

The Flight from Conversation

My guess—and I think this will be debated for a long time—is that humans are very communicative, and so the fact that you're talking to more people with shorter bursts of communication is probably net neutral to positive.

—ERIC SCHMIDT, EXECUTIVE CHAIRMAN OF GOOGLE

Don't all these little tweets, these little sips of online connection, add up to one big gulp of real conversation?

—STEPHEN COLBERT, ACTOR AND COMEDIAN

These days, we want to be with each other but also elsewhere, connected to wherever else we want to be, because what we value most is control over where we put our attention. Our manners have evolved to accommodate our new priorities. When you're out to dinner with friends, you can't assume that you have their undivided attention. Cameron, a college junior in New Hampshire, says that when his friends have dinner, "and I hate this, everyone puts their phones next to them when they eat. And then, they're always checking them." The night before at dinner he had texted a friend sitting next to him ("S'up, dude?") just to get his attention.

Cameron's objection is common, for this is the reality: When college students go to dinner, they want the company of their friends in the dining hall and they also want the freedom to go to their phones. To have both at the same time, they observe what some call the "rule of three": When you are with a group at dinner you have to check that at least three people have their heads up from their phones 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.

I meet with Cameron and seven of his friends. One of them, Eleanor, describes the rule of three as a strategy of continual scanning:

Let's say we are seven at dinner. We all have our phones. You have to make sure that at least two people are not on their phones or looking down to check something—like a movie time on Google or going on Facebook. So you need sort of a rule of two or three. So I know to keep, like, two or three in the mix so that other people can text or whatever. It's my way of being polite. I would say that conversations, well, they're pretty, well, fragmented. Everybody is kind of in and out. Yeah, you have to say, "Wait, what . . ." and sort of have people fill you in a bit when you drop out.

The effect of the rule of three is what you might expect. As Eleanor says, conversation is fragmented. And everyone tries to keep it light.

Even a Silent Phone Disconnects Us

Keeping talk light when phones are on the landscape becomes a new social grace. One of Eleanor's friends explains that if a conversation at dinner turns serious and someone looks at a phone, that is her signal to "lighten things up." And she points out that the rule of three is a way of being polite even when you're not at the dinner table. When "eyes are down" at phones, she says, "conversation stays light well beyond dinner."

When I first planned the research that would lead to this book, my idea was to focus on our new patterns of texting and messaging. What made them compelling? Unique? But early in my study, when I met with these New Hampshire students, their response to my original question was to point me to another question that they thought was more important. "I would put it this way," says Cameron. "There are fewer conversations—not with the people you're texting, but with the people around you!" As he says this, we are in a circle of eight, talking together, and heads are going down to check phones. A few try not to, but it is a struggle.

Cameron sums up what he sees around him. “Our texts are fine. It’s what texting does to our conversations when we are together, that’s the problem.”

It was a powerful intuition. What phones do to in-person conversation *is* a problem. [Studies show that the mere presence of a phone](#) on the table (even a phone turned off) changes what people talk about. If we think we might be interrupted, we keep conversations light, on topics of little controversy or consequence. And conversations with phones on the landscape block empathic connection. If two people are speaking and there is a phone on a nearby desk, [each feels less connected to the other](#) than when there is no phone present. *Even a silent phone disconnects us.*

So it is not surprising that in the past twenty years we’ve seen a 40 percent decline in the markers for empathy among college students, most of it within the past ten years. It is [a trend that researchers link to the new presence of digital communications](#).

Why do we spend so much time messaging each other if we end up feeling less connected to each other? In the short term, online communication makes us feel more in charge of our time and self-presentation. If we text rather than talk, we can have each other in amounts we can control. And texting and email and posting let us present the self we want to be. We can edit and retouch.

I call it the Goldilocks effect: We can’t get enough of each other if we can have each other at a digital distance—not too close, not too far, just right.

But human relationships are rich, messy, and demanding. When we clean them up with technology, *we move from conversation to the efficiencies of mere connection*. I fear we forget the difference. And we forget that children who grow up in a world of digital devices don’t know that there is a difference or that things were ever different. Studies show that [when children hear less adult talk](#), they talk less. If we turn toward our phones and away from our children, we will start them off with a deficit of which they will be unaware. It won’t be only about how much they talk. It will be about how much they understand the people they’re talking with.

Indeed, when young people say, “Our texts are fine,” they miss something important. What feels fine is that in the moment, so many of their moments are enhanced by digital reminders that they are wanted, a part of things. A day online has many of these “moments of more.” But as

digital connection becomes an ever larger part of their day, they risk ending up with lives of less.

I'd Rather Text than Talk

For many, a sentiment has become a litany, captured by the phrase “I’d rather text than talk.” What people really mean is not only that they like to text but also that they don’t like a certain kind of talk. They shy away from open-ended conversation. For most purposes, and sometimes even intimate ones, they would rather send a text message than hear a voice on the phone or be opposite someone face-to-face.

When I ask, “What’s wrong with conversation?” answers are forthcoming. A young man in his senior year of high school makes things clear: “What’s wrong with conversation? I’ll tell you what’s wrong with conversation! It takes place in real time and you can’t control what you’re going to say.”

This reticence about conversation in “real time” is not confined to the young. Across generations, people struggle to control what feels like an endless stream of “incoming”—information to assimilate and act on and interactions to manage. Handling things online feels like the beginnings of a solution: At least we can answer questions at our convenience and edit our responses to get them “right.”

The anxiety about spontaneity and the desire to manage our time means that certain conversations tend to fall away. Most endangered: the kind in which you listen intently to another person and expect that he or she is listening to you; where a discussion can go off on a tangent and circle back; where something unexpected can be discovered about a person or an idea. And there are other losses: In person, we have access to the messages carried in the face, the voice, and the body. Online, we settle for simpler fare: We get our efficiency and our chance to edit, but we learn to ask questions that a return email can answer.

The idea that we are living moments of more and lives of less is supported by a recent study in which pairs of college-aged friends were asked to communicate in four different ways: face-to-face conversation,

video chat, audio chat, and online instant messaging. Then, the degree of emotional bonding in these friendships was assessed both by asking how people felt and watching how they behaved toward each other. The results were clear: [In-person conversation led to the most emotional connection](#) and online messaging led to the least. The students had tried to “warm up” their digital messages by using emoticons, typing out the sounds of laughter (“Hahaha”), and using the forced urgency of TYPING IN ALL CAPS. But these techniques had not done the job. It is when we see each other’s faces and hear each other’s voices that [we become most human to each other](#).

Much of this seems like common sense. And it is. But I have said that something else is in play: Technology enchants. It makes us forget what we know about life.

We slip into thinking that always being connected is going to make us less lonely. But we are at risk because it is actually the reverse: If we are unable to be alone, we will be more lonely. And if we don’t teach our children to be alone, they [will only know how to be lonely](#).

Yet these days, so many people—adults and children—become anxious without a constant feed of online stimulation. In a quiet moment, they take out their phones, check their messages, send a text. They cannot tolerate time that some people I interviewed derisively termed “boring” or “a lull.” But it is often when we hesitate, or stutter, or fall silent, that we reveal ourselves most to each other. And to ourselves.

“My Tiny God”

I’m not suggesting that we turn away from our devices. To the contrary, I’m suggesting that we look more closely at them to begin a more self-aware relationship with them.

So, for example, I have a colleague, Sharon, thirty-four, who describes herself as “happily texting” since 2002. But she is taken aback when she hears a friend refer to her smartphone as “my tiny god.” The comment makes Sharon wonder about her own relationship with her phone. Are there ways in which she treats her own phone as a god? Perhaps.

