RECLAIMING CONVERSATION: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age by Sherry Turkle. New York: Penguin Press, 2015. 448 pages. Hardcover; $27.95. ISBN: 9781594205552.

Everyone is addicted to their phone, but no one is quite sure what to do about it. In *Reclaiming Conversation*, Sherry Turkle continues what she calls her path of repentance from excitedly championing new technology, such as the internet and social networking, toward a more reluctant position, now expressing worry about some of the negative effects that unfettered technology adoption can bring. Following her prior work, *Alone Together*, which began a broad conversation on our relationship with technology, *Reclaiming Conversation* looks specifically at the ways we communicate through technology and how an overreliance on texting, email, and social networking can impoverish our relationships, the public sphere, and even our own sense of self.

This book is not so much about bashing or blaming technology (there is a cottage industry of such books), but a plea for recognizing the importance of conversation to human life. As an outline for the book, Turkle uses Thoreau's metaphor of the three chairs in his cabin, "one for solitude, two for friendships, and three for society" (p. 10). Under solitude she discusses our inability to be alone with our thoughts without pulling out our phones to consume media. Turkle argues that "one of the benefits of solitude is an increased capacity for self-reflection" (p. 79), which, in turn, leads to more empathy toward others. She then shows how this underdeveloped empathy affects family, friendships, and romance (two chairs), and education, work, and politics (three chairs).

In each chapter, Turkle brings together recent sociological studies as well as her own interviews to show how dependence on technologically mediated communication impoverishes conversation over time. Though I personally prefer footnotes to Turkle's style of avoiding annotations in the main text and offloading all references to the end, the book is well documented and the collection of research is valuable for anyone working in this area. Another strength of Turkle's work is that she takes the time to show how complex these movements can be. For example, families for whom disagreements tend to escalate into screaming and yelling might initially find it helpful to move their disagreements to text or email. On those media, one is able to edit one's emotions and think before writing something one might regret. However, while this initially helps, over time individuals begin to edit themselves in all kinds of situations to the point where they feel less able to communicate openly and freely in person. Many people no longer want their friends to drop by unexpectedly, and younger generations find themselves "averse … to talking on the phone" (p. 148) because the fluidity and unpredictability of live conversation is foreign and frightening. At the same time, people feel trapped by the permanent record of all those texts and emails, feeling unable to move forward. The constant curation of the online self eventually becomes a heavy, unmanageable burden from which many never escape.

Turkle also rightly points out that the solution many in the tech industry have given to the problem of lack of empathy is simply to develop more apps. Empathy apps supposedly train humans to be more caring, and Turkle ends the book wondering about the trend toward humans having more conversations with a machine, which effectively adds a "fourth chair" in Thoreau's metaphor. What begins as simple commands to Siri on one's iPhone will eventually become full-fledged relationships with machine AI, especially in cases of child or elder care. Turkle worries that these controlled conversations will further inoculate people against wanting to engage in unpredictable, free-flowing, sometimes painful human conversations.

One of the challenges for Turkle is how to articulate the way that conversation as distraction should work. On one hand, the constant distraction of alerts on our devices and never-ending texts and emails seems to reduce productivity, and Turkle argues that creative people need long periods of alone time to develop ideas. But on the other hand, she also brings evidence that working from home prevents co-workers from bumping into each other and serendipitously sharing information that does not transfer well in emails or formal meetings. If open work environments are not helpful, neither is isolated, remote work or constant email. What, then, is the solution? Turkle points out that these kinds of conundrums mean that simple solutions like "turn off your phone and talk" will not solve all our problems. More complex solutions, such as doctors hiring scribes to do data entry so the physician can look a patient in the eye, will take time and creativity.

Another challenge in the book is to ground the need for conversation beyond itself and to articulate what kinds of conversations are truly good. Turkle shows that open conversations can help a business be more productive, but the idea that productivity is an inherent good toward which humans should work is simply assumed. She also argues that conversation can make us more empathetic or help us engage with the world around us, but she does not mention that pre-digital people who had the kind

of conversations Turkle wants us to have were not necessarily more empathetic. So is face-to-face, eye-to-eye conversation itself inherently good, or is there more to it than that? That said, her final "guideposts" (pp. 319–33) are helpful for thinking through how we might overcome some of the negative impacts of digital communication and work toward a world in which creativity and human connection can flourish.

