



**T H E A R T O F  
G A T H E R I N G**

**H O W W E  
M E E T A N D  
W H Y I T  
M A T T E R S**

**P R I Y A P A R K E R**



# THE ART OF GATHERING

*How We Meet and Why It Matters*

PRIYA PARKER

RIVERHEAD BOOKS

*New York*

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*For my Anand, who shows me daily the true meaning of giving and honoring*

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# Introduction



The way we gather matters. Gatherings consume our days and help determine the kind of world we live in, in both our intimate and public realms. Gathering—the conscious bringing together of people for a reason—shapes the way we think, feel, and make sense of our world. Lawgivers have understood, perhaps as well as anyone, the power inherent in gatherings. In democracies, the freedom to assemble is one of the foundational rights granted to every individual. In countries descending into authoritarianism, one of the first things to go is the right to assemble. Why? Because of what can happen when people come together, exchange information, inspire one another, test out new ways of being together. And yet most of us spend very little time thinking about the actual ways in which we gather.

We spend our lives gathering—first in our families, then in neighborhoods and playgroups, schools and churches, and then in meetings, weddings, town halls, conferences, birthday parties, product launches, board meetings, class and family reunions, dinner parties, trade fairs, and funerals. And we spend much of that time in uninspiring, underwhelming moments that fail to capture us, change us in any way, or connect us to one another.

Any number of studies support a notion that's obvious to many of us: Much of the time we spend in gatherings with other people disappoints us. "With the occasional exception, my mood in conferences usually swings between boredom, despair, and rage," Duncan Green, a blogger and specialist in international development, confesses in the *Guardian*. Green's take isn't unique to conferences: The 2015 *State of Enterprise Work* survey found that "wasteful meetings" were employees' top obstacle to getting work done.

We don't even seem to be thrilled with the time we spend with our friends. A 2013 study, *The State of Friendship in America 2013: A Crisis*

*of Confidence*, found that 75 percent of respondents were unsatisfied with those relationships. Meanwhile, in *How We Gather*, a recent report on the spiritual life of young people, Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile write, “As traditional religion struggles to attract young people, millennials are looking elsewhere with increasing urgency.”

As much as our gatherings disappoint us, though, we tend to keep gathering in the same tired ways. Most of us remain on autopilot when we bring people together, following stale formulas, hoping that the chemistry of a good meeting, conference, or party will somehow take care of itself, that thrilling results will magically emerge from the usual staid inputs. It is almost always a vain hope.

When we do seek out gathering advice, we almost always turn to those who are focused on the mechanics of gathering: chefs, etiquette experts, floral artists, event planners. By doing so, we inadvertently shrink a human challenge down to a logistical one. We reduce the question of what to do with people to a question of what to do about things: PowerPoints, invitations, AV equipment, cutlery, refreshments. We are tempted to focus on the “stuff” of gatherings because we believe those are the only details we can control. I believe that’s both shortsighted and a misunderstanding about what actually makes a group connect and a gathering matter.

I come to gatherings not as a chef or an event planner, but as someone trained in group dialogue and conflict resolution. I’ve spent much of the past fifteen years of my life studying, designing, and advising gatherings whose goals were to be transformative for the people involved and the communities they were trying to affect. Today I work as a professional facilitator. Though there are many of us around, you may have never heard of us. A facilitator is someone trained in the skill of shaping group dynamics and collective conversations. My job is to put the right people in a room and help them to collectively think, dream, argue, heal, envision, trust, and connect for a specific larger purpose. My lens on gathering—and the lens I want to share with you—places people and what happens between them at the center of every coming together.

In my work, I strive to help people experience a sense of belonging. This probably has something to do with the fact that I have spent my own life trying to figure out where and to whom *I* belong. I come on my mother’s side from Indian cow worshippers in Varanasi, an ancient city known as the spiritual center of India, and on my father’s side from American cow slaughterers in South Dakota. To cut a very long story short, my parents met in Iowa, fell in love, married, had me in Zimbabwe, worked in fishing villages across Africa and Asia, fell out of



love, divorced in Virginia, and went their separate ways. Both of them went on to remarry, finding spouses more of their own world and worldview. After the divorce, I moved every two weeks between my mother's and father's households—togglng back and forth between a vegetarian, liberal, incense-filled, Buddhist-Hindu-New Age universe and a meat-eating, conservative, twice-a-week-churchgoing, evangelical Christian realm. So it was perhaps inevitable that I ended up in the field of conflict resolution.

