

“Alone Together”
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
A sermon preached by Stephanie Gannon
on 31 July 2016

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Each of us has our own relationship to technology. Some of us embrace it fully, while others are more skeptical about how and when they use it. Some of us check our email and Facebook feed constantly and have to have all the latest gadgets. We sleep with our phones by our side and can’t imagine parting with them for long. We bank and meet our partners online. We would much rather email or text than call. We look at those without Facebook profiles or cell phones or other digital devices as somehow quaint. We may alternately pity and envy them for their choices. Are they crazy—or far more sensible than everyone else?? Just as technology is always rapidly changing, we’re probably being changed right alongside it. *The question is how, and why does it matter?*

For some humorous reflection on our no-longer-quite-so-new wired existence, I went in search of a couple of *New Yorker* cartoons. They’re usually so spot on in their cultural critique.

One that I came across was of a businessman standing in a park filled with other people all on their phones. With an earnest expression on his face he says to the person he’s phoning with, “I don’t know why, I just suddenly felt like calling.”

Another cartoon I couldn’t resist was of two cavemen outside a cave, one of which is typing on his laptop. While staring at the screen he tells his friend: “That’s what I love about social media. I can have connections with thousands of people and yet still be completely isolated and alone.”

Have you ever had these kinds of experiences before? Largely due to advances in technology we’re more connected now than at any point in our history. If, for example, you’ve ever Skyped for free with friends and family abroad and can remember back to the time when international calls were prohibitively expensive, our current state of connectedness probably seems awesome. Similarly Facebook allows us to connect with people from all phases

of our lives regardless of geographic location. We can “connect” with them all of the time and like their posts.

But there’s the nagging question of what’s the nature of these online “friendships”? How deep do they really go? What does it mean to have a thousand friends on Facebook and yet rarely ever meet even a few of them for coffee or dinner? How many of you have found yourselves at meetings or dinners with family or friends at which everyone was looking at a screen? When did someone finally set some boundary and insist on some face-to-face communication? Were you that person, or did you resist? You’ve probably done both.

I remember being so appalled at my fellow seminary students whom I observed being on Facebook while attending lectures with famous professors. I’m from a different generation that didn’t grow up with laptops. We were also expected to show more deference towards authority figures. But then in the spring semester of my senior year I got my first iPhone and caught myself occasionally pressing the Facebook icon on my phone during class. The irony!

And of course this is the summer of the crazy international phenomenon called Pokemon Go!, a virtual game app that requires that players go to real world sites. In a kind of scavenger hunt you chase cartoony monsters through your phone’s camera, which displays Pokemon as if they’re actually in front of you. I’m not sure what to make of it, but churches are usually Pokestops. While many people may end up playing in the same physical space, such as a park, everyone typically looks down at their individual devices. Do they notice details of their surroundings or interact with the people around them, or are they too absorbed in what’s happening on their own screens? Some say the game’s bringing people together. The jury’s still out. At least it gets its users outside!

During his TedX Bend Talk given earlier this year called “Do Our Devices Divide Us?,” millennial photographer Eric Pickersgill expresses concern for how electronic devices are changing our behaviour and how we relate. As he writes in the catalogue to his exhibit “Removed”: “[P]ersonal devices are shifting behaviors while simultaneously blending into the landscape by taking form as being one with the body. This phantom limb is used as a way of signaling busyness and unapproachability to strangers while existing as an

addictive force that promotes the splitting of attention between those who are physically with you and those who are not.”¹

His wildly successful photography series was comprised of portraits of people posing “as if” they have devices in their hands. Pickersgill’s aim is to get people to see what they look like handling their devices. He argues that only when people see images of themselves interacting with their phones will they change their behaviour. After they declared “no phone” zones in their home, Pickersgill and his wife have noticed a dramatic improvement in their relationship.

Similarly, Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Sherry Turkle, a baby boomer in her sixties, argues that although we're in theory more connected now than ever before, we've lost the capacity for true intimacy and vulnerability. Instead we find ourselves "alone together." Her book of the same title, which was published five years ago, focuses mostly on studies she did of children and the elderly interacting with robots. She also examines, though, how teenagers communicate via texting (her daughter Rebecca was a teen at that time) and explores everyday uses of technology. Turkle’s not anti-tech; she just wants us to reconsider how we’re using it.

Towards the end of the book Turkle shares the story of how surprised she was when she caught people texting during the memorial service of a close friend. When asked about it, one of the mourners, a woman in her sixties, complained that she was bored(!). Maybe she didn’t realize it, but she was avoiding feeling grief or being with the sadness of others?

Turkle argues that we’re at a crossroads and need to pause for reflection: “[I]t is time to look again toward the virtues of solitude, deliberateness and living fully in the moment.”² In her view, we can do better when it comes to how we use technology. She argues that we need to learn to be alone first so that we don’t feel lonely and isolated. We’ve lost our capacity for self-reflection.

A clinical psychologist and sociologist, Turkle is convinced that we need to learn to find ourselves in solitude so that we can form real attachments. Technology allows us to customize our lives and choose where we place our attention. But we keep “connecting” at the expense of real intimacy, which Turkle believes we’re afraid of. She calls our controlling how close we get via

¹ Eric Pickersgill, “Removed” exhibit website: <http://www.removed.social/about/>.

² Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together* (New York: Basic Books, 2011) 296.

technology the “Goldilocks effect”—not too close, not too far, just right.³ We carefully control the image of the self we project in social media, attempting to edit out what we don’t like. In contrast, relationships are inherently messy and complicated and what most make us come alive. Technology merely gives us the sense of companionship without the depth and challenges of friendship.