As Sharon talks with me, it becomes clear that her main concern is how social media is shaping her sense of herself. She worries that she is spending too much time “performing” a better version of herself—one that will play well to her followers. She begins by saying that all interactions, certainly, have an element of performance. But online, she feels involved in her performances to the point that she has lost track of what is performance and what is not.

I spend my time online wanting to be seen as witty, intelligent, involved, and having the right ironic distance from everything. Self-reflection should be more about, well, who I am, warts and all, how I really see myself. I worry that I'm giving up the responsibility for who I am to how other people see me. I'm not being rigorous about knowing my own mind, my own thoughts. You get lost in your performance. On Twitter, on Facebook, I'm geared toward showing my best self, showing me to be invulnerable or with as little vulnerability as possible.

Research tells us that being comfortable with our vulnerabilities is central to our happiness, our creativity, and even our productivity. We are drawn to this message, weary, it would seem, of [our culture of continual performance](#). Yet life on social media encourages us to show ourselves, as Sharon puts it, as “invulnerable or with as little vulnerability as possible.” Torn between our desire to express an authentic self and the pressure to show our best selves online, it is not surprising that frequent use of social media leads to feelings of [depression and social anxiety](#).

And trouble with empathy. Research shows that those who use social media the most have [difficulty reading human emotions](#), including their own. But the same research gives cause for optimism: We are resilient. Face-to-face conversation leads to [greater self-esteem and an improved ability to deal with others](#). Again, *conversation cures*.

To those with Sharon’s doubts, this book says you don’t have to give up your phone. But if you understand its profound effects on you, you can

approach your phone with greater intention and choose to live differently with it.

Pro-Conversation

So, my argument is not anti-technology. It's pro-conversation. We miss out on necessary conversations when we divide our attention between the people we're with and the world on our phones. Or when we go to our phones instead of claiming a quiet moment for ourselves. We have convinced ourselves that surfing the web is the same as daydreaming. That it provides the same space for self-reflection. It doesn't.

It's time to put technology in its place and reclaim conversation. That journey begins with a better understanding of what conversation accomplishes and how technology can get in its way. As things are now, even when people are determined to have in-person conversations, their plans are often derailed. Across generations, people tell me, "Everyone knows you shouldn't break up by text. That's wrong. A breakup deserves a face-to-face conversation." But almost everyone has a story to tell in which they or a friend broke up a relationship by text or email. Why? It's easier.

We are vulnerable, compelled and distracted by our devices. We can become different kinds of consumers of technology, just as we have become different kinds of consumers of food. Today, we are more discerning, with a greater understanding that what tempts does not necessarily nourish. So it can be with technology.

A ten-year-old in New York tells me that he and his father never talk alone, without the interruptions of a phone. I ask his father, forty, about this. The father admits, "He's right. On Sunday morning, when I walk with my son to get the newspaper, I don't go out without my phone." Why is that? "Because there might be an emergency." So far, no emergencies have come up, but on the walk to the corner store, he takes calls.

The real emergency may be parents and children not having conversations or sharing a silence between them that gives each the time to bring up a funny story or a troubling thought. A counselor at a device-free camp describes a common experience that the staff is having. If you go on a

walk in the woods with a camper who has been acting up (perhaps getting into fights, perhaps bullying younger boys in the dining hall), an hour can go by in silence. Sometimes two. “And then,” the counselor says, “and then, there will be the question. And then, there will be the conversation.”

The Three Wishes

Our mobile devices seem to grant three wishes, as though gifts from a benevolent genie: first, that we will always be heard; second, that we can put our attention wherever we want it to be; and third, that we will never have to be alone. And the granting of these three wishes implies another reward: that we will never have to be bored. But in creative conversations, in conversations in which people get to really know each other, you usually have to tolerate a bit of boredom. People often struggle and stumble when they grapple with something new. Conversations of discovery tend to have long silences. But these days, people often tell me that silence is a “lull” from which they want to escape. When there is silence, “It’s good to have your phone. There are always things to do on your phone.” But before we had our phones, we might have found these silences “full” rather than boring. Now we retreat from them before we’ll ever know.

I said that I began my research planning to investigate the sentiment “I’d rather text than talk.” Technology makes possible so many new kinds of connections—on email, text, and Twitter, just for a start. I thought I would explore what makes them appealing and unique.

But soon my interviews—across generations—put another issue at center stage. What people say to each other when they are together is shaped by what their phones have taught them, and indeed by the simple fact that they have their phones with them. The presence of always-on and always-on-you technology—the brute fact of gadgets in the palm or on the table—changes the conversations we have when we talk in person. As I’ve noted, people with phones make themselves less vulnerable to each other and feel less connected to each other than those who talk without [the presence of a phone on the landscape](#).

In the midst of our great experiment with technology, we are often caught between what we know we should do and the urge to check our phones. Across generations, we let technology take us away from conversation yet yearn for what we've lost. We reach for a moment of correction, an opportunity to recapture things we know by heart. When we invest in conversation, we get a payoff in self-knowledge, empathy, and the experience of community. When we move from conversation to mere connection, we get a lot of unintended consequences.

By now, several "generations" of children have grown up expecting parents and caretakers to be only half there. Many parents text at breakfast and dinner, and parents and babysitters ignore children when they take them to playgrounds and parks. In these new silences at meals and at playtime, caretakers are not modeling the skills of relationship, which are the same as the skills for conversation. These are above all empathic skills: You attend to the feelings of others; you signal that you will try to understand them. Children, too, text rather than talk with each other at school and on the playground. Anxious about the give-and-take of conversation, young people are uncertain in their attachments. And, anxious in their attachments, young people are uncertain about conversation.

These days, the first generation of children that grew up with smartphones is about to or has recently graduated from college. Intelligent and creative, they are at the beginning of their careers, but employers report that they come to work with unexpected phobias and anxieties. They don't know how to begin and end conversations. They have a hard time with eye contact. They say that talking on the telephone makes them anxious. It is worth asking a hard question: Are we unintentionally depriving our children of tools they need at the very moment they need them? [Are we depriving them of skills](#) that are crucial to friendship, creativity, love, and work?

A high school senior tells me he fears any conversation that he cannot edit and revise. But he senses its worth. "For later in life I'll need to learn how to have a conversation, learn how to find common ground." But for now, he is only wistful. He says, "Someday, someday soon, but certainly not now, I'd like to learn to have a conversation." His tone is serious. He knows what he does not know.

The Pilot in the Cockpit

Walking through a campus library or almost any office, one sees the same thing: people in their own bubbles, furiously typing on keyboards and tiny touch screens. A senior partner at a Boston law firm describes a scene at his office: Young associates lay out their suite of technologies: laptop, tablet, and multiple phones. And then they put their earphones on. “Big ones. Like pilots. They turn their desks into cockpits.” With the young lawyers in their cockpits, the office is quiet, a quiet that does not ask to be broken.

The senior partner realizes that the junior associates retreat to their cockpits in the name of efficiency. But he says that if they end up not interacting with their colleagues, the fallout will be more damaging than what they gain from doing “all of those emails.” He worries that life in the cockpit leaves the junior associates isolated from ongoing, informal conversations in the firm. He wants reassurance that the new recruits are part of the team. He believes that in the end, success at his firm demands a commitment to in-person collaboration.

