

Learn the Art of Gathering



Do you think of your library programming as a social gathering? Priya Parker, who wrote the powerful book *The Art of Gathering*, would like all of us to think more deeply about how and why we gather. Whether it's for a board meeting or a wedding, Parker suggests that being more intentional about the dynamics of gathering will lead to more successful engagement with everyone involved.

The Art of Gathering: https://www.worldcat.org/title/art-of-gathering-how-we-meet-and-why-it-matters/oclc/1102271728&referer=brief_results

“Social connections are as important to our survival and flourishing as the need for food, safety, and shelter.”*



*Photo: 5 Tribe by [amanda tipton](#) on [Flickr CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)

*Source: [Social Connection Makes a Better Brain](#); E. E. Smith; The Atlantic; Oct 29, 2013

The strongest predictor of a species' brain size is the size of its social group. We have big brains in order to socialize.

Our brains are *wired to seek social connection*.

Which means that when we gather, we are tapping into a primal need.

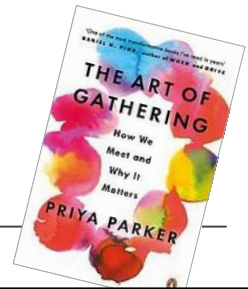
We know that library programs, active or passive, foster social cohesion. We take much of this for granted, but in a time when social infrastructure is failing in many communities, libraries can do more to make the case for the critical role they play. This is about the health of the community, whether or not the community can survive, can work together, connect us socially and with civility.

Be an intentional host



Photo: Grand Summer Event by [Yelp Inc](#) on [Flickr CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)

You are the **HOST**
of your event.
Own it!



It is tempting to think you can just plan a program, then step aside and let your guests come in and start doing the designed activities. There is so much more to being an effective host.

Priming — The event *starts* with the invitation

Parker's 90% rule:

90% of what makes a gathering successful is put in place beforehand.

How you invite people matters.



Game Day Fridays by San Jose Public Library on Flickr, CC BY-SA 2.0

Just realizing that the event actually starts as soon as you announce it or send out the invitations is a revelation. Parker's "90% rule" states that 90% of what makes a gathering successful is put in place before the actual event occurs.

Consider being intentional about who you invite. Will the event work better if you identify a specific group of guests? Do you want to do some intentional mixing of community members who might not come together under other circumstances? Once you've identified who, be thoughtful about the best conduits for reaching them. Is this audience likely to see Facebook or Instagram posts? Are they more likely to respond to an invitation from a community peer or trusted gatekeeper? Make sure the invitation speaks appropriately to the target audiences.

How might you prepare your guests ahead of time?

- Have a theme, especially if it's a recurring event, like Family Movie Night.
- Ask guests to do something before the event; e.g., bring/send a photo of happy moments they had in past year.
- Ask people to RSVP with an avatar or special identity.
- Talk about it leading up to the event, not just relying on the one-time invite.
- Set up a mini-competition, such as costume for movie night, smallest/biggest knitting needle for knit-night.
- Ask people to watch a relevant video to prepare.

Ushering – Crossing the threshold

Threshold: any place or point of entering or beginning.

Help people move from their comfort zone into the new experience.



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Remember that many community members may not feel comfortable in the library. What seems so familiar to you might seem intimidating or even unwelcoming to some. There is a threshold that people have to cross to enter the event. Even if the door is open and the room is bright, there may be an invisible barrier that makes people hesitate at that doorway threshold. Help people move from their comfort zone into the new experience, especially if they are new or infrequent visitors to the library.

What might you do to help people feel comfortable in this new experience?

- Have a welcome person at the door.
- Pay attention to the lighting and look/feel of the physical space; play music.
- Provide nametags: your name and your favorite...
- Have an icebreaker activity that gets people mingling.
- Have displays or activities outside of the space that lead people in.
- Have other staff in the room to interact with newcomers.

Equalizing – Connecting your guests

You are the catalyst for helping people find the connections between them.

Encourage mingling and mixing among participants.



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As the host of your gathering, it is your role to connect your guests. You are the catalyst for helping people find the connections between them. Often there are hierarchies of relationships and separations of perceived roles that keep people from approaching each other. Equalizing is about helping to soften those barriers and encourage mingling among participants.

One tactic that Parker uses to get people to leave their titles, social positions, and degrees at the door is to establish a “no talk about work rule.” When people are prohibited from defining themselves and others in terms of their job, they have to find other non-work things to talk about, like their hobbies, favorite foods, or sports. Another tactic is to require that participants leave their phones at the door. (Yes, that’s a tough one.)

What might you do to eliminate hierarchies and equalize social standing?

- Use randomness or intentionality when selecting teams for event participation.
 - Use mini candy bars to sort people into teams randomly; e.g., all the Snickers bars sit at Table A, Musketeers at Table B, Kit-Kats at Table C, etc.
- Play bingo for door prizes, with questions like “find someone who liked the book more than the movie,” etc.
- Identify willing patrons as collaborators to help catalyze connections.

Closing – End the event graciously

Help people transition back to their regular reality.

Provide time to acknowledge the end and reflect on their experience of the event.

Dual purpose: collect feedback!



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Events often end abruptly. The time is up, staff start cleaning up, and people just walk out the door. Parker urges more graciousness about ending an event, so that guests can transition from this special space and time and return to their individual realities.

The real power of having your guests leave excited and motivated is that it *becomes an advocacy piece*. Asking people to reflect on what has happened at the gathering serves the dual purpose of providing a feeling of closing for your guests and an opportunity for you to collect feedback on how they experienced the event. The feedback may help you improve future events and it may provide some great evidence of success for advocacy.

What might you do to help people reflect on what they experienced at the event?

- Have a talk-back board for people to record their experiences as they leave.
- Save time to do a check-out activity, such as:
 - Ask for one word that describes ...
 - Ask what they want more of.
 - Have people present to the group about what they did.
 - If there were visual or tangible products from the event, arrange them around the room and let guests do a “gallery walk.”
- Rather than ending abruptly, do a last-call announcement, like they do in bars and restaurants.
- Take photos and offer to send them via email or post on social media (with permission).

- Guests might want to pose with their team and their creations.
 - Groups might want to take selfies.
- Follow up next time you see your guests and chat about the program.
- Encourage attendees to post to social media about the event.

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Happy
gathering!



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Thank you!