"Slow of Speech and Slow of Tongue"

Leadership and the Art of Conversation
The Power of Talk in a Digital Age

יב וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה, לִפְנֵי יְהוָה לֵאמֹר:
הֵן בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, לֹא-שָׁמְעוּ אֵלַי, וְאֵיךְ
יִשְׁמָעֵנִי פַּרְעֹה, וַאֲנִי עֲרַל שְׂפָתָיִם

Exodus 6:12 And Moses spoke before the LORD, saying: 'Behold, the children of Israel have not hearkened unto me; how then shall Pharaoh hear me, who am of uncircumcised lips?'

ל וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה, לִפְנֵי יְהוָה: הֵן אֲנִי,
עֲרַל שְׂפָתַיִם, וְאֵיךְ, יִשְׁמַע אֵלַי
פַּרְעֹה. {פ}

30 And Moses said before the LORD: 'Behold, I am of uncircumcised lips, and how shall Pharaoh hearken unto me?'

From "The King's Speech"

Lionel Logue: What was your earliest memory?
King George VI: I'm not... -here to discuss... -personal matters.
Lionel Logue: Why are you here then?
King George VI: *Because I bloody well stammer!*

Speaking about George VI the Prince of Wales told his guests: "His stammer cut him off I think in so many ways from his parents and his brothers and sisters and drove him into himself as I suspect so many stammerers will understand. I think above all he experienced that awful fear of feeling different from others."

Parashat Va'era 5776
Temple Beth El - Stamford, CT

NJPS "The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech!" 13So the LORD spoke to both Moses and Aaron in regard to the Israelites and Pharaoh king of Egypt, instructing them to deliver the Israelites from the land of Egypt.

14The following are the heads of their respective clans.

The sons of Reuben, Israel's first-born: Enoch and Pallu, Hezron and Carmi;

יְהוָה לַאמֹר הֵן בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא־שָׁמְעוּ אֵלַי וְאֵיךְ יִשְׁמָעֵנִי פַּרְעֹה וַאֲנִי עֲרַל שְׂפָתָיִם׃ פ 13 וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן וַיְצַוֵּם אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶל־פַּרְעֹה מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם לְהוֹצִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם׃ ס

14 אֵלֶּה רָאשֵׁי בֵּית־אֲבֹתָם בְּנֵי רְאוּבֵן בְּכֹר יִשְׂרָאֵל חֲנוֹךְ וּפַלּוּא

OJPS children of Israel have not hearkened unto me; how then shall Pharaoh hear me, who am of uncircumcised lips?" 13And the LORD spoke unto Moses and unto Aaron, and gave them a charge unto the children of Israel, and unto Pharaoh king of Egypt, to bring the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt.

14These are the heads of their fathers' houses:

The sons of Reuben the first-born of Israel: Hanoch, and Pallu, Hezron, and

RASHI the inference *a fortiori*. [F] **Impeded speech.** Literally, with OJPS, "uncircumcised lips." That is, "obstructed lips," for I say that "uncircumcised" always means "obstructed." Thus in Jer. 6:10, "their ears are blocked" is literally "their ears are uncircumcised"; in Jer. 9:25, "uncircumcised of heart" means "blocked from understanding," just as with the uncircumcised male member, where the foreskin blocks and covers it.

13 The LORD spoke to both Moses and Aaron. Since Moses had described himself as being "a man of impeded speech" (v. 12), God assigned Aaron to him as his spokesman. **In regard to the Israelites,** they were instructed to lead them sensitively and to put up with them, **and** in regard to **Pharaoh king of Egypt,** they were instructed to speak respectfully to him. So the midrash has it. But contextually it is as the translations have it. As far as the contents of the instruction, they are to be found in ch. 7, after the material inserted to give the lineage of Moses and Aaron.

14 The following are the heads of their respective clans. Needing to give the genealogy of Levi for the sake of Moses and Aaron, the text begins by showing how they

[F] The inference *a fortiori* (in Hebrew, *kal va-homer*) is used in rabbinic literature to present a case and then argue that a second case is just like it, in some respect, but even more so. Here, if the Israelites, a sympathetic audience, would not listen to Moses, then Pharaoh, a hostile audience, certainly would not. Rashi's comment is taken from Genesis Rabbah, which lists the other examples as Gen. 44:8, Num. 12:14, Deut. 31:27, 1 Sam. 23:3, Jer. 12:5 (two cases), Ezek. 15:5, Prov. 11:31, and Esther 9:12. But see Abarbanel's question about this verse.

ABARBANEL'S QUESTIONS ✦ What new information is added by v. 13, which seems merely to repeat what we already know? ✦ Why are the genealogies of Reuben, Simeon, and Levi given (vv. 14–25), but not those of the other tribes?

