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The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters

by Priya Parker

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41 Highlights

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 42

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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 48

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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 56

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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 72

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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 108

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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 119

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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 149

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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 209

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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 330

Specificity is a crucial ingredient. The more focused and particular a gathering is, the more narrowly it frames itself and the more passion it arouses.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 343

what." Specificity sharpens the gathering because people can see themselves in it.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 347

I once visited a teahouse in Kyoto, Japan, where I participated in a traditional Japanese tea ceremony to learn from their wisdom on gatherings. The tea master there told me of a phrase the sixteenth-century Japanese tea master Sen no Rikyū taught his students to keep in the front of their minds as they conduct the ceremony:

Ichi-go ichi-e. The master told me it roughly translates to “one meeting, one moment in your life that will never happen again.” She explained further: “We could meet again, but you have to praise this moment because in one year, we’ ll have a new experience, and we will be different people and will be bringing new experiences with us, because we are also changed.” Each gathering is ichi-go ichi-e. And it can help to keep that in the forefront of our minds as we gather.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 402

Ask not what your country can do for your gathering, but what your gathering can do for your country: I often press my clients and friends to think about what larger needs in the world their gathering might address.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 406

Reverse engineer an outcome: Think of what you want to be different because you gathered, and work backward from that outcome. That is the formula of Mamie Kanfer Stewart and Tai Tsao, who set out some years ago to improve the work meeting. Stewart grew up working in her family enterprise—which is behind the hand sanitizer Purell. The meetings she attended, Stewart told me, were “the absolute best part of the day.” It was only when she set out into the world and discovered other companies’ meetings that she realized how awful most of them are. That inspired her to study meeting behavior and how to fix it, and led her to start a business called Meeteor to help companies meet better. Stewart and Tsao’s big idea is that every meeting should be organized around a “desired outcome.” When a meeting is not designed in that way, they found, it ends up being defined by process. For example, a meeting to discuss the quarter’s results is a meeting organized around process.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 428

THIS CHART MAY HELP Here is a chart showing how you might move from gatherings about nothing to gatherings about something. Gathering type Your purpose is a category (i.e., you don’t have a purpose) Basic, boring purpose, but at least you’re trying Your purpose is specific, unique, and disputable (multiple alternatives) Company offsite To get out of the office together in a different context To focus on the year ahead To build and to practice a culture of candor with one another To revisit why we’re doing what we’re doing and reach agreement about it To focus on the fractured relationship between sales and marketing, which is hurting everything else Back-to-school night To help parents and kids prepare for the year To help integrate new families into the school community To inspire parents to sustain on evenings and weekends the values the school teaches during the days To help connect the parents to one another so as to make them a tribe Church small group To make the megachurch a smaller place To help everyone feel like they belong To have a group that keeps us doing what we say we want to do To have a trusted circle to share struggles without worrying about appearances Birthday party To celebrate my birthday To mark the year To surround myself with the people who bring out the best in me To set some goals for the year ahead with people who will help me stay accountable To take a personal risk/do something that scares me To reconnect with my siblings Family reunion To get the family together To have a time together where no one is allowed to use phones To have a chance for the cousins to bond as adults, without spouses and children To convene the next generation in the wake of Grandpa’s death and create a more tolerant family reunion in line with the younger relatives’ values Book festival To celebrate reading To build community through books To use books and a love of reading to build community across racial lines

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 487

“Who am I to gather in this way?” people often ask themselves. “Who am I to impose my ideas on other people? A big purpose may be fine for a state dinner or corporate retreat, but doesn’t it sound too arrogant, ambitious, or serious for my family reunion/dinner party/morning meeting?” This modesty is related to a desire not to seem like you care too much—a desire to project the appearance of being chill, cool, and relaxed about your gathering. Gathering well isn’t a chill activity. If you want chill, visit the Arctic. But modesty can also derive from the idea that people don’t want to be imposed on. This hesitancy, which permeates many gatherings, doesn’t consider that you may be doing your guests a favor by having a focus.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 515

