



# 52 Pickup Ep. 29 Transcript

## Alone Together

When I was a teenager, specifically a teenager in college, I went through a phase. Most kids do at that age. It made my mother nervous and my high school friends wary. "That's new for you," an old friend said, upon running into me during the summer between my freshman and sophomore year.

You see, I had grown my hair. It was nearly to my shoulders. And red. Not ginger, but red. Like a firetruck.

Further, I had swapped my Converse for combat boots and my jeans for black Dickies. Not to mention the self-important expression of a fool who was taking himself entirely too seriously.

I was an alterna-teen, and I'm not afraid to say it.

My mother asked what this was about. "I'm expressing my individuality," I told her. "I'm being independent." "You and all other freaks," my sister answered. "You're being individuals together. Alone together."

I thought of the notion of "alone together" again last week while watching a TED talk given by Sherry Turkle. Sherry Turkle is a professor, author, consultant, researcher, and licensed clinical psychologist who has spent the last 30 years researching the psychology of people's relationships with technology. She is the Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology in the Program in Science, Technology, and Society at MIT. She's also written several books on the subject, including "Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other."

That's the subject she addressed at a February, 2011 TED event. In part, she said:

"Mobile connectivity -- that world of devices, always on and always on us -- would mean that we would be able to basically bail out of the physical real at any time to go to all of the other places and spaces that we have available to us, and that we would want to. One man I interviewed who plays with his kids in the park while he talks to his virtual mistress on iPhone calls it 'the life mix.' So I guess you could say that what I'm talking about are the perils of going from multi-tasking to multi-lifing. The perils of the life mix."

She goes on to say that many people, deep down are lonely. And technology offers "the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship."



Sherry's words stunned me, as I perform much of the behavior she observes in the subjects she studies. I have greeted my kids at the school bus while staring at a screen. I have read Harry Potter to my daughter while glancing at my iPhone out of the corner of my eye. And, I'll be honest: I do combat loneliness and a sense of isolation with Twitter, Facebook and Path.

I don't have a lot of friends. In fact, I can count the number of people I consider friends \*whom I occasionally see in person\* on one finger. On Path, however, 32 people call me their friend. On Facebook, it's 208. On Twitter it's 2,956. That's 3,196 individuals, near and far, staring at their phones and sharing a virtual friendship with me. 3,197 people -- including me -- being alone together.

There's another side to this, of course. Constant, portable connectivity combined with tools like Twitter have allowed me to create very meaningful and important friendships. I'm talking about relationships that I wouldn't change for the world. For example, I'm great friends with Ged Maheux. Ged lives in North Carolina and I'm in Massachusetts. I've only met Ged once though we've been friends for years. I like Ged a whole lot and we never would have met if not for Twitter. When I pointed Sherry Turkle's TED talk to him, he had a strong reaction. Here's Ged.

Ged: A hundred years ago, you could send a physical letter to someone. Or talk to them in person or call them. So what's the difference between writing a physical letter and texting?

Dave: Yeah, I tend to think just the delivery system has changed. But the relationship can be the same.

Ged: I agree with that. I think she's [Sherry]...one, she's being overly dramatic for effect.

Dave: Mmm.

Ged: Two, she's older than us, and I think she's trying to highlight the fact that maybe she's a little bit scared...I don't know...of where things are. But I've got news for her and anyone like her: things change. So what. Is it really bad? Is it worse than what it was?

OK, if we're all sitting at a table together and we're all texting, yeah, that'd be bad.

Dave: Right.

Ged: But that's not what happens. We communicate. At least I do. When I'm out with people at work or my friends. I pay attention to them. We talk. When there's down time, I check email. I check tweets. Last night, I had to go to Olive Garden to pick up dinner. I had about a 15-minute wait to get food.

As I was sitting there waiting, there was maybe 15 other people and almost all of them were looking at their phone. Sherry would have us believe that that's a bad thing.

My beef is, am I supposed to sit there and just stare at everybody, or surf the entire sum of human knowledge while I wait?



Dave: Or try in vain -- well, not try in vain -- have a largely meaningless conversation with a total stranger about the food at Olive Garden or the weather or your favorite baseball team? There's nothing wrong with trying to make a connection with a new person, but you can have a more meaningful exchange with someone you've already got a great relationship with via Facebook or Twitter or text or whatever it is.

Ged: Right. And just because I'm separated from them by physical distance doesn't mean the conversation I'm having with them is any less meaningful. It's not at all.

Dave: You and I have only met once.

Ged: Physically, yes.

Dave: But I've known you for years now. We don't talk as regularly as we used to via Skype but we still talk on Twitter all the time.

Ged: Yeah, we do. And because of that, I feel like... I mean, I know we're close, we're close friends, even though we've only met the one time. And if it wasn't for Twitter, we probably wouldn't have met in the first place anyway.

Dave: Right. And a silly little tweet every couple of days, I think, goes a long way to maintaining that relationship.

Ged: Oh, it totally does. It's comforting. And she says that, too. She says, I think, it gives the illusion of companionship. It's not an illusion, though. It is companionship. Just because you're not physically here next to me in the room and we're not talking to each other, doesn't mean we have any less of a relationship as friends.