RASHBAM **14 The following are the heads of their respective clans.** The Mekilta explains that the text gives the genealogy of these three tribes, whom Jacob

IBN EZRA **Pharaoh,** who is not one of Your people, **heed me? A man of impeded speech.** Some think that "I will be with you ... as you speak" (4:15) means that God removed Moses' speech impediment. But this proves that He had done so only temporarily, or that He prompted Moses to speak in such a way that he would not have to pronounce the sounds that were difficult for him.

13 The LORD spoke to both Moses and Aaron in regard to the Israelites. Jeshua b. Judah thinks this means that He told them not to lose their tempers with the Israelites, whose spirits were crushed. But this interpretation is unnecessary. Aaron is included here as Moses' spokesman.

14 The heads of their respective clans. Rather, with OJPS, "the heads of their [Moses' and Aaron's] fathers' houses." Or perhaps "their" refers to "the Israelites" in v. 13. The list is taken from Gen. 46:9–11,

NAHMANIDES **Pharaoh heed me?** Moreover, I am **a man of impeded speech** and not fit to speak before a great king. This could be interpreted to mean that Moses thought the Israelites would not listen to him because of his deficiency, because he was a man of impeded speech and could not formulate consoling words to speak to their hearts. How then could he speak to Pharaoh? The reason for Moses' insistence is that originally (3:18) God did not instruct him to speak to Pharaoh, merely to go to Pharaoh with the elders, and that they would all speak to Pharaoh. Moses must have assumed that the elders would speak, and he could remain silent. His complaint that he was not "a man of words" (4:10) was because he was embarrassed even to speak to the people. God assured him that Aaron would do his talking to the people, which is indeed what happened at first (4:30). But here in v. 6 Moses himself is commanded to speak to the people—but they would not listen to him. Now, being commanded to speak to Pharaoh as well, he repeats that he is "a man of impeded speech." "So the LORD spoke to both Moses and Aaron in regard to the Israelites"—to tell them all He would command—"and Pharaoh"—to let them go (v. 13). Rashi and NJPS do not make this clear.

13 In regard to the Israelites. Rashi points out that the contents of the instruction are found in ch. 7, after the genealogy, like someone saying, "But now let us return to our previous subject." Ibn Ezra is of the same opinion. But I do not share this opinion. Once Moses had spoken to the Israelites per God's command (v. 6) and they had not listened to him, God commanded both him and Aaron to speak to both the people and to Pharaoh. Moses assumed that both of them would be present on every occasion, for every speech and every marvel, and that only one of them would have to talk. This is how it works when there is a two-man delegation. One speaks and the other remains silent. Moses was willing to go along with this. Now God tells Moses a second time, "I am the LORD" (v. 29) who appeared to you alone, commanding you to speak in My great Name, "Speak to Pharaoh king of Egypt all that I will tell you." For all My utterances will come to you, not to Aaron with you. It is you whom I have made My messenger to Pharaoh. At this point Moses objects again that he is a man of "impeded speech" (v. 30), and God tells him, "I place you in the role of God to Pharaoh, with your brother Aaron as your prophet" (7:1). You will go before Pharaoh and command Aaron, but Pharaoh will not hear your words. Aaron, on assignment from you, will utter your words, just as God commands a prophet and the prophet utters His words and reproves the people with them. — This was a promotion for Moses, which he earned by his great humility in being embarrassed to speak because of his impeded speech. Note that eventually "Moses himself was much esteemed in the land of Egypt, among Pharaoh's courtiers and among the people" (11:3). Measure for measure—he had been afraid that they would despise him. And see my comment to 7:2.

14 The sons of Reuben. The text did not want to begin directly with Levi, which might make it look as if he were to be regarded as the first-born from now on in honor of Moses. So his older brothers are included to put him third, in his proper place.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS **14 The heads of their respective clans.** This genealogy was not given earlier because only now (v. 13) was Aaron fully associated with Moses in the mission to Pharaoh (Gersonides). The story of Abraham is preceded by a comparable

Looking For the Right Leader: Lessons From Exodus

by Rabbi Charles Savenor, Director

http://metny.uscj.org/2010/12/looking-for-the-right-leader-lessons-from-exodus/

Looking for the right leader? When companies and synagogues have a high-level position to fill, they frequently employ head-hunters to locate the right person for the job. If we were given the task of finding the right person to serve as the leader of the Children of Israel during the Exodus, what type of qualities would we look for?

The job description for this executive position might read as follows: "This person must be confident, charismatic, wise, vibrant, patient, creative and intelligent. It is preferred that s/he has experience in public relations and wilderness economics. Public speaking is a must."

