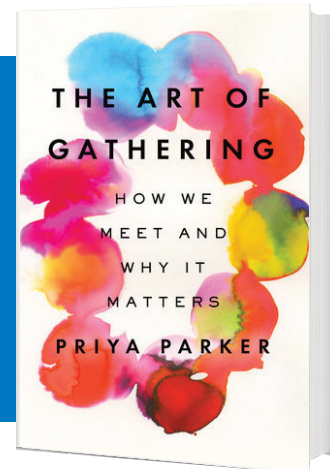


# The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters

A book excerpt by Mobius Senior Expert Priya Parker



We are delighted to announce that Priya Parker joins us at this year's Next Practice Institute where she shares with us more of the practical insights captured in her new book, *The Art of Gathering*.

Based on years of her own innovation research, social activism, entrepreneurship, mediation and conflict work, this is a scholarly yet joyful guide to creating powerful and inspired meetings, conferences and gatherings.

Within our field of transformational leadership one of the most important aspects of our craft is being able to create psychologically safe, inclusive and elevated containers for discussions, mediation, reconciliation as well as gatherings for dialogue, collective intelligence and co-creativity. This capacity is at the heart of our ability to generate transformational fields of development and healing that lie at the very core of Mobius work.

As coaches, facilitators, and business executives our lives are dominated by meetings. Whether we're sitting through them or designing and hosting them, this book offers cutting-edge thinking for how we conduct our work. *The Art of Gathering* shifts us out of "expert mode" where we get trapped by what we think we know, into the wonder of re-immersing ourselves in a such a fundamental topic with the fresh and engaging perspectives Priya brings.

Priya's research draws from a vast array of experts including circus choreographers, Quaker meeting clerks, camp counselors, wingsuit flying-formation instructors, rabbis, coaches, and TV directors. The work examines summer camps, company offsites, baby showers, *New York Times* editorial sessions, classrooms, family reunions, team meetings, funerals, networking events, political summits, and book festivals. This fascinating tour sparks the imagination and enables us to extract wisdom from other settings to cross-fertilize our own thinking about our work as transformational practitioners.

With thanks to the author, we have selected a range of short excerpts taken from throughout *The Art of Gathering*.

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## CONVENING THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

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.

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.

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.

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 Judge 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.

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.

From Chapter 1 *The Art of Gathering*,



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.

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. *The State of Friendship in America 2013: A Crisis of Confidence*, found that 75 percent of respondents were unsatisfied with those relationships.

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.

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### Decide why you’re really gathering

Why 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.

### 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.

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?

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### The “where” of gathering

*On displacement.* Displacement is simply about breaking people out of their habits. It is about waking people up from the slumber of their

own routines. As a facilitator, I seek to do that through the questions I ask and the exercises I run. But it is also possible to achieve a great deal of displacement through the choice of a space.

A dinner, for example, is generally thought best had on dry land. That, at least, is the conventional wisdom. However, one night in the Greek town of Kalamata, in the 1940s, the British travel writer Patrick Leigh Fermor and his friends had another idea. As the group was seated on the quay waiting for their meal to arrive in the searing heat, Fermor and his two companions silently picked up their iron table and carried it into the sea. They sat waist-deep in the water, patiently awaiting service. When the waiter emerged from the restaurant, Fermor wrote, he “gazed with surprise at the empty space on the quay; then, observing us with a quickly masked flicker of pleasure, he stepped unhesitatingly into the sea” with their dinners. The surrounding diners, amused at the spectacle, began

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to send the maritime diners wine in celebration of their insouciance. Perhaps not surprisingly, Fermor's *New York Times* obituary would note that his "tables" were "reputed to be among the liveliest in Europe."

**On perimeter.** Metaphorical doors aren't the only doors that need closing in a purposeful gathering. The artful gatherer is also mindful of physical doors. Gatherings need perimeters. A space for a gathering works best when it is contained. Photographers and choreographers often close all the doors in a room to, as Platon explained to me, "make sure the energy isn't leaking out."

A game designer named Eric Zimmerman once told me about an experiment he and his colleagues designed for an exhibition in Los Angeles. The board game they created was surrounded by four curved walls that approximated a circle, so that when you stepped inside to play, it felt as if you were in a cave. Passersby were intrigued and players ended up becoming so addicted to the game that well after day had given way to night, they kept playing. At last, after the organizers took down all the other sets, they had to remove the four walls, though they left the board game intact. As the walls came down, one by one the players lost interest in the game and dispersed, despite the game remaining playable.

"When the walls came down, even though we didn't take away any of the pieces of the board game, they didn't feel like continuing," Zimmerman told me. "The energy was dispersed." Once the game's perimeter was gone, its players lost their sense of being in an alternative universe.

**On moving rooms.** 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.

**On area.** The size of a gathering's space should serve your purpose. I once walked into a fortieth birthday party that had all the right ingredients: a beautiful venue, delicious food, an open bar, a lively band, and two hundred guests. But for some reason, I kept looking over my shoulder all night, waiting for the party to begin. It felt like the room was still empty even after all the guests had arrived. You had to physically walk over to another part of the room to meet new people because everyone was standing so far apart. I spent most of the night hanging out with a small group of friends I already knew and didn't take any social risks.

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### Being the host

**Equalize your quests.** 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.

President Barack Obama noticed that men were far more likely to both raise their hands and be called on in public question-and-answer settings. So he started an experiment. Whether addressing students at Benedict College, workers in Illinois, or even his



own press corps, he would insist on taking questions in “boy, girl, boy, girl” fashion. If no woman stood up with a question when the women’s turn came, Obama would wait until one did.

