Sunday Review | OPINION

Stop Googling. Let's Talk

By Sherry Turkle SEPT. 27, 2015

College students tell me they know how to look someone in the eye and type on their phones at the same time, their split attention undetected. They say it's a skill they mastered in middle school when they wanted to text in class without getting caught. Now they use it when they want to be both with their friends and, as some put it, "elsewhere."

These days, we feel less of a need to hide the fact that we are dividing our attention. In a 2015 study by the Pew Research Center, 89 percent of cellphone owners said they had used their phones during the last social gathering they attended. But they weren't happy about it; 82 percent of adults felt that the way they used their phones in social settings hurt the conversation.

I've been studying the psychology of online connectivity for more than 30 years. For the past five, I've had a special focus: What has happened to face-to-face conversation in a world where so many people say they would rather text than talk? I've looked at families, friendships and romance. I've studied schools, universities and workplaces. When college students explain to me how dividing their attention plays out in the dining hall, some refer to a "rule of three." In a conversation among five or six people at dinner, you have to check that three people are paying attention — heads up — before you give yourself permission to look down at your phone. So conversation proceeds, but with different people having their heads up at different times. The effect is what you would expect: Conversation is kept relatively light, on topics where people feel they can drop in and out.

Young people spoke to me enthusiastically about the good things that flow from a life lived by the rule of three, which you can follow not only during meals but all the time. First of all, there is the magic of the always available elsewhere. You can put your attention wherever you want it to be. You can always be heard. You never have to be bored. When you sense that a lull in the conversation is coming, you can shift your attention from the people in the room to the world you can find on your phone. But the students also described a sense of loss . . . .

Studies of conversation both in the laboratory and in natural settings show that when two people are talking, the mere presence of a phone on a table between them or in the periphery of their vision changes both what they talk about and the degree of connection they feel. People keep the conversation on topics where they won't mind being interrupted. They don't feel as invested in each other. Even a silent phone disconnects us.

In 2010, a team at the University of Michigan led by the psychologist Sara Konrath put together the findings of 72 studies that were conducted over a 30-year period. They found a 40 percent decline in empathy among college students, with most of the decline taking place after 2000.

Across generations, technology is implicated in this assault on empathy. We've gotten used to being connected all the time, but we have found ways around conversation — at least from conversation that is open-ended and spontaneous, in which we play with ideas and allow ourselves to be fully present and vulnerable. But it is in this type of conversation — where we learn to make eye contact, to become aware of another person's posture and tone, to comfort one another and respectfully challenge one another — that empathy and intimacy flourish. In these conversations, we learn who we are . . . . The capacity for empathic conversation goes hand in hand with the capacity for solitude.

In solitude we find ourselves; we prepare ourselves to come to conversation with something to say that is authentic, ours. If we can't gather ourselves, we can't recognize other people for who they are. If we are not content to be alone, we turn others into the people we need them to be. If we don't know how to be alone, we'll only know how to be lonely.

A virtuous circle links conversation to the capacity for self-reflection. When we are secure in ourselves, we are able to really hear what other people have to say. At the same time, conversation with other people, both in intimate settings and in larger social groups, leads us to become better at inner dialogue.

But we have put this virtuous circle in peril. We turn time alone into a problem that needs to be solved with technology. Timothy D. Wilson, a psychologist at the University of Virginia, led a team that explored our capacity for solitude. People were asked to sit in a chair and think, without a device or a book. They were told that they would have from six to 15 minutes alone and that the only rules were that they had to stay seated and not fall asleep. In one experiment, many student subjects opted to give themselves mild electric shocks rather than sit alone with their thoughts.

People sometimes say to me that they can see how one might be disturbed when people turn to their phones when they are together. But surely there is no harm when people turn to their phones when they are by themselves? If anything, it's our new form of being together.

But this way of dividing things up misses the essential connection between solitude and conversation. In solitude we learn to concentrate and imagine, to listen to ourselves. We need these skills to be fully present in conversation.

Every technology asks us to confront human values. This is a good thing, because it causes us to reaffirm what they are. If we are now ready to make face-to-face conversation a priority, it is easier to see what the next steps should be. We are not looking for simple solutions. We are looking for beginnings. Some of them may seem familiar by now, but they are no less challenging for that. Each addresses only a small piece of what silences us. Taken together, they can make a difference.

One start toward reclaiming conversation is to reclaim solitude. Some of the most crucial conversations you will ever have will be with yourself. Slow down sufficiently to make this possible. And make a practice of doing one thing at a time. Think of unitasking as the next big thing. In every domain of life, it will increase performance and decrease stress.

But doing one thing at a time is hard, because it means asserting ourselves over what technology makes easy and what feels productive in the short term. Multitasking comes with its own high, but when we chase after this feeling, we pursue an illusion. Conversation is a human way to practice unitasking.

Our phones are not accessories, but psychologically potent devices that change not just what we do but who we are. A second path toward conversation involves recognizing the degree to which we are vulnerable to all that connection offers. We have to commit ourselves to designing our products and our lives to take that vulnerability into account. We can choose not to carry our phones all the time. We can park our phones in a room and go to them every hour or two while we work on other things or talk to other people. We can carve out spaces at home or work that are device-free, sacred spaces for the paired virtues of conversation and solitude. Families can find these spaces in the day to day — no devices at dinner, in the kitchen and in the car. Introduce this idea to children when they are young so it doesn't spring up as punitive but as a baseline of family culture. In the workplace, too, the notion of sacred spaces makes sense: Conversation among employees increases productivity . . . .

Sometimes [choosing face-to-face conversations] simply means hearing people out. A college junior told me that she shied away from conversation because it demanded that one live by the rigors of what she calls the "seven minute rule." It takes at least seven minutes to see how a conversation is going to unfold. You can't go to your phone before those seven minutes are up. If the conversation goes quiet, you have to let it be. For conversation, like life, has silences — what some young people I interviewed called "the boring bits." It is often in the moments when we stumble, hesitate and fall silent that we most reveal ourselves to one another.

The young woman who is so clear about the seven minutes that it takes to see where a conversation is going admits that she often doesn't have the patience to wait for anything near that kind of time before going to her phone. In this she is characteristic of what the psychologists Howard Gardner and Katie Davis called the "app generation," which grew up with phones in hand and apps at the ready. It tends toward impatience, expecting the world to respond like an app, quickly and efficiently. The app way of thinking starts with the idea that actions in the world will work like algorithms: Certain actions will lead to predictable results.

This attitude can show up in friendship as a lack of empathy. Friendships become things to manage; you have a lot of them, and you come to them with tools. So here is a first step: To reclaim conversation for yourself, your friendships and society, push back against viewing the world as one giant app. It works the other way, too: Conversation is the antidote to the algorithmic way of looking at life because it teaches you about fluidity, contingency and personality.

This is our moment to acknowledge the unintended consequences of the technologies to which we are vulnerable, but also to respect the resilience that has always been ours. We have time to make corrections and remember who we are — creatures of history, of deep psychology, of complex relationships, of conversations, artless, risky and face to face.

Sherry Turkle is a professor in the program in Science, Technology and Society at M.I.T. and the author, most recently, of "Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age," from which this essay is adapted. The article was further condensed for the purposes of the directed-self-placement essay.