



# EJOURNAL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

VOLUME 10 | ISSUE 1

## **Book Review: Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age, by Sherry Turkle, and We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations That Matter, by Celeste Headlee**

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### **Author Note**

Discussed in this review:

*Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age.* By Sherry Turkle. Penguin. October 2015. ISBN: 978-1594205552. 448 pages. Hardcover, \$16.00

*We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations That Matter.* By Celeste Headlee. Harper Wave. September 2017. ISBN: 978-0062669001. 272 pages. Hardcover, \$21.00

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When it was first published in 2015, Sherry Turkle's *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* read as essential, even urgent. Now, viewed through the lens of 2020, the book is even more relevant and timely. Dr. Turkle's academic training in both sociology and psychology, and her deep research in the areas of culture and technology, prepared her to carefully examine the ways individuals interact with their devices and how they use those devices to interact—or not interact—with others.

This past year has shifted many of our lives from IRL (in real life) to ever more URL (uniform resource locator) communication, making this an ideal moment to examine the data and analysis in *Reclaiming Conversation*. Turkle builds her case for human connection through conversation by drawing on a combination of metaphor, case study, and many examples pulled from her research. As one who teaches communication classes, I have spent years citing the research she shares in the book on how even a silent phone, when visible, can inhibit communication. This semester, I had the opportunity to teach the book to a class of honors students from a broad range of majors, including pre-med, mathematics, psychology, and social work. Like me, they found Turkle's findings compelling and challenging. Also like me, they said reading the book had changed their relationships with their ever-present devices.

Yet, at a time when we are staying distant to keep ourselves and others safe, haven't the screens won out? Should we give up on meaningful face-to-face conversations? Turkle argues that our ubiquitous technology—she refers to her phone as “my tiny god”—makes our need for true connection to ourselves and to others clearer than it has ever been. As she writes, “My argument is not anti-technology, it's pro-conversation” (p. 25).

Turkle uses Thoreau's idea of “three chairs”—“one for solitude, two for friendship, and three for society”—and adds a fourth, which encompasses the technologies that were impossible to imagine in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *Reclaiming Conversation* views the first chair as an essential step toward truly meaningful interactions with others. Our ability to be alone with ourselves has been complicated by carrying computers with us everywhere we go. Regardless of our age, we can all be vulnerable to the appeal of what Turkle calls “the shiny objects of digital culture” (p. 62) to relieve what we perceive as boredom. Indeed, those very devices have manipulated our perspective on what boredom is, and they have effectively stolen our ability to be with our thoughts. Citing Paul Tillich, Turkle notes that “language ... has created the word ‘loneliness’ to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word ‘solitude’ to express the glory of being alone.” Our phones mean we never have to be alone, and we miss out on the glory of solitude. Turkle provides many examples of study subjects sharing their experiences of using social media and various types of tracking devices, and how those technologies have affected their lives.

In Turkle's examination of communication when individuals use “two chairs,” she provides vivid examples of interactions between family members as well as in friendships. As my students related this semester, use of technology during family time is, for many, a long-running source of frustration and missed connections. Turkle describes too-frequent “silent mealtimes” as each person present stares into a tiny screen rather than at the faces of their family members. She observes that “family conversations at dinner are fragile things” (p. 108). Her research clearly shows that devices disconnect individuals from each other, and she explains why and how this occurs in her thorough discussion of how we treat and how we are treated by those closest to us. She shares examples of people who have known each other their entire lives or for decades, and how the new “normal” around technology has affected the depth of these relationships. In discussing the metaphor of the “two chairs,” she also addresses how texting as a

means of communication has altered the landscape of romantic connections. Turkle was interested in how flirting worked for teens interviewed for the book. One teen, Hannah, described the “NOTHING gambit” that occurs when someone does not respond to texts as “a way of driving someone crazy ... You don’t exist” (p. 177). Turkle notes that our ability to completely ignore an attempt at electronic conversation simply is not an option when we occupy the same physical space as the person trying to flirt with us. The devices we use are changing our behaviors and how we communicate.

Adding one more chair, Turkle offers a fascinating illustration from one of her own classes at MIT. She describes the group of students as intimate, since the class was capped at 20 and their topic of science, technology, and memoir captured their interest, resulting in deep and lively discussion. Halfway through the semester, which she thought was working well, a group of students asked to meet with her to confess they had been texting in class and felt bad about it. In a larger class discussion, even more students admitted they also had texted in class, despite the small number of people and the personal nature of the student interactions during the seminar. As a group, they decided to try staying device-free during class time, with a short break to check phones. The result? “Students finish their thoughts, unrushed. What the students tell me is that they feel relief: When they are not tempted by their phones, they feel more in control of their attention” (p. 212). Since the 1980s, Turkle has studied how humans interact with technologies, and she writes with great feeling about this preceding example of how even bright students (who know the challenges that devices pose to human attention) can fall into behaviors that they know disconnect them from the people in the same room as them.

In the “three chairs” section, Turkle also explores conversation in the workplace using vivid examples from a variety of studies. Meetings in the age of technology look very different from those in the days when people needed to be in a common space at least part of the time. She recounts tactics used in some workplaces to mitigate the negative effects of constant connection via technology. For instance, Turkle cites the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and its successful experiment with disconnection. BCG found that, when its employees had the chance for “predictable time off”—that is, “afternoons or evenings totally disconnected from work and wireless devices, agreed-upon email blackout times, or uninterrupted work blocks that allow for greater focus”—those in the experiment reported higher levels of job satisfaction and happiness with work–life balance compared to employees who were not involved in the experiment.