Having a purpose simply means knowing why you’re gathering and doing your participants the honor of being convened for a reason. And once you have that purpose in mind, you will suddenly find it easier to make all the decisions that a gathering requires.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 521

Make purpose your bouncer. Let it decide what goes into your gathering and what stays out. When in doubt about any element, even the smallest detail, hark back to that purpose and decide in accordance with it.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 561

I take no pleasure in exclusion, and I often violate my own rule. But thoughtful, considered exclusion is vital to any gathering, because over-inclusion is a symptom of deeper problems—above all, a confusion about why you are gathering and a lack of commitment to your purpose and your guests.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 592

Barack Obama’s aunt once told him, “If everyone is family, no one is family.” It is blood that makes a tribe, a border that makes a nation. The same is true of gatherings. So here is a corollary to his aunt’s saying: If everyone is invited, no one is invited—in the sense of being truly held by the group. By closing the door, you create the room.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 695

When I talk about generous exclusion, I am speaking of ways of bounding a gathering that allow the diversity in it to be heightened and sharpened, rather than diluted in a hodgepodge of people.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 745

If you want a lively but inclusive conversation as a core part of your gathering, eight to twelve people is the number you should consider. Smaller than eight, the group can lack diversity in perspective; larger than twelve, it begins to be difficult to give everyone a chance to speak.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 752

Groups of 6: Groups of this rough size are wonderfully conducive to intimacy, high levels of sharing, and discussion through storytelling. The Young Presidents' Organization, a network for CEO types, has developed a highly structured process that helps peers in groups of 6 thoughtfully coach one another through their problems. Groups of 6 are, on the other hand, not ideal for diversity of viewpoints, and they cannot bear much dead weight. To make the gathering great, there's more responsibility on each person. Churches often encourage their members to join "small groups" of 6 or so members, who meet weekly to have dinner and share prayer requests, pains, and joys. It helps make the church a smaller place.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 806

Larry O'Toole, the CEO of Gentle Giant Moving Company, based in Boston, makes use of embodiment when inducting new recruits. He leads groups of recent hires on a group run around Boston that ends with a race up the steps of Harvard Stadium. The choice of locale—compared with, say, an orientation conducted in an office—tells the new hires something about the place they have joined: To work here, you have to be physically fit, and just as important, when you are doing hard work, you should do it collegially, cooperatively, cheerfully, and with a sense of sport.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 818

As part of her job, Woon teaches a course for graduate students who aspire to become museum educators. It takes place in a classroom within the museum. On the first day of class, at 3 p.m. sharp, the classroom door opens. In the middle of the room is a huge mess of white chairs, all tangled together—a giant highway pileup of seating. The students pause, confused. They look around at one another and then at Woon. Their teacher watches quietly, giving away nothing. Eventually the students begin talking to one another. Little by little, their confidence growing, their interactions becoming more amusing by the minute, they untangle the chairs and arrange them. As they do so, each student must decide what to do with his or her chair without instructions: Where should I put my chair? How close should the chair be to someone else's? Are we forming rows? A circle? If someone is not going along with the group shape, what should we do? This is what I mean when I say that gathering well doesn't require money or fish knives. It doesn't require a fancy venue. The classroom that Woon uses is utterly ordinary—an unremarkable space in a building, and a city, full of remarkable spaces. By doing one simple thing—setting up the chairs in that crazy tangle—Woon makes the place an embodiment of her purpose. What was that purpose? To teach these future museum educators that nothing in a museum is sacred—not even a pile of chairs that at MoMA could have been confused for a work of art. And to teach them that art truly happens when people participate in it, and that a museum comes to life when people interact with it. "The reason I do this is to challenge traditional hierarchies of teaching and learning. The design of social space, physical space, and emotional space affects how people engage with ideas, content, and each other. And I wanted to show my students that you must actually design a 'space' for exchange and also then invite participation by design," she explains. Over the course of the ensuing weeks, she teaches these aspiring museum educators how to make such interactions happen—how to achieve the kind of participatory museum she believes in and fights to defend. But on that first day, at zero cost and to unforgettable effect, she embodies all that she wished to say.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 888