There are times in business when electronic exchanges are the only choice. But in the law firm where the “pilot” works, many are *actively finding ways around face-to-face conversation*. There, the young recruits are forthright about wanting to avoid even the “real-time” commitment of a telephone call. And the senior partner says that the strategy of hiding from conversation “is catching,” rapidly crossing generations. In fact, it is an older lawyer who first tells me that he doesn’t like to interrupt his colleagues because “they’re busy on their email,” before he corrects himself: “Actually, I’m the one; I don’t want to talk to people now. It’s easier to just deal with colleagues on my phone.” He, too, has become a “pilot.” The isolation of the cockpit is not just for the young.

And we use technology to isolate ourselves at home as well as at work. I meet families who say they like to “talk problems out” by text or email or messaging rather than in person. Some refer to this practice as “fighting by text.” They tell me that electronic talk “keeps the peace” because with this regime, there are no out-of-control confrontations. Tempers never flare. One

mother argues that when family members don't fear outbursts, they are more likely to express their feelings.

A woman in her thirties lists the advantages of online disagreements with her partner: "We get our ideas out in a cooler way. We can fight without saying things we'll regret." And she adds another benefit: Fighting by text offers the possibility of documentation. "If we fight by text, I have a record of what was said."

In all of these cases, we use technology to "dial down" human contact, to titrate its nature and extent. People avoid face-to-face conversation but are comforted by being in touch with people—and sometimes with a lot of people—who are emotionally kept at bay. It's another instance of the Goldilocks effect. *It's part of the move from conversation to mere connection.*

At home, at school, at work, we see a flight from conversation. But in these moments of flight, there are moments of opportunity. We can reclaim conversation. Consider dinner.

Table Manners 2.0

Young people tell me it would be nice to have the attention of their friends at meals but that this has become an unrealistic expectation. Social norms work against it, plus "you don't really want to give up what's coming in on your phone." For anyone who grew up with texting, "[continuous partial attention](#)" is the new normal, but many are aware of the price they pay for its routines.

I interview college students who text continuously in each other's presence yet tell me they cherish the moments when their friends put down their phones. For them, what counts as a special moment is when you are with a friend who gets a text but chooses to ignore it, silencing his or her phone instead. For one woman, a college sophomore, "It's very special when someone turns away from a text to turn to a person." For a senior man, "If someone gets a text and apologizes and silences it [their phone], that sends a signal that they are there, they are listening to you."

A junior admits that she wants to ask her friends to put away their phones at meals but she can't do it because she would be socially out of line. "It's hard to ask someone to give you their undivided attention." She elaborates: "Imagine me saying, 'I'm so happy to see you, would you mind putting your phone away so that we can have a nice breakfast conversation?' And they would think, 'Well, that's really weird.'" Asking for full attention at a meal, she says, "would be age inappropriate."

What is "age appropriate" is that "rule of three," the mealtime strategy where you make sure that enough people are participating in a group conversation before you give yourself permission to look at your phone. Young people recognize that full attention is important, yet they are unwilling to give it to each other. They treat their friends the way that made them feel so bad when they were growing up with distracted parents—parents on phones.

Some young people accept their vulnerability to being distracted and try to design around it. They come up with a dinner game, usually played at a restaurant. It recognizes that everyone wants to text at dinner, but that the conversation is better if you don't. The game is called "cell phone tower." All the dinner guests take their phones and place them in a pile in the center of the table. No phones are turned off. The first person to touch a phone when it rings pays for the meal.

Why do you need a game to force you to pay attention to your friends? One college junior says that "rationally" she knows that if she sends a text to a friend during the dinner hour, it is reasonable that she won't get a reply until after dinner. And that's fine. But if someone sends *her* a text during dinner, she can't relax until she has responded. She says, "I tell myself, 'Don't read it at the table!' But you want to read it, you do read it; it's a weird little pressure to have."

This comment about the "weird little pressure" to respond immediately to a dinnertime text reminds me of a conversation I had with a student in one of my undergraduate seminars—a class on memoir—who came to office hours to tell me that although she felt committed to the seminar, she had been checking her phone during class time. She had been feeling guilty—in the class, after all, students had been telling their life stories—and she wanted to talk to me about her texting. She said she felt "compelled" to check her messages. Why? All she could offer was that she needed to know

who was reaching out to her, who was interested in her. Her formulation: “We are not as strong as technology’s pull.” Phones exert a seductive undertow. The economies of the “cell phone tower” help individuals swim against the tide.

In all of this, there is no simple narrative of “digital natives” at ease in the world they grew up in. On the contrary. The story of conversation today is a story of conflict on a landscape of clear expectations.

Indeed, when college students talk about how they communicate today, they express seemingly irreconcilable positions. In a group of college juniors, one man goes from saying “All of my texting is logistical. It’s just a convenience” to admitting that he can’t follow most dinner conversations because he feels such pressure to keep up with his phone. Another makes wistful remarks about the future of communication, such as “Maybe something new will be invented.” The implication is that this “something new” might be less distracting than what he has now. Two women say that they don’t look forward to what they have now being in their future—but they can’t imagine alternatives. One man suggests that maybe there isn’t a problem at all: Humans are “co-evolving” with their phones to become a new species. But his note of optimism ends when he jokes about being “addicted to texting” because it “always feels safer than talking.” He throws up his hands: “It’s not my fault, my mother gave me my first phone.” Advertisers know their customers. I look up at a sign in a San Francisco subway station for a food delivery service that will deliver from a wide range of restaurants in the Bay Area. It reads, “Everything great about eating combined with everything great about not talking to people!”

“I’m Sorry,” Hit Send

In this atmosphere, we indulge a preference to apologize by text. It has always been hard to sit down and say you’re sorry when you’ve made a mistake. Now we have alternatives that we find less stressful: We can send a photo with an annotation, or we can send a text or an email. We don’t have to apologize to each other; we can type, “I’m sorry.” And hit send. But face-to-face, you get to see that you have hurt the other person. The other

person gets to see that you are upset. It is this realization that triggers the beginning of forgiveness.

None of this happens with “I’m sorry,” *hit send*. At the moment of remorse, you export the feeling rather than allowing a moment of insight. You displace an inner conflict without processing it; you send the feeling off on its way. A face-to-face apology is an occasion to practice empathic skills. If you are the penitent, you are called upon to put yourself in someone else’s shoes. And if you are the person receiving the apology, you, too, are asked to see things from the other side so that you can move toward empathy. In a digital connection, you can sidestep all this. So a lot is at stake when we move away from face-to-face apologies. If we don’t put children in the situations that teach empathy (and a face-to-face apology is one of these), it is not surprising that they have difficulty seeing the effects of their words on others.

The “empathy gap” starts with young children and continues throughout life. A graduate student in economics comments on what is missing when her friends apologize by text. She calls it an “artificial truce.”

The texted “I’m sorry” means, on the one hand, “I no longer want to have tension with you; let’s be okay,” and at the same time says, “I’m not going to be next to you while you go through your feelings; just let me know when our troubles are over.” When I have a fight with my boyfriend and the fight ends with an “I’m sorry” text, it is 100 percent certain that the specific fight will come back again. It hasn’t been resolved.

The “I’m sorry” text is a missed opportunity. These opportunities can be seized. Parents can insist that their children’s apologies be done in person. One mother explains that her always-connected son, now thirteen, had a habit of canceling family plans by sending an email or text to announce his intentions. She has changed the rules. Now, if he wants to cancel a plan—say, dinner with his grandparents—he has to make a phone call to break the date.

