

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 ques-

tion 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 multi-tasking 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