

The inhumanness of technology

March 17 2011, By Lori Kozlowski

Ever get the feeling that a thumbs-up on Facebook just isn't the same as seeing a friend? Ever feel like you want more than 140 characters from someone?

Author-social scientist Sherry Turkle, in her newest book, "Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less From Each Other," explores our growing tendency to rely on technology above [human interactions](#).

The first part of the book focuses on robots - why we would use them, and how it could be dangerous to allow robots to replace human interaction. The second focuses on our most prominent social networks: [Facebook](#) and Twitter. For that, she interviewed hundreds of adolescents and adults about their experiences with the sites - and learned of the rising anxiety many have over not posting enough, or not posting the "right" things that make them look the way they want to be perceived.

Turkle, a professor at MIT, says she loves technology, but wrote the book as a conversation starter about how we are using it and why, and about being more selective about how we spend our time. She recently sat down with the Los Angeles Times to talk about her research.

Q: Why is there a danger in [robot](#) companions?

A: One thing that makes us so vulnerable is if a robot asks for you to take care of it. As human beings, the way we're wired is that we nurture what we love, but we also love what we nurture.

If you take care of something, you begin to love it - which makes us very vulnerable. By pushing your Darwinian button, if a roboticist can get you to take care of the robot, you will attach to it. Once that happens, even if you tell a person, "It's programmed. Here's how it makes eye contact, it's looking for the color red," it doesn't matter - because these things are so strong.

We are tempted to use robots as companions, and I think there are two situations where it is really inappropriate: with children and the elderly.

In Japan, there's this giant push for robots for the elderly. They argue there aren't enough people to take care of the elderly. There's a second vulnerability at work, as well: The guy who visits his mother and says, "If I leave her staring at a wall when I leave the nursing home, I feel terrible; if I leave her staring at the television, I feel not so terrible; if I leave her playing with a robot, I feel OK." It makes us feel better as children to see the interaction. But not all interaction is equal.

To me, having an elderly woman talk about the death of a child, the loss of a spouse, fear about the end of life, to something that doesn't understand what a life is, what a child is, what death is, what it means to face the end of life - this is not an appropriate companion.

Q: What are the greatest dangers of always being "on" or connected?

A: It's the psychology of needing constant validation for every thought. It's the psychology of the transition from "I have a feeling, I want to make a call," which is healthy, to "I want to have a feeling, I need to send a text" - where the sending of a text becomes part of the constitution of an emotion. So that's the first thing.

My second greatest concern is using other people as validation. If you are always looking around for someone to support and validate you, that

very quickly gets into you not really apprehending them as a whole person. You start only looking for what you need.

The third thing is, if you never teach your children to be alone, they can only be lonely. This is one of the biggest dangers in the generation that's growing up: an incapacity for the solitude that refreshes and restores.

Q: What's your take on [Twitter](#) and getting to know others through status updates and tweets?

A: There's something I thought was a danger for the future, but I see it has arrived. I've been asked: "What's wrong with getting you in little 140-character status updates? Doesn't it sort of add up to the whole person? Why do I need to get the whole person? What's the value of being with each other physically?"

I think that we need to be more fully present to each other.

We're human animals. I feel that, sitting next to you, looking at how your face moves, looking at your eyes, the inflection of your voice, how you look, how you dress. I feel that you have taken me in, and I have taken you in, in ways that really matter. That we've revealed each other to each other.

People have a fantasy that we don't need to be with each other. So, what am I afraid of? That we will lose something very precious about our humanity.

Q: What can we do to step back?

A: We're not going back. I'm not a Luddite, and I don't believe that this is an addiction. This is the technology of our lives - we're not going to give it up. We're not supposed to get off it. We're just supposed to turn it

to our human purposes.

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