I discovered that field in college when I became interested in, and anguished by, the state of race relations at the University of Virginia. Upon graduating, I worked in communities—in the United States and abroad—to train leaders in a group dialogue process called Sustained Dialogue. It is a gathering technique that aims to transform fractured relationships across racial, ethnic, and religious lines. Through that work, I became fascinated with what occurs when people attempt to come together across difference.

In the years since, I have applied the methods of conflict resolution in a variety of settings and to a great variety of problems. I've run meetings in five-star hotels, in public parks, on dirt floors, and in college dorm rooms. I've led sessions with villagers in western India grappling with how to rebuild their community after ethnic riots and with Zimbabwean activists fighting the threat of a government shutdown of their NGOs. I've worked on dialogues between Arab opposition leaders and their European and American counterparts to explore the relationship between Islam and democracy. I've designed gatherings for state and federal officials in the United States to figure out how to revitalize a national poverty program for a new generation. I've facilitated gatherings for technology companies, architecture firms, beauty brands, and financial institutions, helping them hold complicated, difficult discussions about their future.

I live in New York City, where people gather a lot. I am often a host and often a guest, and in both roles I am endlessly intrigued by the small and important interventions we can all make to help groups gel. Among my friends and relatives, I am the person people text or call with questions like “Should my work dinner have a guided conversation around a question, or should we just let people chat?” and “How should we handle the one blabbermouth church volunteer?” How, a half-Muslim, half-Christian immigrant friend asked me, might she come up with her own version of a Jewish shiva to mark the death of her father in Germany with friends in New York who never knew him?

In all my gatherings, whether a board meeting or a birthday party, I have come to believe that it is the *way* a group is gathered that determines what happens in it and how successful it is, the little design choices you can make to help your gathering soar. So *The Art of Gathering* is part journey and part guidebook. It is for anyone who has ever wondered how to take an ordinary moment with others and make it unforgettable—and meaningful.

My hope is that this book will help you *think* differently about your gatherings. I have organized the chapters to reflect the sequence that I walk my clients and friends through, and that I employ myself, when designing a meaningful event. Though there are certainly some principles that I believe apply to even the simplest of gatherings, you need not follow every suggestion or step in this book. You are the best person to decide what will be helpful for you and what makes sense in the context of your gatherings.

This book is based on my own experience and ideas, both what I know has worked and what I know hasn't. Yet because gathering is inherently a collective endeavor, I've also interviewed more than one hundred other gatherers to learn their secrets and test my own ideas. My conversations with conference organizers, event planners, circus choreographers, Quaker meeting clerks, camp counselors, funeral directors, DJs, auctioneers, competitive wingsuit flying-formation instructors, rabbis, coaches, choir conductors, performance artists, comedians, game designers, Japanese tea ceremony masters, TV directors, professional photographers, family wealth advisers, and fundraisers have all informed the ideas here. I intentionally draw from a wide variety of gatherings—museums, classrooms, partner meetings, birthday parties, summer camps, and even funerals—to illustrate the creativity that people use regardless of the context, and I hope it inspires you to do the same. All the stories that follow are true, though I have changed some identifying names, details, and locations of events and people for private gatherings. Among the variety of people I spoke with, they all shared one crucial trait: a fascination with what *happens* when people come together.

As I send you off into these pages, let me declare my bias up front: I believe that everyone has the ability to gather well.

You don't have to be an extrovert. In fact, some of the best gatherers I know suffer from social anxiety.

You don't need to be a boss or a manager.

You don't need a fancy house.

The art of gathering, fortunately, doesn't rest on your charisma or the quality of your jokes. (I would be in trouble if it did.)

Gatherings crackle and flourish when real thought goes into them, when (often invisible) structure is baked into them, and when a host has the curiosity, willingness, and generosity of spirit to try.

Let's begin.

One

## Decide Why You're *Really* Gathering

• • •

**W**hy do we gather?

We gather to solve problems we can't solve on our own. We gather to celebrate, to mourn, and to mark transitions. We gather to make decisions. We gather because we need one another. We gather to show strength. We gather to honor and acknowledge. We gather to build companies and schools and neighborhoods. We gather to welcome, and we gather to say goodbye.

