoreau needed these symbolic chairs in his cabin near Walden Pond, we need a similar social structure to communicate effectively. But cell phones are damaging our capacity for engaged conversation, she suggests, and thus our capacity for friendship and social connection.

Turkle argues that we avoid solitude, Thoreau's first chair, by constantly checking our cell phones, despite the fact that we need this solitude to truly know ourselves. With cell phones, "we turn to other people to support our sense of self," robbing us of the self-knowledge necessary for rich conversations.

Chair two, for friendship, is threatened by our cell phones because "when our phones are around, we are vulnerable to ignoring the people we love." Turkle writes about how groups of teens will constantly check their phones even when they are together. This, Turkle claims, results in ever more superficial conversations. Turkle then looks to chair three, society, by examining how cell phones have changed the workplace and classroom. She writes about students checking for and sending text messages during class and offices where we text or e-mail instead of talking to our co-workers. She said in these situations we're not as likely to converse or to play with ideas.

But Turkle also explores what she calls a fourth chair, our desire to converse with the machines themselves. She writes about people's interactions with Apple's iPhone assistant Siri, and with MIT Artificial Intelligence Laboratory's emotive robot Kismet, then marvels that "Even as we treat machines as if they were almost human, we develop habits that have us treating human beings as almost-machines."

She claims that in the end, we are sacrificing conversation for connection. But this isn't necessary. We can take steps to be less reliant on our phones. Turkle is careful to state that her argument is "not anti-technology. It's pro-conversation."