A Discussion Guide to

Reclaiming Conversation

The Power of Talk in a Digital Age
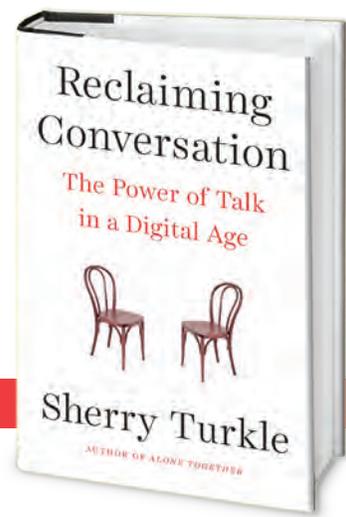
THE FLIGHT FROM CONVERSATION

Over the past few years, we have come to live a life of constant connection. We are always communicating, but something is wrong with conversation. Why is it in trouble?

- If, as Sherry Turkle argues, conversation is too often being replaced by "mere connection," why is *Reclaiming Conversation* an optimistic book? What are the sources of optimism that something will change within the culture?

- What happens to the nature of conversation when a phone is placed on a table between two people? What happens to the relationship between the conversational partners?

- Do you think mobile technology is part of a contemporary crisis in empathy? Do you have experiences in your family and friendships to support that claim? To contradict it?

SOLITUDE, SELF-REFLECTION, CONVERSATION

- Do you see a connection between the capacity for solitude and the capacity for empathy, the capacity for relationship? What is that connection?

- Turkle paraphrases a line from the psychoanalyst David Winnicott who wrote extensively about the capacity for solitude in development. "If you don't teach your children to be alone, they'll only know how to be lonely." What does this mean? What actions does this suggest to parents, to teachers? How do you teach a child to be alone?

- Neuroscience stresses the importance of solitude, and indeed, about being alone, even "bored." What is the value of "the lulls" we are trying too hard to run away from?

- A recent study shows a 40% decline in empathy (as we know how to measure it, the capacity to put yourself in the place of the other) among college students during the past twenty years. After completing this study, its author set to work trying to develop "empathy apps" for the iPhone. What do you think about the possibilities of technology helping us out of a problem that technology may have helped to create?

- Didn't people claim that books would destroy conversation? Is the smart phone just the book of our time?

DESIGNING FOR CONVERSATION, DESIGNING FOR VULNERABILITY IN THE FAMILY AND AT WORK

- Turkle talks about designing for conversation. What would that mean in your home? What would that mean in your workplace?

- Some families think it is helpful to "fight by text," or by chat or by email. In other words, they like to keep their disagreements to screens. What do you think of this practice?

- What do you think of online apologies? What do they accomplish? What are they not able to accomplish? What are the chief seductions of our phones? What makes us so vulnerable?

RECLAIMING CONVERSATION IN EDUCATION

- Turkle discusses a school she calls "Holbrooke" where a faculty member says the twelve year olds "play like eight year olds." They are not able to show empathy toward each other. They are not able to put themselves in each other's place. What does that have to do with conversation? What is at stake here developmentally? Do you see signs of developmental problems in your world?

- Reclaiming conversation will require reclaiming unitasking, both in education and work settings. Is that hard to accomplish in your educational environment?

- Some observers believe that the more technology there is in the classroom, the less student engagement with the classroom itself. What is your experience here? The experience of your family?

- Children are critiquing their parents' choices with technology. What are children able to see that grownups sometimes cannot? Does this seem true in your family? In your school environment?

- Distance learning certainly makes sense in many contexts, for many people. Yet it is not a panacea. It is not a one size fits all solution. In your view, when does it fall down as a solution?

- The psychologists Howard Gardner and Katie Davis have written about the educational handicaps experienced by the "app generation," who imagine everything they experience as something that can be executed, implemented as though it were an app. Is this accurate? What challenges does it present?

RECLAIMING CONVERSATION AT WORK

Research shows that conversation is good for the bottom line.

- If you wanted to reclaim conversation at work, would you be able to?

- We know that conversation improves productivity, creativity, and collaboration. What are the forces that keep us at our desks, despite what we know?

- Across generations, we have different attitudes towards conversation at work. Turkle calls those who prefer to stay at their desks, at their screens and avoid face-to-face talk "pilots in their cockpits." Are there "pilots" in your work environment? How are they seen? Do you feel that they contribute maximally to the life of the firm?

- Turkle stresses that the most successful CEOS she interviewed insisted that they make room for conversation by not clearing out their inbox. They are not reactive to what comes to them in email. They stay proactive. Are you reactive to email? Do you think that being less reactive would help you in your worklife?

- What can employers do to design for conversation, to lead for conversation? What can employees do to make their need for conversation known to management?

- Turkle suggests that in business, it would help if we said to each other when we get an impatient email, "I'm thinking." Have you ever tried that in your business environment? If not, try it. What happened?

- Do younger members in your workplace need mentoring for conversation? Do they report "talking" to colleagues when they have sent emails or texts or communicated on gchat?

THE PUBLIC SQUARE

- "Mindspace" is a way of thinking about your own thinking that values its privacy. How do you think about mindspace? Do you feel that in our digital world, you have strategies for claiming or reclaiming mindspace? What are they?

- One of the young women Turkle interviewed told her that she "was glad that she didn't have controversial opinions." Why? How does our media silence us before we even form opinions? Do you think she is right?

- Edward Snowden's revelations linked digital surveillance to something that people could understand: spying. Do you think much about digital surveillance? Does it bother you? Do you talk about it? What would it take, in your view, to spark those conversations?

- What is intimacy without privacy? What is democracy without privacy?

TALKING TO MACHINES

- What does it mean that kids are now talking to their toys? What is the harm in talking to Siri? That elders might have robotic pets as companions?