But here is the great paradox of gathering: There are so many good reasons for coming together that often we don't know precisely why we are doing so. You are not alone if you skip the first step in convening people meaningfully: committing to a bold, sharp purpose.

When we skip this step, we often let old or faulty assumptions about why we gather dictate the form of our gatherings. We end up gathering in ways that don't serve us, or not connecting when we ought to.

In our offices, we spend our days in back-to-back meetings, many of which could be replaced with an email or a ten-minute stand-up meeting. In college, we stare at the floor in lecture halls, when the same facts would be better conveyed via video and the professor's time would be better spent coaching students on specific difficulties with the material. In the nonprofit world, it is customary to throw galas for causes because that is what nonprofits do, even if they don't raise much more than they cost.

And yet at moments when we could benefit from gathering—to determine how to make a neighborhood park safe again, to strategize with a friend and think through ways to help her struggling career, to rebuild focus after a particularly brutal sales cycle—we don't think to gather, or are too busy to, or, in the modern way, we don't want to ask people for their time. So widespread is this desire not to impose that a

growing number of people report not wanting any funeral at all when they die.

In short, our thinking about gathering—when we gather and why—has become muddled. When we do gather, we too often use a template of gathering (what we assume a gathering should look like) to substitute for our thinking. The art of gathering begins with purpose: When should we gather? And why?

## A CATEGORY IS NOT A PURPOSE

Think back to the last several gatherings you hosted or attended. A networking event. A book club. A volunteer training. If I were to ask you (or your host) the purpose behind each of those gatherings, I wouldn't be surprised to hear what I often do in my work: what you were supposed to *do* at the gathering.

That networking night, you might tell me, was intended to help people in similar fields meet one another.

The book club was organized to get us to read a book together.

The volunteer training was arranged to train the volunteers.

The purpose of your church's small group was to allow church members to meet in smaller groups.

This is the circular logic that guides the planning of many of our gatherings.

"What's wrong with that?" you might say. Isn't the purpose of a networking night to network? Yes, to a point. But if that's all it is, it will likely proceed like so many other networking nights: people wandering around and awkwardly passing out their business cards, practicing their elevator pitches on anyone with a pulse who'll listen. It will likely not dazzle anyone. It may even make some guests feel awkward or insecure—and swear off future networking nights.

When we don't examine the deeper assumptions behind *why* we gather, we end up skipping too quickly to replicating old, staid formats of gathering. And we forgo the possibility of creating something memorable, even transformative.

For example, in planning that networking night, what if the organizers paused to ask questions like these: Is our purpose for this gathering to help people find business partners or clients? Is the purpose to help guests sell their wares or to get advice on the weaker parts of

their product? Is the purpose of the night to help as many people from different fields make as many new connections as possible, or to build a tribe that would want to meet again? The answers to these questions should lead to very different formats of an evening.

When we gather, we often make the mistake of conflating category with purpose. We outsource our decisions and our assumptions about our gatherings to people, formats, and contexts that are not our own. We get lulled into the false belief that knowing the category of the gathering—the board meeting, workshop, birthday party, town hall—will be instructive to designing it. But we often choose the template—and the activities and structure that go along with it—before we're clear on our purpose. And we do this just as much for gatherings that are as low stakes as a networking night as for gatherings that are as high stakes as a court trial.

The Red Hook Community Justice Center, located in Brooklyn, New York, set out to reimagine one of the more intimidating gatherings in public life: the court proceeding. Founded in 2000, in the wake of a crisis, in a neighborhood struggling with poverty and crime, the center wanted to change the relationship between the community and law enforcement. Its founders wondered if it was possible to invent a new kind of justice system that would cure the ailments that a crime revealed instead of just locking up criminals.

The judge who would come to preside over Red Hook's experiment, Alex Calabrese, once described himself as having two options under the traditional justice system: "It was either prosecute or dismiss." Even judges who recognized the problems with the system didn't have much freedom to break out of this paradigm. And so a small group of organizers concluded that, in order to change how the justice system functioned in Red Hook, they would need to invent a new kind of gathering. To do so, they would have to ask themselves a basic question: What is the purpose of the justice system we want to see? And what would a court look like if it were built according to that purpose?