While these characteristics are what we might expect of a leader, in this week's Torah portion God makes a surprising choice. God's selects Moses, a man who is temperamental, easily discouraged, and somewhat impatient.

To complicate matters, Moses makes it clear on several occasions that he doesn't want the job. When approached by God to lead the Children of Israel out of slavery, Moses raises several reasons why God should choose someone else. Finally, Moshe pleads, "Please, Lord, I am not a man of words, either in the past or now when you have spoken to me. I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." (Exodus 4:10)

In essence, Moses confides that his problem lies not with the message, but with the messenger. Traditional and modern scholars have been fascinated by Moses' self-depiction as *khevad peh u'khevad lashon*: slow of speech and slow of tongue. This is usually interpreted as stuttering. Rashi and several other traditional commentators embrace a literal interpretation of the text. According to their view, Moses had a speech impediment. In fact, some go so far as to try and pinpoint which sounds represented the greatest challenge to Moses.

Some modern commentators suggest that Moses declines the invitation to lead because he is neither skilled in the arena of political debate, nor is he what we might consider a charismatic speaker. In Moses and Monotheism, Sigmund Freud asserts that Moses' objection, and the need for Aaron as an interpreter, allude to the fact that "Moses was an Egyptian." (Page 38) According to Freud, Moses does not utilize Aaron as an interpreter with Pharaoh, but rather as a tool for connecting with the Children of Israel.

As described above, when Moses speaks of his slow speech, one of the Hebrew phrases used to describe it is "khaved peh." In the coming Torah portions when "Pharaoh hardens his heart," the Torah employs the expression "vehakhbaed et lebo." (Exodus 8:11)

One simple word, kaved, which means heavy or encumbered, lays out the political tension and real communication problem between Moses and Pharaoh. A man with difficulty in speaking attempts to get through to a man who will not listen and is indifferent to human suffering.

We might assume that God wants an eloquent speaker and someone who feels ready and eager to assume a leadership role. But instead, Moses – hesitant, scared and almost the epitome of a broken vessel – is chosen. In addition to his humility and wisdom, God chooses Moses because of his imperfections. The irony of the story is that God accepts Moses as he is. It is Moses who needs to learn to accept himself. Ultimately, Moses was able to be a leader in spite of his limitations.

Our world today continues to be challenged by pharaohs with hardened hearts and modern-day "plagues," both natural and manmade. The amount of tikkun – healing – that our society and our global community demands is daunting. Like Moses, we can easily feel dwarfed by the mission ahead.

It is precisely when the task seems so large that we need to remember that Moses' inadequacies and hesitations did not hold him back from being a leader. In fact, when exposed firsthand to injustice and cruelty, he takes immediate action without stopping to consider the personal ramifications.

From this week's Parsha, we learn that the type of leadership needed to transform the world cannot easily be captured in a job description. We are all like Moses in that each of us has our own challenges and shortcomings. Similarly, each of us has a unique contribution to make – to our communities, to society, to the world – if only we learn to accept ourselves as we are.

Va'era (Exodus 6:2-9:35) http://www.kolel.org/pages/5762/vaera.html

OVERVIEW

On first approach, Moses has unsuccessfully confronted Pharaoh. Rather than heed God's instruction to let the slaves go, Pharaoh increases their workload and makes their situation even more difficult. Moses goes back to God, and is reassured that the Israelites will indeed be redeemed. The lineage of Moses and Aaron is given, and then they re-approach Pharaoh. When he will not listen, the battle of the plagues begins. However, Pharaoh will not be moved. After the sixth plague, when Pharaoh still fails to relent, God "hardens" Pharaoh's heart, and then the final plagues upon Egypt commence.

IN FOCUS

But Moses appealed to the Eternal, saying, "The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech!" (Exodus 6:12)

PSHAT

Complying with God's orders, Moses approaches the Israelites to tell them of the coming redemption. But, after he speaks to the Israelites as God instructed, they ignore him. The text explains this by saying that they would not listen because their spirits had been crushed by the cruel bondage. God then instructs Moses to go and speak to Pharaoh and demand that the Israelites be freed. Moses, discouraged by his lack of success with his own people, is not confident that he will have any more success with the King. And so he appeals to God using what would later become a classic form of Talmudic argumentation, applying the outcome from a minor case to a major case (*kal va-homer*): if the Israelites would not listen to me, then why should Pharaoh? But Moses takes it one step further, by blaming his speech impediment for his lack of success. Literally, he refers to himself as being "a man of uncircumcised lips." God seems to ignore Moses' concerns about his bad track record so far, but he does assign Moses' brother Aaron to serve as his spokesman.

