

Reclaiming Conversation

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

December 6, 2015

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Last week, when Diana found out about the title of this sermon, she asked: does this mean we'll be having even better conversations?!" Well, maybe; we'll see.

I do know what I'm not going to be talking about and what my spouse was certainly not asking for. Let me put it like this: In a recent *Forbes* magazine article on "13 Simple ways you can have a more meaningful conversation," the author tells his readers to "look at the person's LinkedIn and Twitter account" before a "planned conversation" to find out about the person's interest and tone, to "hit on something the other person is passionate about," to be "genuine about delivering value and cut to the chase early," but to be sure to "always get the other person to talk about himself first. [Because] *Then*, you'll be able to sell yourself more naturally...and transition into a pitch that interests him." So there's a tip on how to approach a person as a mere tool, where she is a means to an end as a potential consumer of something you have *to sell*. But as you can imagine, that's not the kind of conversation I'm thinking about today, and if I'd tried the *Forbes* business tactic on Diana forget having an even better conversation! (John Hall, "13 Simple ways..." *Forbes*, August 18, 2013)

I used to be a history curator and worked in a church history and art museum. My job was to come up with exhibit ideas and then select and present objects, photos and other artifacts from the museum's collection, and elsewhere, to tell clear, compelling stories.

Up until about ten years ago, when I heard the words *to curate* and *curator*, I, and most people, would think of museums and of the people who worked there to create and present exhibits for the public. Recently, however, these words: *to curate* and *curator*, and the settings in which they are used, have expanded and morphed considerably. Now I hear them used to describe music, film and dance performance events: the work of creating and presenting them to audiences; and, crucially, these words are increasingly referring to the considerable attention, time and care that people invest to "curate" their Facebook pages and other forms of social media; those myriad media platforms where a person presents herself to an audience "out there" on the internet, email, on tweets, in texting, and other electronic media and sites for the

presentation of one's "self." That audience may be family, friends, fan base, the world at large, maybe even foes.

I learned as a museum curator that those who curate, and the institutions for which they work, have agendas. That is they aim to educate, influence and persuade audiences to see and understand things in a very certain way using artifacts, texts and exhibit designs—all of which have been deliberately, very consciously selected and exhibited. For example, the American Natural History Museum in New York City does not display the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and its depiction of a white, bearded, male creator god supernaturally calling the cosmos into being. The Museum has a very different idea about how our world came into being and evolved naturally over time and it seeks to persuade and educate its audience to see and appreciate the world through this naturalistic frame.

One other thing about having put time into the museum world is that it is exceedingly rare to mount an exhibit that frankly explores and assesses past mistakes the museum made, or that focuses on flaws or controversies that may call into question the purpose and authenticity of the institution that runs the museum and pays its staff. In 1995, in response to vociferous lobbying, humiliated administrators of the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC fired museum curators and had to abandon an exhibit of the *Enola Gay*—the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima—because the exhibit as interpreted and presented would have raised questions about the context, the decision making and the morality of the bombing. (see Edward Lillinethal and Tom Englehardt, *History Wars: The "Enola Gay" and other Battles for the American Past.*)

Unsurprisingly, most institutions: from nations to churches to cultural organizations--and the elite who own, endow and run them—want to think well of themselves and present their story, art and artifacts in the best possible light. Whether they are conscious of it or not (and they are!), professional curators know this. My job as senior history curator became untenable when the demand for truths, when the reckoning of flaws and controversies ran athwart the agenda of a church hierarchy and its need to always be right and for its image and story to be uplifting, uncontroversial and free of imperfections. And so I had to set up shop elsewhere.

By this point, you may be thinking: Epperson, what does this have to do with reclaiming conversation? Well for me, tons.

I shamelessly lifted the title of this sermon from a recently published book written by Sherry Turkle called *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in the Digital Age*. Turkle is

a professor of social psychology at MIT who's been exploring the effects of digital worlds on human behaviour. Using extensive interviews and analyzing a mountain of research, it's her contention that the very nature of our day-to-day interactions and our basic sense of self are being hugely and negatively impacted by our increasing use and dependence on digital technologies and devices.