### **Attending to thresholds: before your event starts, it has begun.**

*On ushering.* In many gatherings, your guests will benefit from being carried across a proverbial threshold, leaving the wide world and entering your small kingdom.

Hosts often don’t realize that there tends to be unfilled, unseized time between guests’ arrival and the formal bell-ringing, glass-clinking, or other form of opening. Make use of this no-man’s-land.

Managing this entry is important because none of us shows up as a blank slate to anything. You have seven meetings in a row, and the fourth one goes badly, and you go into the fifth meeting distracted and spent. You walk into Thursday small group at your church after crawling through traffic to get your daughter to basketball practice on time. Right before entering a bat mitzvah, you receive a text from your boss that your article has been killed. If you don’t create a passageway into your gathering for guests like these, they are going to be somewhere else in the most crucial moment of your gathering: the start.

Arianna Huffington is a fascinating and controversial woman, thanks to her work in politics, media, and wellness. She is also a gracious and skilled gatherer. In 2013, she hosted a conference to explore the ideas of wellness that would eventually grow into her new company, Thrive. And she chose to host it in her living room in SoHo in Manhattan. It was

essentially a business conference, and many of the participants were strangers to one another, and yet Huffington chose to greet them as if they were arriving at a wedding. She personally stood by the door for a good half hour or hour, first thing in the morning, and individually greeted each person who entered. She didn’t have her chief of staff do it, and she didn’t have her daughters do it. She did it herself. Because she did, she set a tone for the entire day. Yes, she was saying, we are at a conference, but we don’t have to act like it. This is my home, and you are my guest.

In everyday gatherings, it can be as simple as lighting a candle or making a welcome announcement or pouring every guest a special drink. But the final transition between the guests’ arrival and the opening is a threshold moment. Anticipation builds between the initial clap of thunder and the first drops of rain; hope and anxiety mingle. And then when that opening moment finally comes, it is time to give your guests a message: A magical kingdom exists, and you are invited inside.

*Don’t kill the attention of mourners.* The first change you should make if you want to launch well is to quit starting with logistics.

I once attended the funeral of a dear friend. The church was packed. Hundreds of family members, friends, and former colleagues gathered in a beautiful room to honor a man who had towered in his field and helped so many. As people entered the pews, they greeted one another. Many of them had been closely connected through this friend at some point but hadn’t seen one another in years. Sadness hung in the air, and many of us were already crying. Then the minister got up and walked to the front of the room.

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The moment was pregnant. All of us leaned in, eager for his words of comfort. He took a deep breath, looked out at all of us, and began. “Just so you all know, the family has invited us to join them afterward for a reception down the street at the rec center,” he said (as best I remember). “But, unfortunately, I am told there is not enough parking at the venue. It’s a short walk over, and I encourage you to keep your car here and walk over together afterward.” In seconds, the potential energy of the moment had been squandered.

### Keep your best self out of my gathering

Nowhere is puffed-up phoniness more palpable than at conferences. Nowhere else is the chance to have conversations across borders, identities, and professions so often wasted. Nowhere else are so many people with the influence to change things so frequently brought together, only for the resulting conversations to remain on the surface. They lurk there because everyone is presenting the best self they think others expect to meet.

**On the stranger spirit.** One of the more improbable secrets of unleashing honesty and vulnerability in a gathering is raising the stranger quotient. Though it seems counterintuitive, it is often easier to get people to share when many in the room are unknown to them— or when they are helped to see those they do know with fresh eyes.

After one 15 Toasts dinner in New York, a guest was upset that a close friend of hers, whom she had brought to the gathering, had spoken openly of his depression. She pulled me aside afterward, feeling confused and betrayed that he would share with several strangers something he had never told her. Yet the man was making the same choice that many of us do in similar situations. It is often easier to confess parts of our lives with strangers, who have no stake in our lives, than with intimates who do.

The power of the stranger lies in what they bring out in us. With strangers, there is a temporary

reordering of a balancing act that each of us is constantly attempting: between our past selves and our future selves, between who we have been and who we are becoming. Your friends and family know who you have been, and they often make it harder to try out who you might become. *But you’re not the singing type! Why would you want to be a doctor when you hated biology in school? I guess I just don’t see you doing standup.* Strangers, unconnected to our pasts and, in most cases, to our futures, are easier to experiment around. They create a temporary freedom to pilot-test what we might become, however untethered that identity is to what we have been. They allow us to try out new sides. In front of a stranger, we are free to choose what we want to show, hide, or even invent. ■



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Priya Parker, a Mobius Senior Expert and Founder of Thrive Labs, is an expert in innovation, and conflict mediation. Drawing on ten years of conflict resolution facilitation in the United States, India and the Middle East, Priya designs visioning and innovation labs that help organizations grow from the root. Priya has been a contributor to CNN.com/innovation and the *Harvard Kennedy School Review* and was recently named by *Fast Company* as one of “16 People to Follow on Twitter” for her “imagine innovation” twitter stream. She is the author of the just-published book *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters*. She’s also written chapters in *Facilitating Intergroup Dialogues* and *Sustained Dialogue*. Priya received her BA in Political and Social Thought at the University of Virginia, Phi Beta Kappa, an MBA from MIT Sloan and an MPA from the Harvard Kennedy School, where she received the Public Service Fellowship. She lives with her husband, Anand, in Brooklyn, NY.