That real-time telephone call teaches that his proposed actions will affect others. His mother says, “He can hear how my mother made the roast chicken and it’s already in the oven. He can hear that his grandfather has already bought the syrup to make ice cream sundaes.” In sum, he can hear that he is expected and that his presence will be missed. She adds that since the new rules have gone into effect, there has rarely been a cancellation.

In-person apologies are no less potent in business settings. Managers tell me that a big part of their job has become teaching employees how to apologize face-to-face. One CEO says he cries out in frustration, even to longtime employees, “Apologize to him. Face-to-face. You were wrong. Say you are sorry.” Another tells me that in business, not being able to say you’re sorry face-to-face is “like driving a car but not knowing how to go in reverse.” Essentially, it means you can’t drive. In his view, he is working with a lot of people who need driving lessons.

“I Would Never Do This Face-to-Face. It’s Too Emotional.”

When we move from conversation to connection, we shortchange ourselves. My concern is that over time we stop caring—or perhaps worse, we forget there is a difference. Gretchen is a college sophomore who doesn’t see a difference. She sits in my office and tells me she is having a hard time concentrating on her coursework. It’s roommate trouble. She’s been flirting with a roommate’s ex-boyfriend. She started out meaning no harm, but things escalated. Now the ex-boyfriend is using her as a weapon against her roommate. When we speak, Gretchen is distracted. Her grades are a disaster. I ask her if she wants to talk to someone in the counseling center. She says no, she needs to make things right with her roommate. What her roommate needs to hear, says Gretchen, is her apology and “the honest truth.” Gretchen adds, “That is what will restore my concentration.”

I ask Gretchen if she is comfortable going home now; it’s close to dinnertime and her roommate is probably at the dorm, no more than a ten-minute walk from my office. Gretchen looks confused as though my question has no meaning. “I’m going to talk to her on Gchat,” she says. “I would never do this face-to-face. It’s too emotional.”

I was taken aback when Stephen Colbert—as his “character,” a right-wing blowhard political talk show host—asked me a profound question during an appearance on his show: “Don’t all these little tweets, these little sips of online connection, add up to one big gulp of real conversation?” My answer was no. Many sips of connection don’t add up to a gulp of conversation.

Connecting in sips may work for gathering discrete bits of information or for saying “I am thinking about you.” Or even for saying “I love you.” But connecting in sips doesn’t work so well for an apology. It doesn’t work so well when we are called upon to see things from another’s point of view. In these cases, we have to listen. We have to respond in real time. In these exchanges we show our temperament and character. We build trust.

Face-to-face conversation unfolds slowly. It teaches patience. We attend to tone and nuance. When we communicate on our digital devices, we learn different habits. As we ramp up the volume and velocity of our online connections, we want immediate answers. In order to get them, we ask simpler questions; we dumb down our communications, even on the most important matters. And we become accustomed to a life of constant interruption.

Interruptions? “This Is My Life.”

On a balmy evening in June, I interview a group of twenty-five young people, from eighteen to twenty-four, who are in Boston for a summer study program. During our two hours together they tell me that if I really want to know how they communicate, I should be in their group chat. They are having it on an application for their mobile phones called WhatsApp. They invite me into their group, I accept, and our meeting continues. Now we are together in the room and online. Everything changes. Everyone is always “elsewhere” or just getting on their way. With everyone on the app, people switch rapidly between the talk in the room and the chat on their phones. At least half of the phone chat takes the form of images—cartoons, photos, and videos—many of which comment on the

conversation in the room. As the students see it, images connect them, equal to any text or any talk.

In the room, the topic turns to how hard it is to separate from family and high school friends during college. But it is hard for this discussion to go very far because it is competing with the parallel activity of online chat and image curation.

Yet I see how happy these students are. They like moving in and out of talk, text, and images; they like the continual feed. And they like always having someplace *else* to go. They say that their greatest fear is boredom. If for a moment students don't find enough stimulation in the room, they go to the chat. If they don't find the images compelling, they look for new ones. But sharing an image you find on the web is a particular kind of participation. You don't turn to your own experience, but pull instead from external sources. You express yourself but can maintain a certain distance.

As all of this is going on, I remember saying to my daughter when she was three, "Use your words." At first I wonder at my association. I appreciate the pertinence (and the wit!) of the students' shared images, but to me, going to the images is also a way for these young people to slip away from our group conversation just as it becomes challenging. When things get complicated, it's easier to send a picture than to struggle with a hard idea. And another child-raising truism comes to mind, this one in my grandmother's voice: "Look at me when you speak to me." We teach children the outward manifestations of full attention because we hope that by working backward from behavior we can get them to a more profound feeling state. This is the feeling state of attachment and empathic connection. We don't ask children to use their words or to look at us to make them obedient. We want words to be associated with feelings. Eye contact is [the most powerful path to human connection](#).

The students who invited me onto WhatsApp said I could understand them best if I shared their app. But once we shared WhatsApp, their faces were mostly turned down, eyes on their phones.

On this June evening, in the mash-up of talk, texts, and images, the students keep returning to the idea that digital conversations are valuable because they are "low risk." The students talk about how, when they are online, they can edit messages before sending them. And whether the text is to a potential employer or a romantic prospect, if it's important, they often

ask friends to go over their writing to help ensure they are getting it “right.” These are the perks of connection. But in conversations that could potentially take unexpected directions, people don’t always try to get things “right.” They learn to be surprised by the things they say. And to enjoy that experience. The philosopher Heinrich von Kleist calls this “the [gradual completion of thoughts while speaking](#).” Von Kleist quotes the French proverb that “appetite comes from eating” and observes that it is equally the case that “ideas come from speaking.” The best thoughts, in his view, can be almost unintelligible as they emerge; what matters most is risky, thrilling conversation as a crucible for discovery. Notably, von Kleist is not interested in broadcasting or the kind of posting that social media would provide. The thrill of “risky talk” comes from being in the presence of and in close connection to your listener.

The idea that risky talk might be exciting is far from my students’ minds during our evening on WhatsApp. In fact, someone in the group says that one of the good things about sending images is that it makes communication even *less* risky than sending edited texts. Like text, images can be edited. They can be cropped and passed through the perfect filter. And the more you manipulate them, he says, the more you can keep them ambiguous and “open to interpretation.” He sees this as a good thing because you can’t be hurt if you haven’t declared yourself. But if you haven’t declared yourself, you haven’t tried out an idea. Or expressed a feeling. Declaring and defending yourself is how you learn to be forthright. It is a skill that helps in both [love and politics](#).

In Boston, once the group is both talking out loud and attending to WhatsApp, all communications are constantly interrupted. Phones interrupt talk; talk interrupts phones. I ask everyone how they feel about these interruptions and my question hardly seems to make sense. This group doesn’t experience the intrusions of WhatsApp as interruption. One young man says, commenting on the buzz, “This is my life.”

[In the new communications culture](#), *interruption is not experienced as interruption but as another connection*. Only half joking, people in their teens and twenties tell me that the most commonly heard phrase at dinner with their friends is “Wait, what?” Everyone is always missing a beat, the time it takes to find an image or send a text.

When people say they're "addicted" to their phones, they are not only saying that they want what their phones provide. They are also saying that they don't want what their phones allow them to avoid. The thing I hear most is that going to your phone makes it easier to avoid boredom or anxiety. But both of these may signal that you are learning something new, something alive and disruptive. You may be stretching yourself in a new direction. Boredom and anxiety are signs to attend more closely to things, not to turn away.