A traditional courtroom is adversarial. That is a design that derives from its own very worthy purpose: surfacing the truth by letting the parties haggle over it. But the organizers behind the Red Hook Community Justice Center were motivated by a different purpose. Would it be possible to use a courtroom to get everyone involved in a case—the accused, judges, lawyers, clerks, social workers, community members—to help improve behavior instead of merely punish it? "We take a problem-solving approach to the cases that come before us," said Amanda Berman, the Justice Center's project director and a former

public defender in the Bronx. “When we’re presented with a case—whether it’s a housing-court case, a criminal-court case, or a family-court case—the question we are asking at the end of the day is, what is the problem, and how can we work together to come to a solution?”

This new purpose required the design of a new kind of courtroom. A traditional courtroom, built for surfacing the truth adversarially, was constructed to make the judge seem intimidating. It separated the prosecutors from the defense counsel. It featured grim-faced jailers and sympathetic social workers and psychologists. Everyone had their role. Even the décor reinforced the purpose. “Traditional courtrooms often utilize dark woods, conveying a message of gravity, judgment, and power,” Berman said.

The experimental courtroom in Red Hook was created along very different lines. Set up in an abandoned parochial school in the heart of the neighborhood, the court has windows to let the sun in, light-colored wood, and an unusual judge’s bench. “The planners chose to build the bench at eye level so that the judge could have these personal interactions with litigants coming before him, invite them up to the bench, which he loves to do, so that people could see that he is not looking down on them, both literally and figuratively,” Berman said.

Calabrese is the judge. His experimental courtroom has jurisdiction over three police precincts that used to send cases to three different courts—civil court, family court, and criminal court—and now sends many to Calabrese. He personally presides over every case that comes in, taking the time to get to know its history and players. In many cases, a defendant is assigned a social worker, who does a full clinical assessment of the accused to figure out the bigger picture of his or her life. This holistic assessment—which can take place even prior to the initial court appearance—includes looking for substance abuse, mental health issues, trauma, domestic violence, and other factors. This assessment is then shared with the judge, the district attorney, and the defense. At the proceeding itself, Calabrese behaves more like a strict, caring uncle than a traditional judge. He verifies the details of the case and checks errors in front of the defendants. He takes the time to address each individual personally, often shaking their hand as they approach the bench. He explains their situation to them carefully: “The fine print says if you don’t come through, they will come and evict you, and no one wants to see that happen, so I’ve written ‘12/30’ in big numbers on the top of the page.” You have the sense that the people here are rooting for defendants and litigants to get their lives in order. It’s not uncommon for Calabrese to praise a defendant who has shown progress. “Obviously, this is a good

result for you. It's also a great result for the community, and I'd like to give you a round of applause," he might say. And then you see everyone, even the police officers, applauding.

Under the rules of this special court, Judge Calabrese has available to him a diverse toolkit of possible interventions. In addition to traditional prison time, which he metes out when need be, he has the ability to evaluate each individual defendant and, based on both the clinical assessment and his own judgment of the situation, assign community service, drug treatment, mental health services, trauma counseling, family mediation, and so on. Still, sometimes he concludes that jail is the only option. "We give them every reasonable chance, plus two. So when I do have to send them to jail, it tends to be for twice as long as they might ordinarily get," Calabrese told *The New York Times*.

The Justice Center is starting to see some tangible results. According to independent evaluators, it reduced the recidivism rate of adult defendants by 10 percent and of juvenile defendants by 20 percent. Only 1 percent of the cases processed by the Justice Center result in jail at arraignment. "I have been in the justice system for twenty years," Calabrese says in a documentary film about the center, "and I finally feel that I have a chance to really get to the problem that causes the person to come in front of me." The Justice Center team has been able to do this because they figured out the larger purpose of why they wanted to gather: they wanted to solve the community's problems—together. And they built a proceeding around that.

Like all repeated gatherings, the Justice Center is a work in progress. The participants, Berman said, are constantly "making sure that we are remaining true to our mission. This is supposed to be a laboratory and a model. It's supposed to be a different way of doing things. And a better way of doing things."

Thinking of the place as a laboratory frees the people at the Justice Center to be great gatherers. "There are no lines in our head about how we should gather or what it needs to look like," Berman told me. "Every case and every client is looked at individually." This attitude allows them to separate their assumptions of what a court proceeding *should* look like from what a proceeding *could* look like. We can use the same mindset to begin reexamining our own purposes for gathering.