DRASH

This phrase "uncircumcised lips" seems to be a red flag, given the pivotal importance of circumcision in Jewish tradition. What is Moses really concerned about here? Rashi explains that the Hebrew *'aral* ("uncircumcised") simply means "obstructed" and gives a variety of examples of its use in other parts of scripture. Therefore *'orlah* (foreskin) is simply an obstruction over the head of the penis, and Moses' *'aral s'fatayim* - "obstructed lips" - simply refers to the physical deformity of his lips, causing a speech impediment.

But "uncircumcised" is also a clear sign of inappropriateness. When Jacob's daughter Dinah is defiled by Shechem, who then wants to marry her, her brothers object saying, "we cannot give our sister to a man who is uncircumcised, for that is a disgrace to us" (Genesis 34:14). Moses, then, seems to be implying that he is not only unable, but somehow unfit or impure for this important task, to serve as God's messenger.

But our tradition sees this act of extreme humility to Moses' credit. He was not drawing attention to his disability to get out of serving God, but rather to try and explain the behaviour of the Israelites. As it states in the commentary Sefat Emet (as quoted in the anthology Itturai Torah), "The reason they do not listen to me, Moses implied, is not because they do want to hear the voice of God, but because I am of uncircumcised lips."

But another commentator, (Derashot Ha-Ran, also in Itturai Torah) sees it as all part of God's plan. It states that, Moses was gifted with all the qualities necessary for a prophet, so that everyone would realize his divine mission. The only quality he did not possess was fluent speech. This, too, was because of God's divine plan; so that people should not say the Israelites were following him because he was a demagogue. Indeed, in the case of a real demagogue, people listen to him even when he lies."

In the end, we must assume that it was all part of God's divine plan, but that humility was one of the many qualities that made Moses such a great leader. Moses was not superhuman. Above all, he was an ordinary man, with normative human weaknesses and defects. Realizing that, we can appreciate even more what an extraordinary leader he must have been.

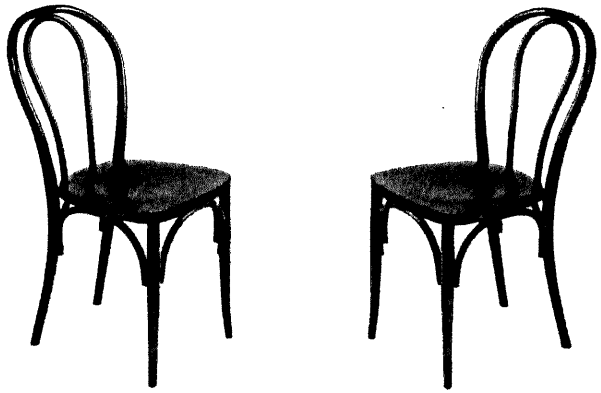
DAVAR AHER

"And the Eternal spoke to Moses and Aaron and gave them a charge to the Children of Israel..." (Exodus 6:13).

Even though the Children of Israel refused to listen, "for impatience of spirit and cruel bondage" (Exodus 6:9), the Eternal commanded Moses and Aaron to continue speaking to them. For the words of God must of necessity leave a profound impression; they may not take effect all at once, but eventually they must accomplish their purpose, for holy words can never be lost on a person. (Sefer Emet)

Reclaiming Conversation

The Power of Talk in a Digital Age



Sherry Turkle

AUTHOR OF *ALONE TOGETHER*

The Empathy Diaries

Twelve-year-olds play on the playground like eight-year-olds. . . .
They don't seem able to put themselves in the place of other children.

—THE DEAN OF THE HOLBROOKE MIDDLE SCHOOL,
COMMENTING ON AN "EMPATHY GAP"
AMONG STUDENTS*

Why a book on conversation? We're talking all the time. We text and post and chat. We may even begin to feel more at home in the world of our screens. Among family and friends, among colleagues and lovers, we turn to our phones instead of each other. We readily admit we would rather send an electronic message or mail than commit to a face-to-face meeting or a telephone call.

This new mediated life has gotten us into trouble. Face-to-face conversation is the most human—and humanizing—thing we do. Fully present to one another, we learn to listen. It's where we develop the capacity for empathy. It's where we experience the joy of being heard, of being understood. And conversation advances self-reflection, the conversations with ourselves that are the cornerstone of early development and continue throughout life.

But these days we find ways around conversation. We hide from each other even as we're constantly connected to each other. For on our

* Holbrooke is a fictitious name. In this book I disguise the identities of all individuals I cite and of all institutions I visited–schools, universities, businesses. I use real names when I draw from the public record or cite words delivered in a public forum. For more on my method, see note on pp. 369–370.

screens, we are tempted to present ourselves as we would like to be. Of course, performance is part of any meeting, anywhere, but online and at our leisure, it is easy to compose, edit, and improve as we revise.