We don't live in a silent world of no talk. But we drop in and out of the talk we have. And we have very little patience for talk that demands sustained attention. When talk becomes difficult or when talk turns to quiet, we've given ourselves permission to go elsewhere. To avoid life's challenges and boring bits.

Life's Boring Bits

A college senior has a boy in her dorm room. They're in bed together. But when he goes to the bathroom, she takes out her phone and goes on Tinder, an app where she can check out men in the area who might be interested in meeting—or more. She says, "I have no idea why I did this—I really like this guy. . . . I want to date him, but I couldn't help myself. Nothing was happening on Facebook; I didn't have any new emails." Lying there in bed, waiting for her lover to come out of the bathroom, she had hit one of life's boring bits.

When I share this story with people under thirty, I usually get shrugs. This is how things are. A dull moment is never necessary. And you always want to know who is trying to reach you. Or who might be available to you. But the sensibility in which we want a constant stream of stimulation and expect to edit out life's "boring bits" has also come to characterize their elders.

A young father, thirty-four, tells me that when he gives his two-year-old daughter a bath, he finds it boring. And he's feeling guilty. Just a few nights earlier, instead of sitting patiently with her, talking and singing to her, as he did with his older children, he began to check email on his phone. And it

wasn't the first time. "I know I shouldn't but I do," he says. "That bath time should be a time for relaxing with my daughter. But I can't do it. I'm on and off my phone the whole time. I find the downtime of her bath boring."

In a very different setting, Senator John McCain found himself feeling restless on the floor of the Senate during hearings on Syria. So he played poker on his iPhone to escape the feeling. When a picture of his game got into the press, McCain tweeted a joke about being caught out. "[Scandal! Caught playing iPhone](#) game at 3+ hour Senate hearing—worst of all I lost!"

Escaping to something like video poker when you come to a moment of boredom has become the norm. But when senators are comfortable saying that going "elsewhere" is normal during a hearing on the crisis in Syria, it becomes harder to expect full attention from anyone in any situation, certainly in any classroom or meeting. This is unfortunate because studies show that [open screens degrade the performance](#) of everyone who can see them—their owners and everyone sitting around them.

And we have to reconsider the value of the "boring bits" from which we flee. In work, love, and friendship, relationships of mutuality depend on listening to what might be boring to you but is of interest to someone else. In conversation, a "lull" may be on its way to becoming something else. If a moment in a conversation is slow, there is no way to know when things will pick up except to stay with the conversation. People take time to think and then they think of something new.

More generally, [the experience of boredom is directly linked to creativity](#) and innovation. I've said that, like anxiety, it can signal new learning. If we remain curious about our boredom, we can use it as a moment to step back and make a new connection. Or it offers a moment, as von Kleist would have it, to reach out and speak a thought that will only emerge in connection with a listener.

But now we turn away from such reverie and connection. The multitasking we can do on our digital devices makes us feel good immediately. [What our brains want is new input](#)—fresh, stimulating, and social. Before technology allowed us to be anywhere anytime, conversation with other people was a big part of how we satisfied our brains' need for stimulation. But now, through our devices, our brains are offered a continuous and endlessly diverting menu that requires less work.

So we move away from the slower pace, where you have to wait, listen, and let your mind go over things. We move away from the pace of human conversation. And so conversations without agenda, where you discover things as you go along, become harder for us. We haven't stopped talking, but we opt out, often unconsciously, of the kind of conversation that requires full attention. Every time you check your phone in company, what you gain is a hit of stimulation, a neurochemical shot, and what you lose is what a friend, teacher, parent, lover, or co-worker just said, meant, felt.

Does Technology Make Emotions Easy?

Clifford Nass was a cognitive psychologist and communications professor at Stanford University who also worked as a “dorm dad,” living in a freshman dorm as a counselor and academic adviser. Nass describes how he tried to connect with one freshman by talking to her about his own high school emotional ups and downs. The student's response was that she and her friends were beyond those kinds of worries. Nass was surprised. Teenage angst was over? That's exactly what the freshman was saying, and she had a theory of why: Social media had stepped in to smooth things out. Her summation: “Technology makes emotions easy.”

This freshman's comment inspired Nass to explore the relationship of online life and the [emotional life of teenage girls](#). Was this young woman's intuition correct? In short, the answer was no. Technology does not make emotions easy. Social media can make emotional life very hard indeed.

Nass compared the emotional development of young women who considered themselves “highly connected” with those who spent less time online: The highly connected young women did not have as strong an ability to identify the feelings of other people or, indeed, to identify their own feelings. They felt less accepted by peers and did not have the same positive feelings from interacting with friends as those who used social media less frequently. Online life was associated with a loss of empathy and a diminished capacity for self-reflection.

This is not really surprising. If you are only partially present, it's easy to miss out on the emotional and nonverbal subtext of what people are saying

to you. And [you are not focusing on your own feelings either](#).

For Nass, the emotional tone of social media is another possible source of trouble. When students go online, some of what appeals to them is that they meet a world of good news. Facebook, Nass reminds us, has no “thumbs-down.” You can feel disappointed if something you share doesn’t get the number of positive reactions you want, but you train yourself to post what will please.

So, on social media, everyone learns to share the positive. But Nass points out that negative emotions require more processing in more parts of the brain. So if you spend a lot of time online—responding to positive emotions—you won’t get practice with this more complex processing. As a result, says Nass, your reaction time will be slowed down. This may be what happens to frequent users of social media: They can’t respond quickly to others or to themselves. When they respond slowly to others, they “seem insensitive and uncaring.” When they respond slowly to themselves, they lose crucial [capacities for self-reflection](#).

Nass worries that in the “thumbs-up” world of online life, young people learn the wrong life lessons. Among the wrong lessons they learn: First, negative emotions are something that unsuccessful kids have rather than normal parts of life that need to be addressed and coped with; second, it is natural to allow distraction and interruption to take you away from other people.

This is a lot of bad news. But here again, there is good news as well: Conversation cures. Nass compares the parts of the brain that process emotion to a muscle: They can atrophy if not exercised, and can be strengthened through face-to-face conversation. Nass says, “The one positive predictor of healthy emotional interactions as well as feelings of social success (statements such as ‘people my age understand me’ and ‘I feel accepted by my friends’): lots of face-to-face communication.” Nass sums it up: “Technology does not provide [a sentimental education](#).” People do.

Technology Does Not Provide a Sentimental Education

Reclaiming conversation begins with reclaiming our attention. These days, average American adults check their phones [every six and a half minutes](#). We start early: [There are now baby bouncers](#) (and potty seats) that are manufactured with a slot to hold a digital device. A quarter of American teenagers are connected to a device [within five minutes of waking up](#). Most teenagers [send one hundred texts a day](#). Eighty percent [sleep with their phones](#). Forty-four percent [do not “unplug,” ever](#), not even in religious services or when playing a sport or exercising.

All of this means that during the dinner hour, the typical American family is managing [six or seven simultaneous streams](#) of information. Scattered about are laptops, tablets, phones, a desktop, and of course, in the background, a television, perhaps two. College students who are using any form of media are [likely to be using four at a time](#). If students are on Facebook, they are also on Netflix, a music blog, and their class reading. What happens to conversation here? We want it to be something to which we can pay attention in the same way that we pay attention to other things—that is, we want it to be something we can drop in and out of. Something like the “crawl” on the bottom of a cable news screen.