People are affected by their environment, and you should host your gathering in a place and context that serves your purpose. In some cases, hosting your gathering in a château may absolutely be conducive to your purpose. But for the two companies, which needed the French to remain modest for only one more day, it turned out to be, at great cost, the wrong environment.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 956

You don't have to bring your meeting to the ocean (though I highly recommend it) to make it memorable. Studies show that simply switching rooms for different parts of an evening's experience will help people remember different moments better. To ensure people will remember the distinct parts of your party, Ed Cooke, an expert on the workings of memory, suggests having several interesting phases over the course of the evening, each of which occurs in a different space. "That way, in your recollection, the fuzz of conversation doesn't all kind of blur into itself, and become just a single 'it was fun,' but instead you can remember specific things that happened at each point. You go on a journey; there's a narrative," he said.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 978

Just as we go into autopilot on the location of our weekly staff meetings, we also tend to accept the default setup we're given. If there's a table in the middle of the room, we leave it there. If the chairs are set up on two of the four sides, we don't move them, even though it would create more intimacy if we did. So next time you're in a gathering venue, remember that something as simple as a few flip charts can allow you to transform the feel of a room.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1000

Mac says one of the reasons party guests often end up gravitating to the kitchen is that people instinctively seek out smaller spaces as the group dwindles in order to sustain the level of the density.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1006

When I raise the question of the host's role to clients or friends, whether in preparation for business meetings or family get-togethers, I am often greeted with hesitancy. This is because to talk about their role is to talk about their power as a host, and to talk about that power is to acknowledge that it exists. This is not what most people want to hear. Many people who go to the serious trouble of hosting aspire to host as minimally as possible. But who wants to sail on a skipperless ship? Time and again, as in the case of S., who was debating whether to do more with her dinner party, I urge those I advise to own their power and lift a hand to the wheel. Time and again, they resist.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1037

Let me declare my bias outright: Chill is a miserable attitude when it comes to hosting gatherings. In this chapter, I want to convince you to assume your proper powers as a host. That doesn't mean that there's one way

to host or one kind of power to exert over your gathering. But I do believe that hosting is inevitably an exercise of power. The hosts I guide often feel tempted to abdicate that power, and feel that by doing so they are letting their guests be free. But this abdication often fails their guests rather than serves them. The chill approach to hosting is all too often about hosts attempting to wriggle out of the burden of hosting. In gatherings, once your guests have chosen to come into your kingdom, they want to be governed—gently, respectfully, and well. When you fail to govern, you may be elevating how you want them to perceive you over how you want the gathering to go for them. Often, chill is you caring about you masquerading as you caring about them

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1104

And the next time you host a gathering and feel tempted to abdicate even a little, examine the impulse. What is compelling you to hang back? If it's something logistical (like the need to heat up food or to step out and take a call), you might find that a willing guest is much happier to get assigned to play temporary "host" than to be oppressed by some friend of yours for the better part of a night. Often, though, something deeper is at work: a reluctance that you convince yourself is generous.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1123

An essential step along the path of gathering better is making peace with the necessity and virtue of using your power. If you are going to gather, gather. If you are going to host, host. If you are going to create a kingdom for an hour or a day, rule it—and rule it with generosity.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1146

Generous authority is not a pose. It's not the appearance of power. It is using power to achieve outcomes that are generous, that are for others. The authority is justified by the generosity. When I tell you to host with generous authority, I'm not telling you to domineer. I'm saying to find the courage to be authoritative in the service of three goals.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1149

The first and perhaps most important use of your authority is the protection of your guests. You may need to protect your guests from one another, or from boredom, or from the addictive technologies that lurk in our pockets, vibrating away. We usually feel bad saying no to someone. But it can become easier when we understand who and what we are protecting when we say no.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1185