What are we to make of some of these statistics cited in the book?: The average adult in the US and Canada checks a cell phone every six and half minutes? Most teenagers send out one hundred texts each day. 89% of people involved in studies admit they took out a phone at their last social encounter, and 82% of them say they felt the conversation in those encounters deteriorated after they checked their phone. Turkle states that when you look at all markers for empathy in college-age students, studies across the board indicate that there has been a 40% decline in empathic thoughts and behaviour in this age cohort in the past decade alone. And think about it: the last time you went out to a cafe, bar or restaurant and looked around—how many people were cradling and checking their phones and laptops even when there was someone sitting across from them at the table? Or riding a city bus—how many are plugged into their own devices, tuned out from those around them and typing out texts? How often do we go to our emails in a day and cut away to scan internet sites that link to others and then more and away we go like a fox in chase of a rabbit through the brambles?

I don't think of myself as a Luddite; I'm not anti-technology—I need, value and work on computers and a phone just about every day of the week. But at the end of those days—of internet searches, email correspondence, quick phone calls and the near-constant going back and forth with them—yeah, I can multitask—I feel like I've been skating on the surface of things, my mind spent after frantically popping around like a drop of water on a sizzling skillet: strung out body and soul. I struggle to settle into a book or sit alone with my own thoughts and feelings. I can feel restless, impatient even, when it comes to adjusting to the slower rhythms, the uneven to and fro, give and take pacing of human conversation. And I don't even have a cell or a smart phone; and I don't text, tweet or “curate” a social media site.

Conversation is Turkle's organizing principle, and something she calls for us to reclaim, believing that it's in meaningful conversation where we create, discover and deepen our sense of self and community. She uses a passage from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* where Thoreau states: “I had three chairs in my house; one for solitude, two for friendships, three for society.”

Picture that for a moment in your mind's eye. A bare room, then three chairs brought forward one at a time.

The first chair of solitude is often overlooked as a precondition for conversation, I think. Someone I know and who's very dear to me has shown over the years an enduring, deep sense of self and self awareness, hewn by discipline, for being alone and thinking out her own thoughts. Solitude can be a place to see and experience oneself unedited, in the rough, and imperfect, as one feelingly thinks through the past, of things said and done for well and ill, of beliefs and hopes to cherish or let go, and of things and folks to value or bid farewell. From the chair of solitude, the mind's heart casts out into the coming day with insights gained in solitude, with empathy kindled by self-awareness and from thence to friends and loved ones: seeing them as they are, or perhaps wished they could be.

This brings out the second chair of friendship, and a time to settle in for some conversation. Here we put our empathy to work. We test our thoughts and feelings in full view of the unmediated reality of another person in whose eyes, tone of voice, and bearing, in silences that ensue and then give to way to more of the to and fro of creative interchange with each other. And here comes the third chair for society—our conversations with other people—at home and workplace, in worship and the public square—where we put our insights, beliefs and empathy to work. These encounters, in turn, test and try our capacity for further introspection, deepening and re-discovering who we are, what we believe and value, how we should go actively forward in society and alone. Reflect. Talk. Act. Repeat.

The problem is that our devices and our devotion to them all-too-often interrupt this cycle; they distract and divert our attention, end the conversation and thus our empathic connection with ourselves and others.

Reading *Reclaiming Conversation* led the novelist Jonathan Franzen to observe that “the most moving...section of the book concerns the demise of family conversation” where, according to Turkle's interviews with children and young people, a vicious circle plays out, and works like this: “Parents give their children phones. Children can't get their parents' attention away from their phones, so children take refuge in their own devices. Then, parents use their children's absorption with phones as permission to have their phones on” even more.

The circle's a vicious one because of what we lose. “Kids are growing up without having experienced unbroken conversation either at the dinner table or when they take a walk with

parents or friends. Through the conversational attention of parents [and other adults], children acquire a sense of enduring connectedness and a habit of talking about their thoughts and feelings, rather than simply acting on them.” When you speak face to face, adult to child, we’re forced, or should be, to “recognize each other’s full human reality,” which is where empathy emerges and deepens. “And conversation carries the risk of boredom” and the revealing of our imperfections, doesn’t it? But it’s here that patience, imagination and mutual understanding and appreciation are developed. We can break that vicious circle, and teach ourselves and our kids, young people and other adults: one chair for solitude, two for friendships, three for society. (see Jonathan Franzen, “Sherry Turkle’s *Reclaiming Conversation*,” *New York Times*, September 28, 2015)

But if we can’t be separated from our digital tools, Turkle says, we end up consuming other people “in bits and pieces; it is as though we use them as spare parts to support our fragile selves.”