We say we turn to our phones when we're "bored." And we often find ourselves bored because we have become accustomed to a constant feed of connection, information, and entertainment. We are forever elsewhere. At class or at church or business meetings, we pay attention to what interests us and then when it doesn't, we look to our devices to find something that does. There is now a word in the dictionary called "phubbing." It means maintaining eye contact while texting. My students tell me they do it all the time and that it's not that hard.

We begin to think of ourselves as a tribe of one, loyal to our own party. We check our messages during a quiet moment or when the pull of the online world simply feels irresistible. Even children text each other rather than talk face-to-face with friends—or, for that matter, rather than daydream, where they can take time alone with their thoughts.

It all adds up to a flight from conversation—at least from conversation that is open-ended and spontaneous, conversation in which we play with ideas, in which we allow ourselves to be fully present and vulnerable. Yet these are the conversations where empathy and intimacy flourish and social action gains strength. These are the conversations in which the creative collaborations of education and business thrive.

But these conversations require time and space, and we say we're too busy. Distracted at our dinner tables and living rooms, at our business meetings, and on our streets, we find traces of a new "silent spring"—a term Rachel Carson coined when we were ready to see that with technological change had come an assault on our environment. Now, we have arrived at another moment of recognition. This time, technology is implicated in an assault on empathy. We have learned that even a silent phone inhibits conversations that matter. The very sight of a phone on the landscape leaves us feeling less connected to each other, less invested in each other.

Despite the seriousness of our moment, I write with optimism. Once aware, we can begin to rethink our practices. When we do, conversation is there to reclaim. For the failing connections of our digital world, it is the talking cure.

"They Make Acquaintances, but Their Connections Seem Superficial"

In December 2013, I was contacted by the dean of the Holbrooke School, a middle school in upstate New York. I was asked to consult with its faculty about what they saw as a disturbance in their students' friendship patterns. In her invitation, the dean put it this way: "Students don't seem to be making friendships as before. They make acquaintances, but their connections seem superficial."

The case of the superficial acquaintances in middle school was compelling. It was of a piece with what I was hearing in other schools, about older students. And so it was decided that I would join the Holbrooke teachers on a faculty retreat. I brought along a new notebook; after an hour, I wrote on its cover "The Empathy Diaries."

For that's what the Holbrooke teachers are thinking about. Children at Holbrooke are not developing empathy in the way that years of teaching suggested they would. Ava Reade, the dean of the school, says that she rarely intervenes in student social arrangements, but recently she had to. A seventh grader tried to exclude a classmate from a school social event. Reade called the remiss seventh grader into her office and asked why it happened. The girl didn't have much to say:

> *[The seventh grader] was almost robotic in her response. She said, "I don't have feelings about this." She couldn't read the signals that the other student was hurt.*
>
> *These kids aren't cruel. But they are not emotionally developed. Twelve-year-olds play on the playground like eight-year-olds. The way they exclude one another is the way eight-year-olds would play. They don't seem able to put themselves in the place of other children. They say to other students: "You can't play with us."*

They are not developing that way of relating where they listen and learn how to look at each other and hear each other.

The Holbrooke teachers are enthusiastic users of educational technology. But on their retreat, they follow what some call the precautionary principle: "Indication of harm, not proof of harm, is our call to action." These teachers believe they see indications of harm. It is a struggle to get children to talk to each other in class, to directly address each other. It is a struggle to get them to meet with faculty. And one teacher observes: "The [students] sit in the dining hall and look at their phones. When they share things together, what they are sharing is what is on their phones." Is this the new conversation? If so, it is not doing the work of the old conversation. As these teachers see it, the old conversation taught empathy. These students seem to understand each other less.

I was invited to Holbrooke because for many decades I have studied children's development in technological culture. I began in the late 1970s, when a few schools were experimenting with personal computers in classrooms or special computer laboratories. I work on this question still, when many children come to school with a tablet or laptop of their own, or one their school has issued.

From the beginning, I found that children used the digital world to play with issues of identity. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, children used simple programming as an expressive medium. A thirteen-year-old who had programmed a graphical world of her own said: "When you program a computer, you put a little piece of your mind into the computer's mind and you come to see yourself differently." Later, when personal computers became portals to online games, children experimented with identity by building avatars. The particulars changed with new games and new computers, but something essential remained constant: Virtual space is a place to explore the self.

Also constant was the anxiety of adults around children and machines. From the beginning, teachers and parents worried that computers were *too* compelling. They watched, unhappy, as children became

lost in games and forgot about the people around them, preferring, at long stretches, the worlds in the machine.