Again, we live in a world of unintended consequences. Hyperconnected, we imagine ourselves more efficient, but we are deceived. Multitasking [degrades our performance](#) at everything we do, all the while giving us the feeling that we are doing better at everything. So [it makes us less productive](#) no matter how good it makes us feel. And recall technology’s deficiencies as a “sentimental education”: Frequent multitasking is associated with [depression, social anxiety](#), and trouble reading human emotions.

What is most hopeful is our resiliency. If children develop [problems with self-esteem](#) and empathy when they turn to screens at an early age, conversation, remarkably, seems able to reverse it. So, instead of doing your email as you push your daughter in her stroller, talk to her. Instead of putting a digital tablet in your son’s baby bouncer, read to him and chat about the book. Instead of a quick text if you find a conversation going stale, make an effort to engage your peers.

But the talking cure is no simple matter. For one thing, we are wired to crave instant gratification, a fast pace, and unpredictability. That is, we are wired to crave what neuroscientists call “[the seeking drive](#),” the kind of

experience that scrolling through a Twitter feed provides. And people who chronically multitask train their brains to crave multitasking. Those who multitask most frequently don't get better at it; they just want more of it. This means that conversation, the kind that demands focus, becomes more and more difficult.

A twenty-four-year-old young woman who works at a start-up tells me that she is no longer able to focus on one thing or one person at a time. And that's the problem with conversation; it asks for a skill she no longer can summon. "If I try to do one thing, I'm not good. I pick my nails off. I can't do it. I physically can't do one thing." At first her multitasking made her feel like Wonder Woman. Now she feels she needs help.

One college junior describes her "problem with conversation" in similar terms. It rules out multitasking, and multitasking is how she copes with life: "When you deal with people face-to-face, you are only seeing one of them at a time. When I get used to messaging with my Facebook groups, talking to one person at a time seems slow." After college, she took a break from Facebook. She deleted the app from her laptop and her phone. She was off Facebook for only a few weeks, but she says the experience "calmed" her. "I am less impatient with people," she says. "And for the first time I know I can be alone."

We could say we are "addicted to multitasking," but this is not the most helpful way to frame the problem. Our phones are part of our media ecology. We have to find a way to make our lives better with our phones. I prefer to think in terms of technological affordances—what technology makes possible (and often attractive and easy)—and human vulnerabilities. If you are addicted, you have to get off your drug. If you are vulnerable, you can work to be less vulnerable.

Thinking in terms of technological affordances and human vulnerabilities positions us to [design for vulnerability](#). I meet with an inventor who observes that when people engage with smartphones, they are compelled into a new kind of vigilant behavior. "They want to make sure they're not missing anything," he says, "so they keep interacting with their devices." He makes this intriguing suggestion: "What if we designed a smartphone interface that made it easy for us to do a specific task (such as messaging a friend or family member) and then, instead of encouraging us to stay connected as long as possible, would encourage us to disengage?"

The interface would be designed to reduce our usage, and make spending more time on our phone [a deliberate action](#).” The point is not to make connection impossible or difficult. But it should demand intention; it should not be something the system helps you slide into. He says, “So instead of a phone that keeps us mesmerized, we may want to build a phone that lets us attend to our business and then gradually releases us because that is what is best for us.”

We can design technology that demands that we use it with greater intention. And in our families, we can create sacred spaces—the living room, the dining room, the kitchen, the car—that are device-free. We can do the same thing at work—for certain meeting spaces and classes. We can plan for a future in which the design of our tools and our social surroundings encourages us to be our best. As consumers of digital media, our goal should be to partner with an industry that commits to our using their products, of course, but also to our [health and emotional well-being](#).

“They Look like Deer Caught in the Headlights. They Don’t Want to Have Another Conversation.”

Conversation implies something kinetic. It is derived from [words that mean](#) “to tend to each other, to lean toward each other,” words about the *activity of relationship*, one’s “manner of conducting oneself in the world or in society; behavior, mode or course of life.” To converse, you don’t just have to perform turn taking, you have to listen to someone else, to read their body, their voice, their tone, and their silences. You bring your concern and experience to bear, and you expect the same from others.

When we express our anxiety about conversation, we express our anxiety about our ability to do all of this. A sixteen-year-old boy tells his mother that he has just received a text from his best friend. His friend’s father has died. He tells his mother that he has texted his friend to say he is sorry. His mother, almost uncomprehending, asks, “Why didn’t you call?” She is thinking about consolation. The boy says, “It isn’t my place to interrupt him. He’s too sad to talk on the phone.” The boy assumes that conversation is intrusive even at moments that beg for intimacy.

I tell this story to a twenty-one-year-old college senior who has been working with me at my home every day for months, organizing my papers for an archive. She says that she wouldn't call me if she heard that there had been a death in my family. She says that she *knows* I would be more comforted by a call, that it would mean more to me. But she echoes the sentiments of the sixteen-year-old boy. She says, "Anything having to do with the voice feels like an interruption."

One high school senior talks about a plan to put himself on a self-improvement program. He is going to "force himself" to use the telephone. I ask him why. "It might," he says, "be a way to teach myself to have a conversation . . . rather than spending my life in awkward silence. I feel like phone conversations nowadays will help me in the long run."

This is a poignant admission. This young man acknowledges that for all his many hours a day texting and messaging, he has not learned how to listen and respond. At news of a death, he, too, would send an email. These days, there are college courses on conversation. The curriculum includes how to pay attention to someone on a date. How to disagree with someone politically. It is an acknowledgment that students are comfortable going to bed with each other but not talking to each other. They will know each other's sexual preferences but not if their partner has a widowed father or an autistic sister. They may not even know if their partner has siblings at all.

Employers have come to appreciate the vulnerability of the new generations. Some businesses explicitly screen for an ability to converse. A vice-president at a large pharmaceutical company tells me her strategy for hiring new recruits. "It's very simple," she says. "I have a conversation with them."

Most applicants are prepped for one conversation. And then at the end, I tell the potential recruits that their homework is to organize what we've discussed and from that make an agenda of interesting themes for our next conversation . . . hopefully tomorrow or the day following. They are stunned. They look like deer caught in the headlights. They don't want to have another conversation. They were hoping for some follow-up emails.

The Three Chairs

In the chapters that follow, I look at the kinds of conversation Thoreau envisaged when he described the three chairs in his cabin. The story begins with *one-chair conversations*, those of solitude. Solitude does not necessarily mean being alone. It is a state of conscious retreat, a gathering of the self. The capacity for solitude makes relationships with others more authentic. Because you know who you are, you can see others for who they are, not for who you need them to be. So solitude enables richer conversation. But our current way of life undermines our capacity for solitude.

I've said that, these days, being alone feels like a problem that needs to be solved, and people try to solve it with technology. But here, digital connection is more a symptom than a cure. It expresses but it doesn't solve the underlying problem—a discomfort with being alone. And, more than a symptom, constant connection is changing the way people think of themselves. It is shaping a new way of being. I call it "I share, therefore I am." We share our thoughts and feelings in order to feel whole.

In order to feel more, and to feel more like ourselves, we connect. But in our rush to connect, we flee solitude. In time, our ability to be separate and gather ourselves is diminished. If we don't know who we are when we are alone, we turn to other people to support our sense of self. This makes it impossible to fully experience others as who they are. We take what we need from them in bits and pieces; it is as though we use them as [spare parts to support our fragile selves](#).

If you don't have practice in thinking alone, you are less able to bring your ideas to the table with confidence and authority. Collaboration suffers. As does innovation, which requires a capacity for solitude that continual connection diminishes.