But very talented moderators like David Gergen, the CNN political commentator and consigliere to many American presidents—get used to the idea of taking one for the team, even if the team doesn't even realize what is being done on their behalf. When Gergen hosts a panel and Q&A time comes, he often instructs the audience: "If you would, identify yourself, be fairly succinct, and remember that a question ends with a question mark." When an audience member inevitably begins making a long statement, Gergen interrupts repeatedly if need be: "Can you put that into a question? . . . Can you put that into a question? . . . Is this leading to a question?" It may

seem to some that he is being mean, but in fact he is protecting the rest of the audience who waited or paid to hear from the head of state or a famous author or a political activist, not a fellow audience member.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1209

Another vital use of a host's authority is to temporarily equalize your guests. In almost any human gathering there will be some hierarchy, some difference in status, imagined or real, whether between a sales vice president and a new associate at an all-hands meeting or between a teacher and a parent at back-to-school night. Most gatherings benefit from guests leaving their titles and degrees at the door. However, the coat check for their pretenses is you. If you don't hang them up, no one else will.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1267

CONNECT YOUR GUESTS A third use of generous authority is in connecting your guests to one another. One measure of a successful gathering is that it starts off with a higher number of host-guest connections than guest-guest connections and ends with those tallies reversed, far in the guest-guest favor.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1361

One of my favorite gathering documents is an email that Abousteit once wrote to a friend, offering tips for throwing a dinner on the sidelines of the South by Southwest Conference. It leaves no doubt about where her heart is: **YOU ARE THE BOSS**. Hosting is not democratic, just like design isn't. Structure helps good parties, like restrictions help good design. Introduce people to each other **A LOT**. But take your time with it. Be generous. Very generous with food, wine, and with compliments/introductions. If you have a reception before people sit, make sure there are some snacks so blood sugar level is kept high and people are happy. **ALWAYS** do placement. Always. Placement **MUST** be boy/girl/boy/girl, etc. And no, it does not matter if someone is gay. Seat people next to people who do different things but that those things might be complementary. Or make sure they have something else in common; a passion or something rare is best. And tell people what they have in common. Within each table, people should introduce themselves, but it must be short. Name, plus something they like or what they did on the weekend or maybe something that can relate to the gathering. For dessert, people can switch, but best to have it organized: tell every other person at the table to move to another seat. I love this list for how it distills the ethos of generous authority. In almost every instruction two things are embedded: compassion and order.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1382

If the sin of the chill host is leaving people alone for his or her own sake, the sin of the domineering host is controlling people for his or her own sake. It is running your gathering with an iron fist, and doing so in a way that is in service, above all, of yourself. Though there are no hard and fast rules, in my own experience, it is institutional gatherings that more often err on the side of ungenerous authority, the bureaucratic need for predictability translating into a rigidity that doesn't serve guests. It is personal gatherings that more often suffer from the problem of chill.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1396

We made plans for an interactive conversation among President Obama and one hundred leaders in the social innovation sector. It was a rare gathering where the icons of the field would all be in one room—and a room in the White House, no less. Members of our team recommended doing a live, dynamic, fishbowl conversation where each guest could step in and out of the dialogue circle at timed intervals while engaging with the president. But when we took our plans to the Office of Public Engagement, the gatekeeper for all public-facing gatherings, the staff there shot down every element of the gathering that was unscripted, that had any element of risk. “We never know what he might say if it’s unscripted,” we were told of the president. The event ended up being traditional—a highly scripted speech with guests seated in classroom-style rows in the East Room of the White House. What might have been an event that pushed forward a field and embodied its purpose—to look out to the community for solutions to the nation’s problems—ended up being a staid, top-down ceremony. Because of the organizers’ fear, it was an excessively controlled gathering. The organizers had claimed their authority, but their authority did not feel generous. Rather than protecting their guests, they seemed motivated to protect their own jobs. Rather than connecting the invited leaders to one another, they had them listen to the president and three other speakers. In the organizers’ mind, the perceived upside (galvanizing a group of leaders around the president’s new innovative initiative) was not worth the risk of the perceived downside (the president making some offhand comment that might cause other problems). This risk factor is among the biggest reasons many institutional gatherings leave the generosity out of their authority.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1601

etiquette

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