And it's not just in public gatherings like courtrooms where we follow traditional formats of gathering unquestioningly. A category can masquerade as a purpose just as easily, if not more so, in our personal gatherings, particularly those that have become ritualized over time. Thanks to ancient traditions and modern Pinterest boards, it's easy to



overlook the step of choosing a vivid purpose for your personal gathering. Just as many of us assume we know what a trial is for, so we think we know what a birthday party is for, or what a wedding is for, or even what a dinner party is for. And so our personal gatherings tend not to serve the purposes that they could. When you skip asking yourself what the purpose of your birthday party is in *this* specific year, for where you are at this present moment in your life, for example, you forsake an opportunity for your gathering to be a source of growth, support, guidance, and inspiration tailored to the time in which you and others find yourselves. You squander a chance for your gathering to help, and not just amuse, you and others. Looking back, that's what I did when I barred my husband from my baby shower.

We were expecting our first child. My girlfriends offered to throw a shower for me. Like most people, we didn't spend any time thinking about why we were having a baby shower. It wasn't the first one we'd had in our circle of friends, and it wouldn't be the last. It was almost becoming a routine—that great enemy of meaningful gathering.

And so, with a date agreed on, my girlfriends went straight into logistics.

I was excited. The problem was, my husband was, too. When I told him about the shower, he asked if he could come.

I thought he was pulling my leg. Then I realized he was serious. He really wanted to attend my baby shower.

At first I thought it made no sense. But in time I wondered if he had a point.

I always value a circle of women in my life, but that wasn't my highest need in this case. If I had thought about my gathering need more deeply at that moment, it probably would have been something about preparing both my husband and me for our new roles and the new chapter of our marriage as we welcomed our first child. I was becoming a mother. Anand was becoming a father. But we were also, as our doctor pointed out, transforming from a couple to a family. If I had been more thoughtful about it, I would have sought out a gathering that helped us make that weighty transition. But the structure and ritual of most baby showers—women-only, playing games, opening presents, making something crafty for the baby—were based on a different purpose. Traditional baby showers, I realized, were rituals for expecting mothers and a collective way to help a couple defray the costs of tending to a new life. The assumed format of this ritual—women gathering around women—reflected an era when the only person who really needed to prepare for parenting and a new transformative identity was the mother. But what

should a baby shower look like when the purpose it was designed around no longer reflects the assumptions or realities of the people it's technically for? (Should it even be called a "baby shower"?)

Baby showers aren't the only form of ritualized gathering that suffers from a purpose problem. Many of the ritualized gatherings in our more intimate spheres—weddings, bar mitzvahs, graduation ceremonies—have been repeated over time such that we become emotionally attached to the form long after it accurately reflects the values or belief systems of the people participating in it.

Today in India, for example, one such clash is arising over the structure and content of marriage rites within the gathering of the traditional Hindu wedding. In the traditional format, the rites end with a man and woman taking seven steps around a fire, at each step saying a vow to each other. These *phas*, or rounds, are visually striking and, for many Hindu families, steeped in meaning and tradition. It's often the photograph plastered on living room walls that children grow up staring at and imagining for their own weddings one day. But some younger couples are beginning to feel that the actual spoken words of the vows depict an outdated view of marriage: The man directs his wife in the first vow to "offer him food"; the bride agrees to be "responsible for the home and all household responsibilities"; only the bride vows to "remain chaste," with no such requirement made of the man; four of the groom's seven vows relate to children, but all of the bride's vows relate to the groom; and so on. The underlying assumptions of the vows describe an ideal of marriage that many no longer want. But when they suggest changing the ritual, to better reflect their actual values, the parents are shocked, and often deeply hurt, seeing it as a rejection of their traditions. The form itself has come to carry power, because of the repetition through generations, even when it no longer serves the ostensible purpose of the wedding for *this* couple.

Ritualized gatherings are hardly confined to the intimate realms of baby showers and weddings. They affect our institutions equally. Of course, ritualized gatherings are never ritualized at the beginning. The initial idea emerges to solve a specific challenge. We need to find a way for the public to understand the differences between the candidates' positions. We need to find a way to get our sales team excited about a new product. We need to find a way to raise money for a new community center in the neighborhood. A structure is designed to bring people together around that need. Then that gathering—say, a presidential debate or a sales conference or a gala fundraiser—gets repeated again and again, year after year, and often the elements of the gathering