Fragile selves and the revealing of our imperfections—which returns me to some things I said earlier about “curating.” A dictionary definition of “curate” is “to act as a curator, to look after and preserve, to select and present items for an exhibition.” I told you that curators and the institutions they work for have stories to tell that consciously serve an agenda; they hope to educate and persuade their audiences to learn and accept those stories; artifacts, texts and design have all been very carefully selected, written, crafted and presented; and it’s rare for organizations, via curation and design, to explore and present past mistakes, flaws and controversies. Even institutions seemingly as secure and powerful as the Smithsonian Institution and the Mormon Church, by consciously avoiding controversial subjects and past mistakes, end up looking uncertain of themselves and surprisingly fragile—as though one truth, one flaw and imperfection, one controversy exhibited...and the whole edifice would fall apart....

But what about people, what about us? In the years since the debut of Facebook, email, tweets, Instagram, blogs, and...I can’t keep track of it all, people, more and more, are spending their days on digital devices actively constructing, tinkering, photographing, editing, fragmenting and re-presenting themselves: a curated self, a performative self in a quest to get it, to get myself presented just right. Sherry Turkle’s research, the hundreds of interviews, the data reveal increasingly, that as we move to curating and presenting to others a so-called “better self,” with flaws and imperfections airbrushed away, not only is the natural conversation of our cracked-pot,

ragged-glory-native-self falling away, so too is compassion, so too is empathy for ourselves and others.

Besides, that curated life on-line?—what is it if not the indulging in a fantasy—one that fits the fantasy of a consumer culture fixated on efficiency, speed and predictability, on image and perfection, on photoshopped blemishless celebrity, a life without friction, boredom, setbacks, our all-too-human imperfections, and the emotional and moral moment that confronts us when we encounter, truly encounter, the reality of another person in meaningful, face-to-face conversation?

I loved this study: summer camps—the kind where kids go off for a couple of weeks, sleep away from home, and where all personal digital devices are prohibited? It turns out that after five days of being weaned off their devices, all the markers for empathy and empathic encounters among these kids away on summer camps begin to rise dramatically. And why?—because they start talking with each other; they start sharing their unmediated, non-curated lives.

Now I could just sign off by encouraging all of us to be more intentional in our use of technology; to create times and places in our lives that are device free and to use media that are less likely to pull us away from face to face interaction and meaningful conversation. But then, I imagine that we're all struggling with this, and taking steps to curtail and get real about our on-line, virtual, attenuated, and curated lives.

I have something else in mind. We Unitarians say that the nature of all existence is best, most adequately described as an interdependent web. This affirmation rises from a profound empirical, philosophical and moral vision. The cosmos and all it contains—from galaxy clusters beyond to the energy substrate of sub-atomic particles within—all of it partakes in a hard-to-imagine grandly interrelated, creative, evolutionary process. Being and things and us are not static entities, but dynamic, processional, relational occasions. All of it is evolving, moving toward greater complexity and meaning, toward a deepening, ripening richness of creative interrelationship, and interdependence. That means the universe is an ally to any effort we make toward reclaiming conversation—perhaps the most human and humanizing thing we do. It begins with a room and three chairs: one for solitude, two for friendship and three for society.

So did I learn to have better conversations this week with my partner? Strange how things happen. Without intending, or planning, an even better conversation took place at the end of dinner the other night. We just sat there looking at each other—lots of eye contact, no outside

distractions, nothing to rush to, no plan—we just settled in—and it *happened*. Deep things and true, feelings unfettered and thoughts, worries, and ideas laid bare. Without defensiveness or fears of being judged, neither for the raw, unscripted content of *what* was being said or *how* it was expressed. Well, it helps that all of it came from a place of trust, affection and experience. And there was no thought or attempt at analyzing or doing therapy about each others' emotional state. That would have killed the moment and its flow.

Looking back, I think what took place at our dinner table was an experience of interdependence. It was also a truly creative encounter: what had not been before—insights, ideas and feelings—arose, emerged, and came forth—and, crucially, it happened in the give and take of engaged, thoughtful, soulful conversation. I believe that encounters like this can take place almost anywhere between anyone—on a bus, a covenant group, in a cafe, on a walk—wherever, whenever, when we bring our native selves forward from solitude and intentionally pull up a chair for conversation. I believe that when this happens, in some awesome way, something of the universe, the nature of all things, will be there as an ally welcoming and enabling a deepening and growing of the self and others to take place.

“To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught. The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching. Teaching...comes from the exterior and brings me more than I contain. In its non-violent transitivity the very epiphany of the face is produced.”

— Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*