Dave: No, of course not. I totally agree with that. Lots of people have said, and I think this is a common criticism of the "you" that you present on Facebook or Twitter is that you get to edit yourself. You get to present the best part of your day or yourself. I can certainly see that happening, but don't we do that anyway? I don't go about broadcasting, "Here's the things I worry about," or "here's the faults I have," be it online or in person. I wouldn't say that online tools make it easier to do that. My own inner editor makes it easy to do that. I don't talk about the bad news with people or my own insecurities or my own worries or my own failings. Because, why would I do that?

Ged: And even if you did, is that a bad thing?

Dave: No, of course it's not a bad thing.

Ged: This is why when I saw that lecture I really had a problem with it. Because it's a bunch of sound and fury signifying nothing. It's hollow, it doesn't mean anything. The only thing it means is things are different now than they were before. That's really all there is. I can't take anything else away from it.

I get upset when people even start to suggest that social relationships that are done through digital means are meaningless or valued less than "real" relationships.



Dave: Yeah, that term “real” bothers me a lot, too. There’s sort of a tacit distinction between your Internet friends and your “real” friends. That’s like saying...I call my mom on the phone but I visit my mother-in-law frequently. Does that mean I have a better relationship with my mother-in-law? No, of course not. But my mom lives 1,100 miles away, so I’m not able to sit and talk with her as often as I like. But, the phone conversations we have once or twice a week maintain the relationship that we’ve had for 41 years. The fact that it’s a telephone vs. Facebook vs. Twitter vs. a letter in the mail doesn’t make a difference.

Ged: It doesn’t make a difference, and anyone who says it does is ignorant. One is by voice, one is by typing...the written word. It makes on difference to me.

I’ll give you another example. A few months ago, a friend of mine named Jiffy was laid up at home. I’ve known her since college. She’s a good friend of mine. It’s similar to us, I tweet her and she tweets me. She’ll send me an email and I’ll send her an email. But we don’t really talk on the phone.

But she was laid up at home and she likes watching science fiction. She was thinking about getting into the original Star Trek. And of course, I’m....

Dave: ...all for that!

Ged: I’m gangbusters on Star Trek and if I can help someone, especially a friend, understand it or experience it, I jumped at the chance. So I said, when you watch Star Trek, let’s watch it together. If you want to watch some episodes together, we can do that.

So, we did. We queued them up on Netflix. A couple times we Skyped and watched them together. Couple times we just IM’d. In both cases, it’s the same thing. One time I’m talking to her; I can hear her voice and she can hear my voice.

Another time we’re just typing. The communication is the same. It might not flow as freely because we’re typing instead of talking, but it still felt the same. I was still experiencing it with here. It’s just a different delivery system. But she’s still my same friend, no matter how we communicate with each other.

The think I really like is that all these people that I’ve met on Twitter that I’ve never even met in real life. They suggest people for you to follow I guess who are like-minded. I follow a bunch of people in wildly different age ranges. I follow teenagers, some people in their 20’s and people a lot older than me. Disparate people that I would never be friends with in “real life.” I don’t go down to the park to hang out with teenagers to try to make friends with them. yet, I’m friends with some of them on Twitter. I’m friends with some people in the UK and in Australia and New Zealand. Kelly in Portland. That’s the power of the Internet. And, if you ever do end up meeting them, how much better will that be?

Dave: Right, it’d be great!

Ged: I remember when I came up there and we went to the Red Sox game together I had a great time. I was wonderful getting to meet you.



Dave: Yeah. "Hey, there's Ged!"

Ged: Same with getting to meet Mike Rose and the TUAW gang when I was at Macworld that one time and talking to them for so long and finally getting to say hello and putting the face with the tweet.

Dave: It makes that eventual meeting even more fun. Now, at one point, Sherry talks about being too distracted by these things. I agree with her there. She gives the example of the parent who's reading Harry Potter in one hand and glancing at the phone in the other hand. Or who greets the child at the bus at the end of the day and is staring at a screen. I agree that that's not the best thing in the world. You do want to disconnect when it's time to interact with the people you're having a relationship with in the same physical proximity. That's fine. I totally get that. I know I'm guilty of doing that, too. But I don't think that problem expands to the whole of Internet relationships. In most ways, the Internet allows us to create wonderful relationships that are just as meaningful as in-person relationships. Like you said, relationships that likely wouldn't have happened otherwise.

Ged: Oh, I agree with you. When you're with people, you want to be with them and you want to try to put the phone down.

I feel very satisfied and emotionally fulfilled with the relationships I have with friends online. And I met my wife online. I met MIindy through AOL.

Dave: And there's the most meaningful relationship you're probably going to have: your spouse!

Ged: And that was because of the Internet. It's degrees of how you want to see it. Do you want to embrace the good in it or focus on the bad in it?

Dave: I choose to focus on the good and I think there's significantly more of it.

Ged: And kids today don't know the bad. All they know is they have the Internet and they're never going to know a time when they don't have it. So, try to explain this to them. Good luck.

