WHERE WE ARE GOING

For the first time in the history of our species, we are never alone and never bored. Have we lost something fundamental about being human?

Chances are that you have a smartphone, a Facebook page and a Twitter account and that you have found yourself ignoring a friend or family member who is in the same room as you because you are totally engrossed in your social technology. That technology means never having to feel alone or bored. Yet ironically, it can make us less attentive to the people closest to us and even make it hard for us to simply be with ourselves.

Many of us are afraid to make this admission. "We're still in a romance with these technologies," says Sherry Turkle of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "We're like young lovers who are afraid that talking about it will spoil it."

Turkle has interviewed, at length, hundreds of individuals of all ages about their interactions with smartphones, tablets, social media, avatars and robots. Unlike previous disruptive innovations such as the printing press or television, the latest "always on, always on you" technology, she says, threatens to undermine some basic human strengths that we need to thrive. In the conversation that follows, which has been edited for space, Turkle explains her concerns, as well as her cautious optimism that the youngest among us could actually resolve the challenges.

SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN: What concerns you most about our constant interaction with our social technologies?

TURKLE: One primary change I see is that people have a tremendous lack of tolerance for being alone. I do some of my fieldwork at stop signs, at checkout lines at supermarkets. Give people even a second, and they're doing something with their phone. Every bit of research says people's capacity to be alone is disappearing. What can happen is that you lose that moment to have a daydream or to cast an eye inward. Instead you look to the outside.

Is that an issue for individuals of all ages?

Yes, but children especially need solitude. Solitude is the precondition for having a conversation with yourself. This capacity to be with yourself and discover yourself is the bedrock of development. But now, from the youngest age -- even two, or three, or four -- children are given technology that removes solitude by giving them something externally distracting. That makes it harder, ironically, to form true relationships.

Maybe people just don't want to be bored.
People talk about never needing to have a lull. As soon as it occurs, they look at the phone; they get anxious. They haven’t learned to have conversations or relationships, which involve lulls.

Are we valuing relationships less, then?

People start to view other people in part as objects. Imagine two people on a date. “Hey, I have an idea. Instead of our just looking at each other face-to-face, why don’t we each wear Google Glass, so if things get a little dull, I can just catch up on my e-mail? And you won’t know.” This disrupts the family, too. When Boring Auntie starts to talk at the family dinner table, her little niece pulls out her phone and goes on Facebook. All of a sudden her world is populated with snowball fights and ballerinas. And dinner is destroyed. Dinner used to be the Utopian ideal of the American family having a canonical three-generation gathering. Facebook is what’s Utopian now.

What about people who take their phones to bed? They’re asleep, so why would they feel alone?

I have interviewed enough middle school and high school kids: “So tell me, do you answer your texts in the middle of the night?” “Oh, yeah.” I call it “I share, therefore I am,” as a style of being.

If you’re sharing in the middle of the night and responsive to people in the middle of the night, you’re in a different zone. And all these people feel responsible to respond. The expectation is constant access. Everyone is ready to call in the advice and the consent of their peers. I’m doing a case study of a young woman who has 2,000 followers on Instagram. She’ll ask about a problem at 9:00 at night, and at 2:00 in the morning she’s getting responses, and she’s awake to get those responses. This is 2:00 in the morning for a lot of kids.

Where does this lead for someone who lives that way?

If you don’t call a halt to it, I think you don’t fully develop a sense of an autonomous self. You’re not able to be in personal relationships, business relationships, because you don’t feel fully competent to handle major things on your own. You run into trouble if you’re putting everything up, ultimately, for a vote.

You’re crowdsourcing your life.

You’re crowdsourcing major decisions. I hope it’s likely, however, that a person reaches a point where they’re on a job -- they’re not twenty something, they’re thirty something -- and this starts to become less comfortable, and they develop emotional skills that they really haven’t worked on.

What about our interactions with automated personalities and robots?

When we started looking at this in the 1970s, people took the position that even if simulated thinking might be thinking, simulated feeling was not feeling. Simulated love was never love. But that’s gone away. People tell me that if Siri [the iPhone voice] could fool them a little better, they’d be happy to talk to Siri.

Isn’t that like the movie Her?

Absolutely. The current position seems to be that if there’s a robot that could fool me into thinking that it understands me, I’m good to have it as a companion. This is a significant evolution in what we ask for in our interactions, even on intimate matters. I see it in kids. I see it in grown-ups. The new robots
are designed to make you feel as though you're understood. Yet nobody is pretending that any of them understands anything.

What line does that cross -- that there's no empathy?

There's no authentic exchange. You're saying empathy is not important to the feeling of being understood. And yet I interviewed a woman who said to me that she's okay with a robot boyfriend. She wants one of these sophisticated Japanese robots. I looked at her and said, "You know that it doesn't understand you." She said, "Look, I just want civility in the house. I just want something that will make me feel not alone."

People are also good with a robot that could stand in as a companion for an older person. But I take a moral position here because older people deserve to tell the story of their life to someone who understands what a life is. They've lost spouses; they've lost children. We're suggesting they tell the story of their life to something that has no idea what a life is or what a loss is.

