



2015 Human Ties Celebration

Remarks by UH Executive Director Cynthia Buckingham

The president of the Federation of State Humanities Councils summarized recent remarks by MIT professor Sherry Turkle in this way: “For communication about issues of complexity and consequence, there is no substitute for face-to-face conversation.”

Author of *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, Turkle argues that the technology that helps us to communicate in many new ways can psychologically distance us, and erode the simple act of conversation. “The presence of a device already signals that your attention is divided,” she said. The technology that contributes to inter-connectivity can also create a sense of alienation.

I’m not arguing against cell phones and social media. Even if I were inclined to do so, I understand that would be tilting at windmills. I’m glad that our ways to access information are expanding.

However, I am arguing for more opportunities to have real, face-to-face conversations about important matters, in situations where we feel safe and heard and where we hope to break through barriers of entrenched positions.

We all know that there are great challenges in our times--ideas, concepts, beliefs, values that can divide us or unite us, that will affect our everyday lives, and that have the potential to change our futures.

People are hungry for real conversations to talk about these challenges. It’s a rare tweet or Facebook post that can substitute for talking face to face.

Book clubs and study groups proliferate—they start with a text to discuss, but usually spend at least as much time on topics of the day.

Jacob Hess, director of the new Village Square SLC, is organizing a series of open discussions of touchy subjects, such as same sex marriage and

conflicts between religious and secular perspectives, and the first one last month was standing room only.

In St. George, Douglas Caputo organized a Community Conversation about social interaction in the media age; they asked “why is our public discourse so polarized?”

This fall’s third annual TEDxSLC event on the theme of “upcycled thinking” –transforming products or ideas into something better--had twice as many seats available as last year, but still sold out in 6 hours.

So, what is the role of the humanities in these conversations?

In 1965, NEH’s founding legislation said the humanities help us make sense of the “current conditions of American life.” Early on, the Utah Endowment for the Humanities took on MX missiles, the ERA, and war and peace. More recently, Utah Humanities has had programs on immigration, civil disobedience and land use, and, well, war and peace. Taking on those big issues, challenging us, and helping people to expand their thinking is an important role of the humanities.

In 1939, columnist Walter Lippmann wrote about “The Indispensable Opposition.” His point was that it is essential to consider multiple perspectives and to try to understand ideas you disagree with—it’s the only way to arrive at an educated decision (he called it seeking the Truth with a capital T). This is hard to do; most of us tend to avoid conflict. It’s uncomfortable—but it’s important.

As Turkle and many others have observed: changes in the media world affect public discourse. It has become easier and easier to live in an echo chamber of our own opinions. Yet we yearn for “communication about issues of complexity and consequence”—the grand challenges Bro Adams wants us to address in his “Common Good” initiative.

Enter the humanities. Examining an issue through history, literature, or philosophy allows us to take a step back from the clash, explore another way of thinking, develop empathy, and pursue the Truth. Unlike angry argument, this kind of real conversation is a very satisfying feeling!

We hope you’ll join the conversation—or, better yet, start one.