Jason Kottke wrote about this topic earlier this week in a post entitled "The iPhone, an automobile for your mind." He concludes by saying, "Perhaps then the iPhone is an automobile for our mind in that it allows us to go anywhere very quickly but isolates us along the way." Shawn Blanc added, "From where I'm sitting, it seems to me that the only way to be 'saved' from our phones is through self-control and intentional cultivation of real-life relationships."

One way to exercise that self-control is built right into our iPhones. My friend Patrick Rhone, author and the man behind MinimalMac.com, uses Airplane Mode as an "offline mode," during a weekly face-to-face get-together with a friend. Here's Patrick.



Patrick: "Airplane mode is one of those features of your phone that can be used for so much more, not just face-to-face conversations, though we can get to that. But also, recently I said, 'Why don't we just consider this moving vehicle mode?'"

Dave: "Mmm-hmm."

Patrick: "There was a big crack down last weekend on texting while driving by the state patrol, and when you passed the highway traffic signs, they were set to say, 'Don't text and drive, it's the law.' It's like, wow, we have to legalize common sense. We have to make common sense...write that into law and persecute people for not having that."

Dave: "It's almost an offline mode and not restricted to traveling on an airplane."

Patrick: "Yeah. And I would argue that when viewed like that, one can make some really conscious decisions about how and when they wish to be interrupted by this thing. It's a reminder that it's not just about our feeling like want to tweet or text or that we want to engage. It's also that, if I'm in a conversation and want to spend time on that, with another person, it's the interruption aspect, right? I can't control when someone calls or emails come in, right?"

Dave: "Right."

Patrick: "The beautiful thing about Airplane mode is it equally stops our engagement as it stops our interruption."

Dave: "Right. You can control your response to those interruptions."

Patrick: "You certainly can control your response to those interruptions, but you can also control your response to or need for engagement. I think does come down to that psychological dopamine hit of, the reason you check the email, the reason that you check the Twitter the reason that you text is this constant dopamine reminder of how important you are."

Dave: "Now I know you have regular face-to-face meetings with a friend of yours. I believe it's on Mondays, is that right?"

Patrick: "Yep, Monday mornings."

Dave: "So how do you prepare for those, technologically?"

Patrick: "Generally, when I arrive at the table, or when we both arrive at the table, what we take out of our bags isn't our iPads or our laptops or our phones or anything like that. We take out pen and paper. I have copious notes that I've taken during those conversations with him, and he does as well. Much of what you see me write about later in the week often times is taken directly from notes I took during those conversations. So, for one thing, the technology isn't even seen."



For another thing, the place where we meet...the Wi-Fi is password-protected and the password is changed daily. To keep people from camping out. Also, I don't turn my phone off during those times. I'll explain why, and that is that I'll find, during the course of our conversations, 'Oh, I saw this thing that I really wanted to tell you about but I can't quite remember...aw, shoot, let me look it up for you real quick.' And I'll whip my phone out and look it up. That's less disruptive than going up to the counter and getting the Wi-Fi password. But I'll tell you, I'll look up that thing and I'll share the information and I will then put the phone back in the pocket. It doesn't just stay out. Quite frankly, I think the quality of the conversation matters, too."

Dave: "Yeah. Now you and your friend could have this same weekly meetup via Skype or instant message. Yet, you choose to do it in person. Is that a conscious decision between the two of you?"

Patrick: "It's a very conscious decision. I would argue that there's so many nuances that it would be very difficult to have it via Skype or via some other medium. Those two hours that I spend every week has become for me the most valuable two hours that I spend almost any week. I get so much from that conversation and so much from that engagement from him. And we both have this really collaborative ability with each other to take ideas and kind of bring them in new directions and explode them out in different ways. I can bring an idea to the table and within a few minutes he'll say, 'Oh, have you thought about it this way?' and maybe going this other direction might help. Or, that really resonates with me and here's why. And I get to see, 'Oh, yes, I didn't even consider that aspect of it.' I think, quite frankly, I wouldn't even have my second book right now if it weren't for those conversations. They were...he really helped me explore all of those things and ideas."

"So no, I don't think technology can be an adequate substitute for that. There have been studies that demonstrate that there's an emotional bond that forms with things we physically touch. And, just the act of shaking someone's hand begins an emotional connection...begins a connection that cannot be had in another way."

I agree with Shawn, Jason, Ged, Patrick and Sherry.

1. Many people are lonely
2. Human relationships are the antidote, be they online or face-to-face
3. Face-to-face communication has clear advantages
4. Online friendship can be just as valid as one conducted in person
5. Like so many other things, moderation is the key to a healthy online life

Follow-up reading:



NYT Article: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/opinion/sunday/the-flight-from-conversation.html?\\_r=2](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/opinion/sunday/the-flight-from-conversation.html?_r=2)

Sherry's TED talk <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtLVCpZliNs&feature=share>

Jason Kottke <http://kottke.org/12/04/the-iphone-an-automobile-for-your-mind>

Shawn Blanc <http://shawnblanc.net/2012/04/iphone-automobile/>

What very happy people have in common <http://www.bakadesuyo.com/what-do-very-happy-people-all-have-in-common>