One sixteen-year-old describes this refuge: "On computers, if things are unpredictable, it's in a predictable way." Programmable worlds can be made exciting, but they also offer new possibilities for a kind of experience that some began to call friction-free. Newton's laws need not apply. Virtual objects can be made to simply glide along. And you, too, can glide along if that's how things are programmed. In virtual worlds, you can face challenging encounters—with scoundrels and wizards and spells—that you know for sure will work out in the end. Or you can die and be reborn. *Real people, with their unpredictable ways, can seem difficult to contend with after one has spent a stretch in simulation.*

From the early days, I saw that computers offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship and then, as the programs got really good, the illusion of friendship without the demands of intimacy. Because, face-to-face, people ask for things that computers never do. With people, things go best if you pay close attention and know how to put yourself in someone else's shoes. Real people demand responses to what they are feeling. And not just any response.

Time in simulation gets children ready for more time in simulation. Time with people teaches children how to be in a relationship, beginning with the ability to have a conversation. And this brings me back to the anxieties of the Holbrooke teachers. As the Holbrooke middle schoolers began to spend more time texting, they lost practice in face-to-face talk. That means lost practice in the empathic arts—learning to make eye contact, to listen, and to attend to others. Conversation is on the path toward the experience of intimacy, community, and communion. Reclaiming conversation is a step toward reclaiming our most fundamental human values.

Mobile technology is here to stay, along with all the wonders it brings. Yet it is time for us to consider how it may get in the way of other things we hold dear—and how once we recognize this, we can take action: *We can both redesign technology and change how we bring it into our lives.*

A Partisan of Conversation

I have spent my professional life as a student of conversation, trained as a sociologist, a teacher, and a clinical psychologist. These vocations have made me a partisan of conversation because they have taught me to appreciate the work that conversation can do—from Socratic classrooms to small talk around water coolers.

My mentor, the sociologist David Riesman, called these vocations "the talking trades." He was right. They rely on conversation and they approach it with high expectations. Each has an answer to the question: What is the work of conversation?

Sociologists and anthropologists use conversation to make sense of the web of relationships at home, at work, and in public life. When things go right, the social scientist's interview becomes an open, easy exchange. This often happens after trust has been established, when the researcher's notebook has been closed, when people who only a few minutes earlier had been "participants" in "your study" realize that there is something in this for them. Your question becomes their question as well. A conversation begins.

In the classroom, conversations carry more than the details of a subject; teachers are there to help students learn how to ask questions and be dissatisfied with easy answers. More than this, conversations with a good teacher communicate that learning isn't all about the answers. It's about what the answers mean. Conversations help students build narratives—whether about gun control or the Civil War—that will allow them to learn and remember in a way that has meaning for them. Without these narratives, you can learn a new fact but not know what to do with it, how to make sense of it. In therapy, conversation explores the meanings of the relationships that animate our lives. It attends to pauses, hesitations, associations, the things that are said through silence. It commits to a kind of conversation that doesn't give "advice" but helps people discover what they have hidden from themselves so they can find their inner compass.

Conversations in these traditions have a lot in common. When they work best, people don't just speak but listen, both to others and to themselves. They allow themselves to be vulnerable. They are fully present and open to where things might go.

You don't need to be in the talking trades to recognize the work conversation can do. I have asked people of all ages and circumstances to tell me about their most important conversations—with children, with friends, with spouses, partners, lovers, and colleagues. It was a question people wanted to answer. They offered the conversation when they fell in love, when they realized that their parents were vulnerable and needed their care, when they understood that their children were no longer children. They offered the conversation when they were confirmed in a career choice because a mentor gave them a chance to run with a quirky idea.

With all of this in mind, when I hear lovers say that they prefer to "talk" by editing a text on their smartphones, when I hear families say that they air their differences on email to avoid face-to-face tension, when I hear corporate vice-presidents describe business meetings as "downtime for emptying your inbox," I hear a desire for distraction, comfort, and efficiency. But I also know that these moves won't allow conversation to do the work it can do.

The Virtuous Circle

We are being silenced by our technologies—in a way, "cured of talking." These silences—often in the presence of our children—have led to a crisis of empathy that has diminished us at home, at work, and in public life. I've said that the remedy, most simply, is a talking cure. This book is my case for conversation.

I begin my case by turning to someone many people think of—mistakenly—as a hermit who tried to get away from talk. In 1845, Henry David Thoreau moved to a cabin on Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, to learn to live more "deliberately"—away from the

crush of random chatter. But the cabin furniture he chose to secure that ambition suggests no simple "retreat." He said that in his cabin there were "three chairs—one for solitude, two for friendship, and three for society."