In an interview in the *Atlantic Monthly* about her new book *Reclaiming Conversation* (2015) she says: “[mobile devices], I think unlike other similar technologies, make three promises. I call it ‘three gifts from a benevolent genie’: that you’ll never have to be alone, that your voice will always be heard, that you can put your attention wherever you want it to be. And that you can slip in and out of wherever you are to be wherever you want to be, with no social stigma. [These devices create] a new set of social mores that allow for a split attention in human relationships and human community.”⁴ According to Turkle, they’re affecting our ability to empathize and to be attentive to one another. Maybe you’ve noticed this in your own behaviour and that of those around you, especially in public places. You may have observed how seldom people engage in eye contact these days. They’re constantly looking down—even while walking down the street or crossing a busy intersection. Yikes!

Turkle cites Pew research numbers that indicate that over 80 percent of people polled said that a phone was out during a recent social interaction, but that they found the use of it to be positive. For example, people were looking up information and sharing it with each other. However, when asked the question what the smartphone was doing to their conversation, some 82 percent of the participants claimed it was adversely affected. We keep turning to our phones rather than to each other. Why?

Turkle suggests that what we’re seeing in our uses of technology is the expression of a radical individualism. Too many people seem to be choosing phones over interaction with people. Yet there’s a paradox in the simultaneous burgeoning of all sorts of online communities that we long to participate in. And the result is a conflict. Like Eric Pickersgill, one of Turkle’s tips for combatting these trends is for us to intentionally create sacred space and time that’s technology free. She’s optimistic because we can use this juncture to reevaluate what really matters: *we still have each other*. We need to recognize our vulnerability and longing for deeper connection. As she says in her TED talk,

³ Sherry Turkle, “Connected, But Alone?,” *TED Talk*, April 2012: https://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together/transcript?language=en.

⁴ Lauren Cassani Davis, “The Flight From Conversation,” *Atlantic*, October 7, 2015: <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/10/reclaiming-conversation-sherry-turkle/409273/>.

technology's giving us a precious chance "to affirm our values and our direction."

This brings me to Unitarian Universalism and the tension within our denomination between individualism and community. Firmly within the tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson's insistence on self-reliance, Unitarians are some of the staunchest individualists. Rev. Paul Rasor puts us in the wider context of religious liberals today, among whom we can observe a "strong individualism, almost a self-centeredness."⁵ Perhaps you've witnessed this firsthand. I have to confess that at certain points in my faith journey, I've thought of us as little more than "alone together"—a very loose consortium of individuals with very different theologies. It wasn't always clear what connected us.

Of course what binds us together are our covenantal relationships. Our faith lacks creeds or doctrines. We agree to our seven UU principles and six sources. Beyond that, we are bound by covenant, what theologian Rev. Rebecca Parker calls "freely chosen and life-sustaining interdependence."⁶ We can trace this back to the roots of our congregational polity, which was established in seventeenth century Puritan New England. Parker's emphasis on interdependence is significant. We can't do it alone. As she insists, we humans are created in the context of relationships and commitments. We're "covenantal" by nature. She says, "[i]t's in our grain, our heartwood. And all authentic covenants are created, sustained, and renewed in authentic hope."⁷

Recently I learned a new Greek word "temenos," one of whose meanings is "container." Our covenant is our secure container of trust that keeps us safe and allows us to grow together. It provides a healthy boundedness to our community and is supposed to ensure that we stay in right relationship with one another through good times and bad.

Occasionally, though, we'll falter and break our agreements with one another, and then the real challenge is to stay in relationship. I witnessed this in my home congregation in Brooklyn a decade ago. Certain members fell out of right relationship with one another, and their actions resulted in a very painful ministerial transition. I experienced this as an example of individualism run amok, and partly in response I co-founded the Small Group Ministry

⁵ Paul Rasor, *Faith Without Certainty* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2005) 87.

⁶ Cited in "Bound by Covenant," *UU World* (Summer 2013): <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/bound-in-covenant>.

⁷ Rebecca Ann Parker and John A. Buehrens, *A House for Hope* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010) 49.

program, which I coordinated for five years. In small covenanted groups we could practice active listening, caring, and empathy and explore openly questions of intimacy and ultimacy. Together we built little circles of restoration in a wider community that was broken and in need of healing. To echo Rev. Parker's words, we were restoring the heartwood of our congregational culture, and it paid off in healthier relationships.

Each Sunday here at First we recite our covenant in unison. Please repeat after me:

Love is the doctrine of this church,

The quest for truth its sacrament,

And service is its prayer.

... Thus do we covenant with each other and with all.

My challenge to you this morning is to take more seriously our covenant with each other, to see it as an invitation to break free of excess individualism. Given the way that technology tends to keep us constantly connected and yet often stuck feeling alone, congregational life can be perceived as countercultural. Let your life here at Toronto First be radically different from the roles you play in other areas of your life. Let it be freeing and dynamic as you keep renewing your covenant with one another. Let it be a sacred space for you to experience real community and intimacy. We can be so much more than simply alone together.

As Rev. Lisa Ward writes in today's reading: "*A covenant is a dance of co-creation, keeping in step with one another in the flow of our lives.*" We long to be co-creators of our experience of the holy. We long to relate to one another in ways that make us come alive and feel whole. We long to be transformed as we serve others and build a better world.

I love the metaphor of the dance. It's a great metaphor for the shared ministry that we do together. Let ours be a dance that celebrates interdependence and accepts our mutual vulnerability.

Trust in the fluid dance of covenant. Trust that it's strong enough to hold us across all of our many differences as well as whenever we make mistakes.

Let it nurture our spirits and guide us in becoming the beloved community we wish to be.

Blessed be and Amen.