A love of solitude and self-reflection enables sociability. Many think of Thoreau as a recluse. He was anything but. In fact, his friends joked that he could hear the Emerson family dinner bell from his cabin in the woods. Thoreau's *two-chair conversations* are with friends, family, and romantic partners.

These days, parents complain that children won't talk to them because they are so busy with their phones at mealtime; children have the same complaints about their parents. Parents respond that children don't have the "standing" to make this kind of complaint. During meals, children go to their phones. We are at an odd standoff with neither side happy.

In a television commercial for Facebook, a large, gregarious family sits down to a meal. It is a Norman Rockwell moment. In our positive associations to family dinner, myth and science come together. We know that for children the best predictor of success later in life is the number of [meals shared with their families](#). The dinner in the Facebook commercial looks like one of those dinners that everyone knows they are supposed to love.

Just as the viewer locks on to this image of unconditional "good," the narrative is disrupted. An older woman at the table—let me call her "boring Auntie"—begins a painfully dull story about trying to buy a chicken at the market. A teenage girl at the table does the predictable: She pulls out her phone and goes onto Facebook. Immediately, the scene is populated with scenes from her newsfeed: A friend plays the drums, another performs ballet, yet others are in a snowball fight. The teenager is no longer at dinner. She is elsewhere.

We once taught our children to ignore a ringing phone at dinner. We became annoyed if telemarketers interrupted us. Now, Facebook suggests that it may be a good thing to [interrupt dinner ourselves](#).

And then there are *three-chair conversations*, conversations in the social world. Here I begin with examples from the world of work. I look at my own kind of workplace, the world of education, and also the business and corporate world. I saw striking commonalities between education and business, between the dynamics of classrooms and offices. I found conversation to be at the heart of the learning culture and I learned that conversation is [good for the bottom line](#).

And both domains face similar threats to their cultures of conversation. In classrooms and offices, the cultural expectation for multitasking subverts conversation and constant interruption threatens achievement. Just as we go to dinners with friends that are not quite dinners together, we go to classes that are not quite classes and work meetings that are not quite meetings.

What these not quite encounters have in common is that we all feel free to be on some device and to let our minds wander.

And, most recently, in both education and at work, conversation is challenged by new experiments that use technology to engage people from a distance. So, for example, there is the hope that online courses will make remote [learning more “efficient”](#) in ways that can be measured. One unexpected result of the online experiments has been to make the value of teachers and students talking face-to-face ever more clear. A teacher “live” in front of a classroom gives students an opportunity to watch someone think, boring bits and all. That teacher is a model for how thinking happens, including false starts and hindsight. There has been a parallel development in the workplace: Many of the firms that encouraged employees to work at home are calling them back to the office in order to have a more collaborative and productive workforce.

Of course, in many businesses, remote work is the cost-saving rule. I interview an executive, Howard Chen, who is the creator of a social media site for a multinational corporation. He is passionate about the necessity for advanced social media in his company because it has decided to close down local offices. In their place is a new system called “hoteling.” When people need the resources of an office, they bring their computer to a building where an automated system assigns them a room. When they get there and plug in their computer, a virtual telephone pops up on the screen. That is their company line for the day. They are “at work.”

So when Chen goes to the office, there are no regular colleagues around, no community at all. But this is all the more reason for him to be excited about the new social network he has designed. He dreams that it will restore life to his work environment, now stripped so bare of familiar objects and people. On the day I meet him, we are in a new hotel space. He responds to his unfamiliar physical surrounds by extolling the “sociability” of his social media. With only a few keystrokes he can call up an international database of all employees and their interests. This, he hopes, can be the basis for online conversations and new connections. He says, “Yeah, if you’re a soccer fan, you can talk to all the other soccer fans in the company. How cool is that?” But as an aside, he says that recently he has been feeling rather sad:

Last week I was sitting there and I finished doing something and I looked around and you could hear a pin drop. And I'm, like, this is ghastly. It's just horrible. So I took out my iPhone and I recorded the silence for a minute to show my wife. This is what it sounds like, or doesn't sound like, at work.

We work so hard to build our online connections. We have so much faith in them. But we must take care that in the end we do not simply feel alone with our devices.

This is all the more important because although the flight from conversation affects us as individuals, it also changes our life in communities. Here I consider three questions about politics and social policy on our new digital landscape.

First, the Internet gives us the possibility of sharing our views with anyone in the world, but it also can support information silos where we don't talk to anyone who doesn't agree with us. Studies show that people don't like posting things that their followers won't agree with—everyone wants to be liked. So technology can sustain ever more rigid partisanship that makes it hard to talk, enabling us to live in information bubbles that don't let in dissenting voices.

Second, when politics goes online, people begin to talk about political action in terms of things they can do online. They are drawn to the idea that social change can happen by giving a “thumbs-up” or by subscribing to a group. The slow, hard work of politics—study, analysis, listening, trying to convince someone with a different point of view—these can get lost. The Internet is a good start, a place to bring people together. But politics continues in conversation and in relationships developed over time. I have said that technology gives us the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Now I worry that it can also give us the illusion of progress without the demands of action.

Third, digital communication makes surveillance easier. The corporations that provide us with the means to talk on the net (to text, email, and chat) take our online activity as data. They declare ownership of it and use it, usually to better sell things to us. And we now know that our

government routinely makes a copy of our communications as well. The boundaries have blurred between private communication and routine surveillance, between private communication and its repackaging as a commodity. So, in addition to the question *What is intimacy without privacy?* I consider another: *What is democracy without privacy?*

The Fourth Chair

And I think of a “fourth chair.” I’ve said that when conversation got expansive, Thoreau took his guests into nature. I think of this as his fourth chair, his most philosophical one. These days, the way things have gotten philosophical causes us to confront how we have used technology to create a second nature, an artificial nature. For so long we have assumed that the conversations that matter are the conversations we have with other people. In recent years, this idea has been challenged by computer programs that seduce us not by their smarts but by their sociability. I explore proposals for new, more intimate conversations with “socially” competent machines—a development with the potential to change human nature itself. For me, our *fourth-chair conversations* are ones that Thoreau could not have envisaged: We are tempted to talk not only through machines but to them, with them.

At first, we met Siri, a digital companion always ready to engage. But that was just the beginning. As I write these words, the media is full of stories about the launch of the first “home robots” who are there to be always-available “best friendly companions” by acting as though they understand what you are saying when they exchange pleasantries through the [magic of simulated feelings](#). Have we forgotten what conversation is? What friendship is? Is talking to machines companionship or abandonment?

We lose our words. *Intelligence* once meant more than what any artificial intelligence does. It used to include sensibility, sensitivity, awareness, discernment, reason, acumen, and wit. And yet we readily call machines intelligent now. *Affective* is another word that once meant a lot more than what any machine can deliver. Yet we have become used to describing machines that portray emotional states or can sense our

emotional states as [exemplars of “affective computing.”](#) These new meanings become our new normal, and we forget other meanings. We have to struggle to recapture lost language, lost meanings, and perhaps, in time, lost experiences.

At one conference I attended, the robots were called “caring machines,” and when I objected, I was told we were using this word not because the robots care but because they will take care of us. Caring is a behavior. It is a [function, not a feeling](#). The conference participants seemed puzzled: Why did I care so much about semantics? What’s wrong with me?

It is natural for words to change their meaning over time and with new circumstances. *Intelligence* and *affective* have changed their meaning to accommodate what machines can do. But now the words *caring*, *friend*, *companionship*, and *conversation*?