These three chairs plot the points on a virtuous circle that links conversation to the capacity for empathy and for self-reflection. In solitude we find ourselves; we prepare ourselves to come to conversation with something to say that is authentic, ours. When we are secure in ourselves we are able to listen to other people and really hear what they have to say. And then in conversation with other people we become better at inner dialogue.

Of course, this virtuous circle is an ideal type, but taking that into account, it works. Solitude reinforces a secure sense of self, and with that, the capacity for empathy. Then, conversation with others provides rich material for self-reflection. Just as alone we prepare to talk together, together we learn how to engage in a more productive solitude.

Technology disrupts this virtuous circle.

The disruptions begin with solitude, Thoreau's first chair. Recent research shows that people are uncomfortable if left alone with their thoughts, even for a few minutes. In one experiment, people were asked to sit quietly—without a phone or a book—for fifteen minutes. At the start of the experiment, they were also asked if they would consider administering electroshocks to themselves if they became bored. They said absolutely not: No matter what, shocking themselves would be out of the question. But after just six minutes alone, a good number of them were doing just that.

These results are stunning, but in a way, not surprising. These days, we see that when people are alone at a stop sign or in the checkout line at the supermarket, they seem almost panicked and they reach for their phones. We are so accustomed to being always connected that being alone seems like a problem technology should solve.

And this is where the virtuous circle breaks down: Afraid of being alone, we struggle to pay attention to ourselves. And what suffers is our ability to pay attention to each other. If we can't find our own center, we lose confidence in what we have to offer others.

Or you can work the circle the other way: We struggle to pay attention to each other, and what suffers is our ability to know ourselves.

We face a flight from conversation that is also a flight from self-reflection, empathy, and mentorship—the virtues of Thoreau's three chairs. *But this flight is not inevitable. When the virtuous circle is broken, conversation cures.*

For there is good news. Despite the pull of our technology, we are resilient. For example, in only five days at a summer camp that bans all electronic devices, children show an increased capacity for empathy as measured by their ability to identify the feelings of others by looking at photographs and videos of people's faces. In my own research at a device-free summer camp, I hear what this resiliency sounds like.

At a nightly cabin chat, a group of fourteen-year-old boys talk about a recent three-day wilderness hike. One can imagine that not that many years ago the most exciting aspect of that hike might have been the idea of "roughing it" or the beauty of unspoiled nature. These days, what makes the biggest impression is time without a phone, what one boy calls "time where you have nothing to do but think quietly and talk to your friends." Another boy uses the cabin chat to reflect on his new taste for silence: "Don't people know that sometimes you can just look out the window of a car and see the world go by and it's wonderful?"

Crossroads

Just as some people will ask, "Why a book about conversation? We're talking all the time," some will say, "Why bring up the negative? You must know about all the wonderful new conversations that happen on the net!" I do know. I've gone to a reunion of my sixth-grade class from PS 216 Brooklyn that could never have happened if not for Facebook. Texts from my daughter, when she was twenty-three, made her seem closer to home even when she took a job on another coast. These from fall 2014: "Hi! I REALLY like *Life After Life*!" "Where do I get challah?" "My roommate and I are going to the party as Elsa and Anna from

Frozen." All of a sudden, with no warning, on my phone, in my hand, there will be a reference to a book or a food or a Halloween costume that reminds me of our intimacy and infuses my day with her presence. This is pleasurable and to be cherished. The problem comes if these "reminders" of intimacy lead us away from intimacy itself.

Most relationships are a blend of online and off-line interaction. Courtships take place via text. Political debates are sparked and social movements mobilize on websites. Why not focus on the positive—a celebration of these new exchanges?

Because these are the stories we tell each other to explain why our technologies are proof of progress. We like to hear these positive stories because they do not discourage us in our pursuit of the new—our new comforts, our new distractions, our new forms of commerce. And we like to hear them because if these are the only stories that matter, then we don't have to attend to other feelings that persist—that we are somehow more lonely than before, that our children are less empathic than they should be for their age, and that it seems nearly impossible to have an uninterrupted conversation at a family dinner.

We catch ourselves not looking into the eyes of our children or taking the time to talk with them just to have a few more hits of our email. Will we summon our attention if, a decade later, fearful of being alone but anxious about attachment, our children show us what it looks like to pay the price? It makes no sense to "match" this disturbing possibility with a happy story about Facebook friendship or Twitter exchanges. This isn't a game in which we can cross our fingers and hope that the good will outweigh the bad. We want to take the good and also make the changes necessary so that we don't pay a price that no technology is worth.

Generations

I remember the generation that first encountered networked personal computers in the 1980s and 1990s. These were machines you "went to" when you wanted to play games, or write, or work with spreadsheets,

or send email. Computers offered aids to productivity and many new pleasures—but they did not suggest that text might displace talk.