Turkle’s fourth chair challenges us to look critically at what happens when we interact with machines. This section of the book, in which she concludes several hundred pages of insight into the hows and whys of human interaction in online spaces, is all the more profound now that many of us have spent countless hours meeting, celebrating holidays, interacting with medical professionals, buying groceries, etc., via machines rather than in person. Even though, in some cases, we are “together” virtually, we are still interacting through machines.

The structure of *Reclaiming Conversation* allows the reader to engage with thought-provoking research findings, concrete examples, and a philosophical approach to connection, and Turkle weaves all of these elements together seamlessly. Especially in light of the events of 2020, I find myself guided and challenged every day by her call to make our interactions intentional—whether with devices or directly with people around us. This year of distance has made the need for Turkle’s deep examination of our human connections vital.

The importance of meaningful connections through dialogue is also the topic of Celeste Headlee’s 2017 *We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations That Matter*, a book that saved my Interpersonal Communication class that same year. The arrival of the planned textbook for

the course was delayed by wildfires and shipping issues, so in the first week of classes, I decided we would start the semester with Headlee's book instead, based only on having heard her in interviews discussing it. No doubt I was predisposed to trust her, having listened to her voice for decades on public radio. It also did not hurt that she had delivered a much-watched TED Talk sharing the ideas she developed in *We Need to Talk*, or that the book clocked in at under 250 pages, making it a nice fit as the class waited for the textbooks to arrive.

Since that semester, I have read Headlee's book with my students in both Interpersonal Communication and in a class called Consequential Conversations, and never has it seemed more necessary than now. Headlee combines social psychology insights from Danny Kahneman, economic data from Heather Boushey, and philosophy from Salman Rushdie (whom she describes as a favorite interview subject). Her research across various fields is presented against the backdrop of her lived experiences as a trained opera singer from a high-profile African American family who has spent her professional life interviewing thousands of people, famous and not, for broadcast. Her endless curiosity is clear from her diverse sources of inspiration and her professional interests. She takes the reader into her world of considering the best approach to learning from a conversation partner with whom she may only speak once, and for a relatively short time. Throughout the book, Headlee shares personal stories, making the reading experience very much like the kind of meaningful conversation she encourages readers to have.

Headlee organizes *We Need to Talk* into two main parts. In Part 1, she makes it clear that poor communication skills can cost billions of dollars as well as human lives. My students have found her description of how humans came to use language particularly fascinating. This is certainly a strength of the book. For those who can easily form words and speech, it is easy to take this ability for granted and overlook the complexity of conveying meaning. Headlee provides brief illustrations of how remarkable it is that humans can communicate in ways so distinct from birdsong or the growl of a dog, for instance. She takes a close look at the fancy devices we use to seemingly connect with each other and reveals that, in actuality, we often use them to avoid conversations that should happen. She writes, "We shut people out all the time. When we do connect, we usually seek out only those who already agree with our opinions" (p. 59). She also maintains that "technology will take us only so far; conversation can get us the rest of the way" (p. 100). Re-reading those words in 2020 was quite profound against a backdrop of social distancing. There is a real hunger for true connection now that many of us have learned more about what it means to be isolated, physically apart from people with whom we would like to be in conversation across a table.

Headlee argues convincingly that we first need to acknowledge the complexity of sharing meaning with another person. She highlights research that illustrates how unaware we tend to be about our bad communication habits such as inattention, poor listening, and avoidance of difficult topics. In my courses, the students and I often spend most of a class discussion on one line from Chapter 5 of *We Need to Talk*: "A good conversation is not necessarily an easy one" (p. 101). Students have revealed that they have often opted out of tough conversations with family members and peers. As a teacher of communication, this concerns me, of course, since it is vital that people of all ages build their skills in order to have challenging interactions. *We Need to Talk* includes a discussion of the power of apology that my students find compelling and thought-provoking. After making a strong case that we first need to be aware of how challenging competent communication really can be, Headlee provides some straightforward guidance around building relevant skills for meeting those challenges.

In Part 2 of her book, Headlee details the specific strategies she has identified through research and experience. She makes it clear that her goal is for readers to have “better conversations, deeper connections, and richer relationships,” and it is very difficult to think of anyone who would not want to learn more about how to get there. In 10 short chapters, Headlee describes, in clear language, techniques for enabling the “good conversation” that is the goal of the book. She uses pithy chapter titles to highlight what is important; *Get Off the Soapbox* and *Keep it Short* are just two of my favorites. The chapter titled *That’s a Great Question* includes a detailed but concise explanation of the power of open-ended questions. Asking open-ended questions is a technique often used in education, and instructors try to teach students to construct such questions as a way to help them think about thinking. Headlee writes, “The most uncomplicated questions often elicit a complicated response, just as a detailed question can result in a one-word answer” (p. 214).

The concluding chapters in *We Need to Talk* pull together all the lines Headlee has thrown out. She provides examples from her own life when she has not been attentive in conversations so we can learn from them. She refers to herself as “scatterbrained,” and in an age of distraction that may be true of many readers of the book as well. Her research-based explanations of how we can gain greater control over and awareness of our attention point the way to better conversations in the future.

In particular, I love the title of Headlee’s book. The phrase itself—*We need to talk*—may seem ominous or discouraging if we have ever heard it said in a tone of reproach. The meaning of the title, however, changes if the emphasis is placed on “we” instead of “need.” With the experience gained as a result of the constraints, limitations, and losses of 2020, we may feel more than ever that we need to *talk*—to really take the time to process these events. In order to do that in a significant way, we will need the skills Celeste Headlee describes so beautifully. Her book is important, especially as we prepare to once again share space with those not in our household or our pandemic “bubbles.” We need other humans for us to make sense of our world, and *We Need to Talk* can help us do that meaningfully.

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