A lot is at stake in these words. They are not yet lost. We need to remember these words and this conversation before we don’t know how to have it. Or before we think we can have it with a machine.

We paint ourselves into a corner where we endanger more than words.

I talk of our having arrived at a “robotic moment,” not because we have built robots that can be our companions but because we are willing to consider becoming theirs. I find people increasingly open to the idea that in the near future, machine companionship will be sufficient unto the day. People tell me that if a machine could give them the “feeling” of being intimately understood, that might be understanding enough. Or intimacy enough.

The ironies are substantial. We turn toward artificial intelligence for conversation just at the moment that we are in flight from conversations with each other.

More generally, in our fourth-chair conversations, we imagine ourselves in a new kind of world where machines talk to each other to make our lives easier. But who will we become in this world we call friction-free where machines (and without our doing any talking at all!) will know what we want, sometimes even before we do? They will know all about our online lives, so they’ll know our taste in music, art, politics, clothes, books, and food. They’ll know who we like and where we travel.

In that world, your smartphone will signal your favorite coffee shop as you set out in the morning to get a latte, which of course will be waiting for

you when you arrive, exactly as you want it. In the spirit of friction-free, your phone will be able to reroute and guide you so that you can avoid your ex-girlfriend and see only designated friends on your path. But who said that a life without conflict, without being reminded of past mistakes, past pain, or one where you can avoid rubbing shoulders with troublesome people, is good? Was it the same person who said that life shouldn't have boring bits? In this case, if technology gives us the feeling that we can communicate with total control, life's contingencies become a problem. Just because technology can help us solve a "problem" doesn't mean it was a [problem in the first place](#).

Paths Forward

I explore the flight from conversation in digital culture by looking at big questions and small details. I begin with the conversations of solitude, romance, friendship, and family life and end with our desire to chat with robots. I report on the current state of conversation in schools, universities, and corporations, looking at children as they develop and adults as they love, learn, and work. In every case, I describe our vulnerability to settling for mere connection—why it tempts—and I make the case for reclaiming the richness of conversation.

Reclaiming conversation won't be easy. We resist: It sometimes seems that we want to be taken away from the conversations that count. So I go to meetings where laptops are open and phones turned on. Yet the participants admit that constant interruptions are interfering with group work. When I ask the participants why they all continue to bring their devices to meetings, they say, "For emergencies." I inquire further, and they admit that it's not so much about emergencies—they're bored, or they see an opportunity to double down on their emails. And other reasons come up: Some feel so much pressure to outsmart their peers that when they feel they can't, they turn to their phones, pretending to do something else more "urgent" than anything that could be going on in the meeting. And sometimes the idea of "emergencies" on their phones is a strategy to step away from each other and their differences, to defer them for another day, another meeting.

And sometimes, I am told, they actively want to avoid the spontaneity of conversation. The desire for the edited life crosses generations, but the young consider it their birthright. A college senior doesn't go to his professors' office hours. He will correspond with his teachers only through email. The student explains that if he sees his professors in person, he could get something "wrong." Ever since ninth grade, when his preparations to go to an Ivy League college began in earnest, he and his parents have worked on his getting everything "right." If he wasn't getting enough playing time on a team, his father went in to see the coach. When his College Board scores weren't high enough, he had personal tutors. He had no interest in science, but his high school guidance counselor decided that a summer program in neurobiology was what he needed to round out his college application. Now he is three years through that Ivy education and hoping for law school. He is still trying to get things right. "When you talk in person," he says, "you are likely to make a slip."

He thinks his no-office-hours policy is a reasonable strategy. He tells me that our culture has "zero tolerance" for making mistakes. If politicians make "slips," it haunts them throughout their careers. And usually they make these mistakes while they are talking. He says, "I feel as though everyone in my generation wants to write things out—I certainly do—because then I can check it over and make sure it is okay. I don't want to say a wrong thing."

Studying conversation today brings forth many comments like these. They encourage a fresh look at our cultural expectations of getting everything "right." And a fresh look at what we accomplish when we communicate perfection as a value to our children. Studying conversation suggests that it is time to rediscover an interest in the spontaneous. It suggests that it is time to rediscover an interest in the points of view of those with whom we disagree. And it suggests that we slow down enough to listen to them, one at a time.

These are not easy assignments. But I am hopeful about our moment. Some of the most "plugged in" people in America find conversation blocked and struggle for ways to reclaim it. Corporations devise strategies for workplace teams built on face-to-face meetings. They ask employees to take a break and not check their email after business hours. Or they insist that employees [take a "smartphone-free" night](#) during the business week.

One CEO sets up pre-workday breakfasts where there are no phones or scheduled meetings. Others begin the day with technology-free “stand-up meetings.” There are new corporate programs for emotional self-help in an age of overconnection: I meet executives on technology “time-outs,” [Sabbaths, and sabbaticals](#).

Even Silicon Valley parents who work for social media companies tell me that they send their children to technology-free schools in the hope that this will give their children greater emotional and intellectual range. Many were surprised to learn that Steve Jobs did not encourage his own children’s use of iPads or iPhones. His biographer reports that in Jobs’s family, the focus was on conversation: “Every evening Steve made a point of having dinner at the big long table in their kitchen, discussing books and history and a variety of things. [No one ever pulled out an iPad](#) or computer.” Our technological mandarins don’t always live the life they build for others. They go to vacation spots deemed “device-free” (that don’t allow phones, tablets, or laptops). This means that America has curious new digital divides. In our use of media, there are the haves and have-nots. And then there are those who have-so-much-that-they-know-when-to-put-it-away.

Sometimes people sense that there is a flight from conversation but want technology to restore it for them. When I give talks about the importance of conversation for young children, sometimes teachers in the audience will come up at the end of my presentation to say that they wholeheartedly agree (“Kids can’t talk anymore”) but go on to tell me how they are using messaging on the iPad to try to increase student sociability. Apps for sociability may increase sociability on apps; what children are missing, however, is an ease with each other face-to-face, the context in which empathy is born. Indeed, empathy, too, will have its own technologies: The researcher who found a 40 percent decrease in empathy in college students over the past twenty years has begun to develop apps for smartphones to [encourage empathic habits](#).

Clearly, her finding about the decrease in empathy did not feel like something she wanted to accept. It felt like something that called for action. But does a decrease in teenage empathy suggest the need for an empathy app? Or does it suggest that we make more time to talk to teenagers?

Sometimes it seems easier to invent a new technology than to start a conversation.

Every new technology offers an opportunity to ask if it serves our human purposes. From there begins the work of making technology better serve these purposes. It took generations to get nutrition labels on food; it took generations to get speed limits on roads and seat belts and air bags into cars. But food and transportation technology are safer because all of these are now in place. In the case of communications technology, we have just begun.

In every encounter, we need to use the right tool for the job. Sometimes face-to-face conversation is not the right tool for a particular job. But having the whole person before you is reliably the best way to begin. It gives you the most information to decide which communication tools you need as you move forward. But what I've found is that once people have texting, chat, and email available, they stick with them even when they suspect that these are not the right tools for the job. Why? They are convenient. They make us feel in control. But [when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable](#) and less in control, our relationships, creativity, and productivity thrive.

We are at a crossroads: So many people say they have no time to talk, really talk, but all the time in the world, day and night, to connect. When a moment of boredom arises, we have become accustomed to making it go away by searching for something—sometimes *anything*—on our phones. The next step is to take the same moment and respond by searching within ourselves. To do this, we have to cultivate the self as a resource. Beginning with the capacity for solitude.