

Alone Together
Why We Expect More From
Technology and Less From Each Other

By, Sherry Turkle

Review by, Ronnie White

Part 1: The Robotic Moment: In Solitude, New Intimacies

As I began reading Sherry Turkle's book, *Alone Together*, I was drawn to the title. Knowing that this is a technology driven book, I expected more of a techie title. But after reading the book the title is so fitting. Alone together, what does that mean? The book was divided into two parts, both of which have a different outlook on the title.

Part one, *The robotic moment: In solitude, new intimacies*, describes the rise of technology in society, specifically robots. Turkle focuses on the relationships that can be formed between robots and humans, and the varying degrees of those relationships. In describing the relationships of several people Turkle explains, "They are won over by the robot's responsive yet stable presence." (p.116). It brings to light some very interesting sociological and moral questions. What should robots be used for and how far is too far?

In one case an elderly woman, Edna, seems to be overly mothering and attentive to a My Real Baby doll only to spurn the idea of maintaining the "relationship". But if Edna had been happy to carry on a "relationship" with the robot doll then should society intervene or be happy for her? Turkle suggests that many people seem to think its ok, a better than nothing approach to a large societal problem to loneliness amongst the elderly. Unfortunately I feel similarly; better a robot for companionship than to have no companions at all.

In another example of the ongoing and ever changing social dilemmas brought to the forefront in the book, a high school teacher named Tony has "mixed feelings" about robots aiding in the raising of children. He describes many of the talks parent have as robotic in nature anyway, "the shit-and-string-beans" (p.144), as he puts it. I have a huge

problem with the idea of raising children with robots but he seems to think its ok as long as it's in moderation.

As I pondered the ideas brought to light by part one of the book I found myself struggling with the rise of robots in society, yet I understand the appeal. With robots you get many of the benefits that you would have with a human relationship without all of the baggage that humans bring along. But as we isolate ourselves from those baggage filled relationships we lose a little of our humanity and become more and more isolated, something Turkle continues to explore throughout the book.

Part 2: Networked: In intimacy, New Solitudes

As a high school teacher I have often pondered about the obsession my students have with cell phones and social network sites. When students are supposed to be doing homework, why do they allow so many distractions to overwhelm them? In spite of the obvious consequences, students continue to set aside responsibilities for these social technologies. As someone without a strong need or desire for virtual connection, I've simply wondered what the appeal truly is.

In part two, *Networked: In intimacy, new solitudes*, Sherry Turkle explores the lives of several teens in a way that helped to open my eyes. She begins part two of the book by describing the "cyborgs", a group of students at MIT that want nothing more than to be permanently attached, or connected to the internet wherever they were. The connection made them feel smarter and more powerful than ever before. After all, they were permanently attached to a never ending source of information. Is there anything more powerful?

As I read on I assumed that power was the only logical explanation for the constant need for connectedness displayed by my students. Power not just intellectually, but also socially. Turkle describes how teens manipulate Facebook profiles, IM's and texts to seem to be more than they are. But as one teen discussed, everyone does it. When I think about it I have to agree. We only put up information that we want to be on display. One teen, Audrey, describes Facebook as "the avatar of me" (p.180). It is not her true self but rather the self she wishes to be perceived by her friends. This balancing act between true life and virtual life takes constant attention. The fear of a perceived loss of social status leads to a constant need for connectedness.

However, as soon as it seems that power, social status and never ending connectedness are the goal, Turkle throws in a curveball. Apparently there are a few problems with being available at all times. As Marcia, a sixteen year old high school sophomore describes "on screen life is too much to bear" (p.241). In her case it is more about her perception of self and a disappointment in her actions online. However it is easy to relate her statement to the constant manipulation of maintaining several social network profiles and Second Life relationships, I imagine it can be overwhelming.

While I have had some of my questions answered, I leave the book with several still in tact. With so much trouble involved in the constant upkeep and manipulation of online life, how can it really be worth it? But more importantly, where are we heading in society? Turkle implies that we are becoming more involved with technology and less involved with each other. We are losing our true, deep connections and replacing them with shallow ones. We are isolating ourselves from human interactions, becoming alone together.

Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. New York: Basic Books.