It's crucial to understand that this changing interaction is not just a story about technology. It's a story about how we are evolving when we're faced with something passive. I hope we're going to look closer at people's willingness to project humanity onto a robot and to accept a facade of empathy as the real thing, because I think such interactions are a dead end. We want more from technology and less from each other? Really?

Do avatars and virtual reality present the same issues?

In these cases, we are moving from life to the mix of your real life and your virtual life. One young man put it very succinctly: "Real life is just one window, and it's not necessarily my best one." People forgot about virtual reality for a while, but now the acquisition of Oculus by Facebook raises it again -- Mark Zuckerberg's fantasy that you will meet up with your friends in a virtual world where everybody looks like Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt, you live in a beautiful home, and you present only what you want to present. We're evolving toward thinking of that as a Utopian image.

But skeptics say your avatar is not different from the real you.

Well, we do perform all the time. I'm trying to do my best Sherry Turkle right now. But it's a little different from me hanging out in my pajamas. What's different with an avatar or on Facebook is that you get to edit. A woman posts a photo of herself and then works on the color and background and lighting. Why? Because she wants it a certain way. We've never before been able to have it the way we wanted it. And now we can. People love that.

I asked an 18-year-old man, "What's wrong with conversation?" He said, "It takes place in real time. You can't control what you're going to say." It was profound. That's also why a lot of people like to do their dealings on e-mail -- it's not just the time shifting; it's that you basically can get it right.

One reason for the rise of humans is that functioning in groups gives each member a better chance to succeed. Will the move toward living online undermine those benefits?

Oh, this is the question before us. Are we undermining or are we enhancing our competitive advantage? A lot of my colleagues would say we're enhancing it. The Internet is giving us new ways of getting together, forming alliances. But I think we are at a point of inflection. While we were infatuated with the virtual, we dropped the ball on where we actually live. We need to balance how compelling the virtual is with the realities that we live in our bodies and on this planet. It is so easy for us to look the other way. Are we going to get out there and make our real communities what they
should be?

Your critics say there's nothing to worry about because this "new technology" situation is not really new. We went through this with television -- you know, TV is there to watch your kids so you don't have to.

First of all, television can be a group exercise. I grew up in a family that sat around a TV and watched it together, fought about what was on the TV together, commented on it together. But when everybody watches their own show in their own room, so to speak, that stops. Technology that is always on and always on you -- that is a quantum leap. I agree that there have been quantum leaps before: the book. The difference with "always on," however, is that I really don't have a choice.

You mean, you could turn off the TV and still function.

I cannot live my professional life or my personal life without my phone or my e-mail. My students can't even obtain their syllabus without it. We don't have an opt-out option from a world with this technology. The question is, How are we going to live a more meaningful life with something that is always on and always on you? And wait until it's in your ear, in your jacket, in your glasses.

So how do we resolve that?

It's going to develop as some sort of common practice. I think companies will get involved, realizing that it actually isn't good for people to be constantly connected. Our etiquette will get involved; today if I get a message and don't get back to people in 24 hours, they're worried about me, or they're mad that I haven t replied. Why? I think we will change our expectation of having constant access.

Any suggestions for how we can get started?

One argument I make is that there should be sacred spaces: the family dinner table, the car. Make these the places for conversation because conversation is the antidote to a lot of the issues I'm describing. If you're talking to your kids, if you're talking to your family, if you're talking to a community, these negative effects don't arise as much.

And we should be talking more about the technologies?

My message is not antitechnology. It's pro conversation and pro the human spirit. It's really about calling into questions our dominant culture of more, better, faster. We need to assert what we need for our own thinking, for our own development, and for our relationships with our children, with our communities, with our intimate partners. As for the robots, I'm hoping that people will realize that what we're really disappointed in is ourselves. It's so upsetting to me. We're basically saying that we're not offering one another the conversation and the companionship. That, really, is the justification for talking to a robot that you know doesn't understand a word you're saying. We are letting each other down. It's not about the robots. It's about us.

So who is going to stop this train we are on?

The most optimistic thing I see is the young people who've grown up with this technology but aren't smitten by it, who are willing to say, "Hold on a second." They see the ways in which it's undermined life at school and life with their parents. This is where I'm guardedly hopeful.

I have so many examples of children who will be talking with their parents; something will come up, and the parent will go online to search, and the kid will say, "Daddy, stop Googling. I just want to talk
to you." When I go to the city park, I see kids go to the top of the jungle gym and call out, "Mommy, Mommy!" and they're being ignored. They object to being ignored when they're five, eight or nine. But when I interview these kids when they're 13, 14 or 15, they become reflective. They say, "I'm not going to bring up my children the way I'm being brought up." They're going to have rules, like no phones at dinner.

I also see evidence that dealing with some of this technology is feeling to them like work -- the whole notion that you have to constantly keep up your Facebook profile. So I think there's every possibility that the children will lead us. They see the costs. They think, "I don't have to give up this technology, but maybe I could be a little smarter about it."

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