

Alone Together by Sherry Turkle

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At this year's 2011 UPCEA Annual Conference held in Toronto, I found myself unconnected, lacking access to my university computer either through my iPhone or the hotel's workstations. I was unexpectedly and unintentionally cut off and incapable of checking email or reading the latest headlines from *The New York Times*. Severed from my electronic umbilical cord, I could only imagine what important information was passing me by.

Worse yet, I was doubly alone. Everyone around me was busily texting or otherwise totally engrossed with their PDAs and laptops. I was alone; we were all alone, but together. Sherry Turkle, one of the conference's keynote speakers and author of *Alone Together*, had just minutes before made this point, and now it was driven home with added visceral irony.

Alone Together is a disturbing book. You may argue, find fault, or disagree with the most important parts of Turkle's thesis, but in the end you will concede that the increased use and preference for the company of our electronic devices is distancing us further from authentic, richly textured communication and creating the insidious illusion that we are connecting with others.

While this in itself is not earth-shattering news to anyone who has witnessed family members separately texting or talking on their smartphones even while dining together, Turkle maintains that the ubiquity and ease in using text messaging and IM (instant messaging) have relegated more emotionally demanding, real-time phone conversations to the bleachers, and then only for special occasions, particularly when there is no other alternative. Her pronouncement on this and other available electronic communication is that our preference for emailing, by way of example, although initially viewed as "better than nothing" has been elevated to "simply being better" than actually calling.

A quick text or a longer email, edited and scrubbed to attain just the right tone, and the equally swift, yet crafted response—perhaps a single word—assures us that we have linked up, without having to go through time-consuming pleasantries and the need to keep a phone conversation moving along until protocol finally permits its long-awaited conclusion.

She sketches a typical contemporary scenario: We're tired, with scores of emails yet to answer after dinner. And at home, we just want to be under the radar. We keep putting off calling people, annoyed that they have not given us their email address. And another threshold is crossed when we receive a call: "Why are they calling?" instead of "A call!"

In several chapters Turkle reports on advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics based upon breakthroughs at MIT's Media Lab and other university labs. Is having a lifelike robot "friend" with whom to converse and reveal your thoughts and fears better than being alone, or are we better off with an overworked, underpaid nursing home attendant mechanically attending to our needs, or waiting for children and grandchildren to visit?

The rapidity with which we are willing to relinquish flesh-and-blood connections in favor of the false simulacrum of metal, plastic, and complex software, even while painfully aware of the false comfort we are purchasing at the cost of social withdrawal and isolation, is most disturbing. Turkle presents compelling examples of the shift from "toy" to "other" among children, teenagers, adults, and senior citizens. For example, reciprocating our own words and gestures, robots that respond to sound and movement go beyond creating the illusion of life by suggesting their capacity for feeling and reaching out. And by appearing to react to our needs for emotional bonding, they seem to offer solace and understanding, but without awareness. When this interdependence flows in both directions and we create a robotic dog or person that appears sad, the relationship goes beyond projecting our feelings upon a contrived artifact (like an old-fashioned, inanimate toy) and appears to have the deeper trappings of human engagement. The sad reality is that a baby robot's crying or the sad, turned-down mouth of a robotic dog is an electronically triggered response and not the expression of feelings of harm or hurt that we attribute to them.

Of course, the more that we learn about the biochemistry of our brains and bodies, the degree to which our species has been hardwired to respond to stimuli over centuries of evolution, or how frequently used medications for anxiety or depression are changing the way we react to stimuli, the more likely we are to question the exact nature of our own humanness. Are we not contrived as well? There is no doubt that the evolving sophistication of AI creations will come closer and closer to evoking the appearance of life and perhaps blurring the line between wo(man) and machine.

Trained as a psychoanalyst, Turkle regards this drift toward a preference for the predictability of a robot's programmed response as a consequence of the inadequacy of achieving the necessary level of emotional sustenance from others. She writes about children whose parents are too busy to show them affection creating an ideal bond with "MyBaby," or socially isolated teens finding solace from "Kismet," a lifelike robot whose plastic skin, when electronically stimulated, can change expressions in response to programmed verbal cues. Depending upon the state of its circuitry or mechanical condition, Kismet has the capacity to either heal or hurt a person. In either case, Turkle observes, it may turn a child inward and away from others.

The concept of a seemingly responsive nonhuman companion—think of Ira Levin's compliant, supportive, and loving *Stepford Wives* or a demonic creation running amok as in Shelley's *Frankenstein*, or *Hal* in Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*—reveals our ongoing fascination with and fear of artificial life. Perhaps the day will arrive when the perfect mate, friend, or companion can be acquired, for a reasonable sum, by one and all. But is there really a continuum connecting a yearning for robotic helpmates and the growing use of smartphones, iPads, and social networking media? Turkle argues that we are halfway there or have already become cyborgs, i.e., (bio)technology-enhanced entities who can transcend the limitations of cytoplasm and inherited DNA, possessing an improved ability to think, feel, and act.

In her provocative analysis of social media, especially Facebook, Turkle shows how the practice of "friending" has become a low-threshold way of making friends without the familiar accoutrements of friendship, as we have known it. Instead we create through Facebook a composite friend, taking bits and pieces from many—a friend for this need,

and only that need, and other friends for other equally specific needs. Unlike the old-fashioned relationships between pen pals, which necessarily took time because of the exchanges of letters but were often short-lived, Facebook offers the promise of immediate feedback and perhaps a relationship of longer duration. But at what price?

Turkle wonders if this utilitarian notion of friendship, narrowly construed to fulfill specific needs, reduces our relationships into one-way, functional, and instrumental exchanges, instead of the presumably deeper, longer lasting, and sustaining understandings that characterize true friendship. Here, I think, is the critical question posed by *Alone Together*: Have we crossed the technological Rubicon without the option of returning to a world that offers fewer but better choices? Or is this value judgment similar to other nostalgic visions of the past, when the grass was greener, roses smelled sweeter, and we were all vibrant and alluringly slim? And is this imagined conversation at all relevant, especially to those whose earliest memories are largely digitized and computer-mediated?

Turkle touched upon these themes in her keynote, where, in the company of colleagues of a certain age, I asked her about distance learning. Turkle's response was predictable: entirely online courses would deprive students of real-time, visceral contact with faculty. That prompted me to ask my current students about their own inclinations. Much to my dismay, the majority preferred an entirely online class compared to the face-to-face seminar (albeit with several online sessions) I taught this spring. Yes, they would miss out on the piquant banter of our in-class exchanges, but an online course was good enough for their needs, much more convenient, etc. This was the pedagogic equivalent of being hoisted with my own petard because I have been a long-time, impassioned advocate for distance education without ever having envisioned that in an educational variant of Gresham's Law, it would drive out traditional classroom instruction.

We in continuing higher education extol the virtues and importance of increased student choice and access to learning opportunities. At a minimum these must naturally be of comparable academic quality and rigor. And in our increasingly outcomes-oriented course assessments, if there are no significant differences between learning venues and if students overwhelmingly choose online courses, who are we to judge their choices in the

brave new world that we have created? After all, we make our own selections based on convenience, cost, and presumed value.

Read *Alone Together*. And then talk about it with your colleagues, your students, and your friends—face-to-face.

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