Only a few years later, there would be cohorts of children who grew up with smartphones, social media, and chatty digital assistants. Today, these children, no longer children, are our teachers, businesspeople, doctors, and parents.

When these new generations consider the idea of a "flight from conversation," they often ask, "Is that really a problem? If you text or iChat, isn't that 'talking'? And besides, you can get your message 'right.' What's wrong with that?" When I talk with them about open-ended conversation, some ask me to specify its "value proposition." Some tell me that conversation seems like "hard work," with many invitations, often treacherous, to imperfection, loss of control, and boredom. Why are these worth fighting for?

Many of the things we all struggle with in love and work can be helped by conversation. Without conversation, studies show that we are less empathic, less connected, less creative and fulfilled. We are diminished, in retreat. But to generations that grew up using their phones to text and message, *these studies may be describing losses they don't feel.* They didn't grow up with a lot of face-to-face talk.

Of course, across the generations, there are those who do not need to be convinced of the value of conversation. But even these partisans of conversation often surprise me. So many of them seem defeated. They say the future has overtaken them. A filmmaker who graduated from college in 2009 tells me that was the year conversation died. I am particularly struck by parents who say they want their children to stop texting at dinner but don't feel they can object when the phones come out. They fear they are too late with their admonishments, that they will be left behind if they don't embrace the new.

I am describing more than a flight from conversation. This is a flight from the responsibilities of mentorship. Technology enchants; it makes us forget what we know about life. The new—any old new—becomes confused with progress. But in our eagerness, we forget our responsibility *to* the new, to the generations that follow us. It is for us to pass on the

most precious thing we know how to do: talking to the next generation about our experiences, our history; sharing what we think we did right and wrong.

It is not enough to ask your children to put away their phones. You have to model this behavior and put away *your* phone. If children don't learn how to listen, to stand up for themselves and negotiate with others in classrooms or at family dinner, when will they learn the give-and-take that is necessary for good relationships or, for that matter, for the debate of citizens in a democracy? Reclaiming conversation begins with the acknowledgment that speaking and listening with attention are skills. They can be taught. They take practice and that practice can start now. In your home, in a classroom, at your job.

Stepping Up, Not Stepping Back

There are at least two audiences for this book. One audience needs to be persuaded that a flight from conversation suggests a problem and not an evolution. And it is a problem with a solution: If we make space for conversation, we come back to each other and we come back to ourselves.

And for the audience that feels defeated, whose members mourn an "inevitable" flight from conversation and see themselves as bystanders, I make another case: This is the wrong time to step back. Those who understand how conversation works—no matter what their ages—need to step up and pass on what they know.

We can step up in our families and friendships, but there are also the public conversations of Thoreau's third chair. These conversations, too, need mentors. Here I think of teachers and students: The classroom is a social space where students can see how thinking happens. College faculty are often shy about asking students to put away their devices in classrooms. Only a few years ago, most professors told me that they didn't want to be their students' "nannies," that this "policing" job was not for them. But we have learned that a student with an open laptop will multitask in class. And we have learned that this will degrade the performance not only of

the student with the open machine but of all the students around him or her. These days, faculty are less deferential. Many begin the semester by announcing a device-free classroom policy or specifically set aside class time for "tools down" conversation.

I have met CEOs who now make a point of instructing employees to work out disagreements and apologize to each other *in person*. A new manager, in his mid-thirties, admits that he shies away from face-to-face conversation but is inspired by a weekly "all hands" meeting in his company that is reserved for "just talk." The new manager is insecure about what he can express, but he says of the weekly meeting: "That's a place where I'm learning to have a conversation." In another company, a manager begins her team's meetings by having all laptops and cell phones put into a basket at the door. She's tired of meetings where people do their email.

Beyond school and workplace, there is the public square.

In the media, one often hears a distinctive phrase: "We have to have a national conversation." But the pundits who say it have become accustomed to quick cuts, partisan bickering, and dropping the subject—be it war or weather or racism—when the next news cycle hits. They are also accustomed to talking about news with a "crawl" of unrelated stories scrolling under their images on the screen. That crawl under the news began during the Iran hostage crisis of 1981. No matter what the news, Americans wanted instant updates on the American prisoners in Iran. The hostage crisis ended; the crawl that divides our attention remains. A more satisfying public conversation will require work. But it's important not to confuse the difficult with the impossible. If we commit ourselves, it's work we know how to do.

Does the Exception Make the Problem Go Away?

The problem I sum up as a "flight from conversation" doesn't always capture our attention (the technology does!), so it's easy to defer thinking about it. People are still together talking—this looks like