

2012

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Recommended Citation

Wood, Douglas M. (2012) "Alone Together, Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*: Vol. 11 : No. 11 , Article 10.

Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol11/iss11/10

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Alone Together, Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other

Sherry Turkle

(New York, NY: Basic Books, 2011)

Reviewed by Douglas M. Wood

In 1998 futurist Ray Kurzweil published *The Age of Spiritual Machines* (1998) which predicted a future of supreme artificial intelligence shaping our world in ways we cannot imagine. Kurzweil theorized that within the next 100 years, the computing power of all computers will exceed that of human brains, with superhuman computing machines appearing around the same time. The ever-advancing scope of artificial intelligence will lead to a question of whether or not these machines will want to keep the human race around. It's likely they will no longer need us.

If all goes as Kurzweil projects, Sherry Turkle's latest book *Alone Together* won't matter all that much in the long run. But if there's one upside to Turkle's view of our present technology and its vice grip hold on today's rising Millennials, it's that who we are in relation to our machines does matter. In short, we need them.

Turkle, an MIT professor of Social Studies of Science and Technology, has a keen interest in knowing how the technologies we make shape us. In *Alone Together*, Turkle explores both the emerging robotic movement in addition to the online world and asserts that our uber-dependency comes at a debilitating cost. Her interviews with hundreds of people across ages, from children to senior citizens, reinforce the notion that, for all its benefits, technology can really stifle us.

Social Robots

We are on the verge of a robotic movement that will far exceed what our society has experienced to date. In the not-too-distant future, robots will do our housework, cook us meals, take care of our aging parents, and provide a synthetic companionship that will be too perfect and irresistible for us not to imagine as real. According to Turkle, the ease with which we will be able to relate to our future personalized assistants – a relationship with no rigorous demands or challenges – will ultimately diminish our ability to relate to real people. If that's hard to imagine, consider the story of Howard, age 15, who in an interview with Turkle expresses his disappointment with advice his father gave him about a girl at school and wished he had a programmed companion robot to turn to instead.

In short, Howard didn't follow his father's advice because it was "limited by his own life experience" and would have ended in disaster for him. Instead, Howard can envision a day when companion robots will be uploaded with a multitude of "life experiences" and know how to give the right advice tailor-made for him and his situation. The robot would be an ideal confidant and wise sage. Howard told Turkle, "People (with their limited data base), are risky. Robots are safe" (p. 51).

Envisioning our future response to such idealized technology, Turkle takes cues from how today's children interact with their programmable Tamagotchis and Furbies. These two digital pets are programmed to have feelings and needs that must be responded to by their caretakers. They are required to have ongoing feeding and care, or they will "die." Not surprisingly, children attribute life to them. "We love what

we nurture,” explains Turkle, as she connects the classic children’s story *The Velveteen Rabbit* to our ability to make programmable computerized robots “become real” (p. 31).

Lest we think we may outgrow affording agency to inanimate objects, Turkle cites examples from a thriving sex doll industry and details a chilling account of a senior citizen shunning the whining of her own great granddaughter to quiet the cries of a Hasbro My Real Baby doll. Turkle references the current testing of Nursebots which are designed to care for the elderly in their homes, to dispense medication, provide surveillance, check vital signs, signal for help in an emergency, etc. She suggests both the frail and their human caregivers would welcome the assistance of these helpful programmed companions.

Ultimately, our ability to make robots more human will increase as the technology advances. Turkle posits what these “social robotics may augur – the sanctioning of relationships that make us feel connected although we are alone” (p. 120).

Tethered to a Web

Feeling connected yet isolated is further explored as Turkle looks at today’s embrace of smartphones. With these pocket computers, she asserts that we are tethered at all times to the Internet and virtual world of social networking sites. Our apps bring us food, directions, captured moments, entertainment, and instant solutions literally at the touch of our finger tips. Lest we think we can sever the tether, we are too uncomfortable knowing we can’t be reached by a loved one or check the myriad of updates of our “friends” or our virtual selves. We are, as Turkle puts it, “always on” (p. 151).

Turkle suggests that this pulsing connection to the Internet brings us a reframing of identity development. New possibilities exist for experimentation in cyberworld. Developmental tasks no longer need to occur at age-appropriate times nor require completion. Trying on new and different identities is also no longer relegated to adolescence.

A college senior warned Turkle not to be fooled by anyone she interviewed “who tells you that his Facebook page is ‘the real me’. It’s like being in a play. You make a character” (p. 183). She describes a high school guy shocked to find out that some girls use “shrinking software” to thin down their appearance in posted photos. Lives lived in the virtual world become another life where it’s easy to mix what a true self is from an imagined one. “Distinctions blur. Virtual places offer connection with uncertain claims to commitment” (p. 153).

Turkle emphasizes a banality of technical dependency as well. With the affirmation of multitasking and the bombarding demands on our time, we choose not to talk on these phones. The ease of a depthless text suffices. Emails are too long. We can Tweet *what’s up*, thumb a semicolon and half parenthesis and let the world know we are happy, or sad, depending on how the line curves. That we would text as we walk across campus at the expense of meaningful conversation with other students seems shallow until we realize that we’re all doing it. Countless undergrads have their heads down to their hand-held devices, connected, yet alone.

Turkle’s research is a compelling, albeit one-sided, view of the current and coming technology and its impact on humankind. Her take on how identity development is being reshaped is of particular interest to student affairs professionals. Glaringly absent from her work is an exploration of the Divine in relation to creation. I had to remind myself that God is in control. We are made in His image and, yes, designed for relationship. Discerning how we create technology brings us face to face with the original temptation: to be like God.

Admittedly, there were times when reading the book that I wanted to quicken the Second Coming or at least join the Amish! Devoid of this biblical grounding, Turkle's commentary on current trends and forecast for the future seemed quite bleak.

Perhaps not coincidentally, I read *Alone Together* while revisiting Chap Clark's *Hurt* (2004). His research on systemic abandonment of teenagers by adults reinforces the relational void Turkle presents. The implicit challenge for Christians reading *Alone Together* is that we would utilize our technology to create and shape our relationships in ways that honor our Creator's purpose and not for a purpose we cyber-create.

Contributor

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