If one is looking for a book explaining what a conversation is and how to have a good one, Turkle's book probably will not be of much benefit, but for someone looking for language to describe the relational difficulties that have arisen since the advent of the smartphone, *Reclaiming Conversation* offers a rich exploration that is, interestingly enough, rooted in great conversations between the author and others.

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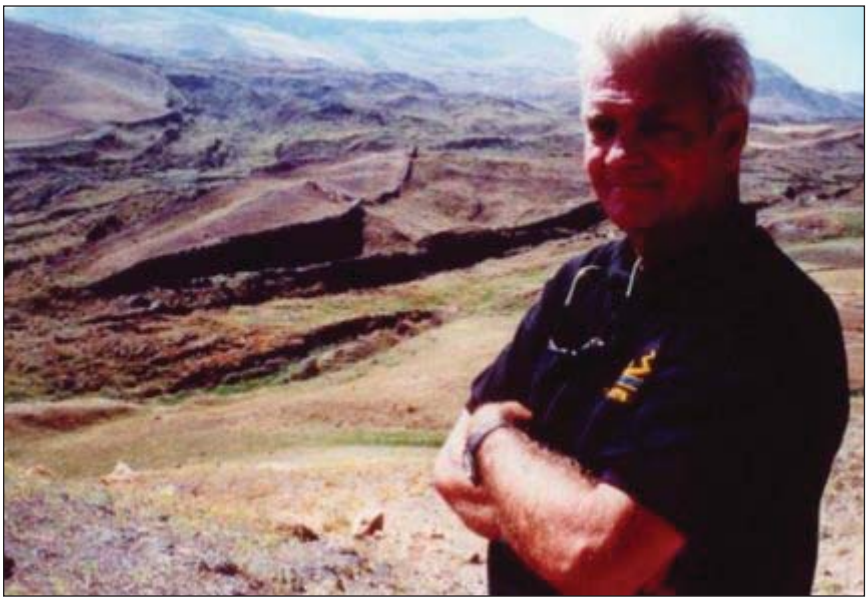
Letter

Pursuing the Truth despite the Cost

David Fasold was a merchant marine officer on a commercial transport boat and so knew a lot about boats. He heard about the possible Noah's ark at Dogubayazit, Turkey, from Ron Wyatt, and when he came with Ron to see it in 1985, he was sure that it was a wreck of a boat. In 1988, his book, *The Ark of Noah*, which describes the reasons for his belief that the boat-shaped formation was Noah's ark, was published. However, he had no training in geology. After several years of hearing from Ron Wyatt and others that the ribs, deck, and walls of the boat remains were composed of petrified wood, he began to have some doubts.

Fasold hired a TV crew from Germany to come with him to the ark site to photograph the petrified wood of the boat ribs, himself paying for the crew's airline tickets and expenses. While they were there, he discovered that Ron had carved the eroded and weathered fractures in the structure so that the spaces between the fractures made the rock layers between the fractures stand out like ribs. Unfortunately, he could not see any petrified wood in them. So, Fasold had to tell the TV crew that he was sorry he had wasted their time, and he sent them home.

Because of his rising doubts, Fasold collected twelve samples from various places at the structure that were being described as petrified wood, along with an "iron bracket," a part of an "anchor stone," and a "reed stone." With some risk, he smuggled the samples out of Turkey through customs. Somehow he got hold of me and asked me to voice my opinion. I had not been to the site, but I did a thin section study for him on all the samples he had collected. I then invited him to California State University Northridge and showed him what thin sections of fossilized wood looked like compared with thin sections of basalt and andesite. I also went to his house in San Diego and gave him a slide show on volcanic rocks so that he could understand what processes occur in the formation of volcanoes. When all of this was done, he had no doubt in his mind that the formation was not Noah's ark.



David Fasold in front of what at the time he thought were the remains of the ark (photo provided by David Fasold).

David told me that his book, *The Ark of Noah*, was selling so fast that it was number 15 in world sales and that his book publisher was translating his book into five different foreign languages. But realizing now that the structure was not Noah's ark, he cancelled all further publication of the book, likely costing him hundreds of thousands of dollars in royalties. David just wanted the truth.

He agreed to co-author an article with me for my website titled