



# ART OF GATHERING by Priya Parker

VIRTUAL GATHERING IN THE TIME OF CORONA

*Work Edition*

**APRIL 1, 2020**

# So your big upcoming work thing has been cancelled.

## **At least you're not alone.**

Gatherings of all kinds, from conferences to offsites to global meetings, are being canceled because of the new coronavirus. But while we may be entering a recession of real-world gatherings, we have the power to stave off an accompanying boom in loneliness.

Many of our real-world, in-person gatherings aren't actually that useful or warm or connective or transformational now. Turning them virtual may not be as bad as you'd think. Given the low bar set by our traditional meetings, with people staring at their phones at poorly moderated panels and pointless meetings, it's possible that these gatherings, when treated with intention, can outshine your rote in-person get-togethers.

This guide provides ideas for ways you might inject connection and meaning into events when you're physically apart but virtually together.



# If you're new here, Hi! I'm Priya Parker.

In case this guide landed in your inbox as a recommendation from a friend or colleague, I should probably tell you a little something about me.

I am a facilitator, strategic advisor, and author of *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why it Matters*. For the last 15 years, I've been helping people create collective meaning in modern life, one gathering at a time.

I hold degrees in public policy, organizational design, and political theory. But I've also been deeply shaped by dance, community theater, improv, and the fields of dialogue and deliberation. I realized along the way that when coming together, we often spend more time planning logistics than thinking about the elements that make a gathering sing - the human ones.

And I have now turned my attention to how we can make meaning together while we're apart. In partnership with The New York Times, I have a new podcast, called *Together Apart*, where I explore how people are gathering virtually, even while apart. You can subscribe [here](#).

I hope the Art of Gathering encourages you to have conversations about community and identity at moments of transition. And I think we all agree that this is one heck of a moment of transition.

You can find additional resources at [priyaparker.com](http://priyaparker.com) and find me on Instagram [@priyaparker](#).



**HELPING PEOPLE  
CREATE COLLECTIVE  
MEANING IN MODERN  
LIFE, ONE GATHERING  
AT A TIME.**



## STEP 1

# CLARIFY THE PURPOSE OF YOUR VIRTUAL GATHERING

**It may not be the same as the canceled gathering.**

Don't assume your digital gathering shares the same purpose as your real-world one. And don't try to do everything. Instead, first ask, given this new context:

- What is the most important need now for this group to gather around?
- What is the new heart of this gathering?
- How might we create that online?

If, for example, the canceling of an annual gathering is going to affect a whole range of small businesses' annual sales, maybe the biggest need is to create an ad hoc virtual marketplace where each business gets 30 seconds to pitch their new offering, and guests commit to placing orders on the spot.

After the city of Austin cancelled SXSW this year, Nina Gregory, senior editor on the arts desk at NPR posted this on Twitter: "What if @AmazonStudios or @netflix or @Apple just bought all the films from @sxsw and did a sxsw x streamer film festival, coronavirus edition. build online community around it. films get bought and seen. and the streamer is a hero to indie filmmakers and fans."

Or if the benefit was to create the warmth that builds the good will for the rest of the year, maybe you scrap the "official" agenda and host a virtual game night instead.

If your purpose remains the same, then find the appropriate digital tools to help you recreate it. (Zoom, Google Hangouts, Skype, and [Run The World](#) are some tools that can help.)



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## STEP 2

# USE EVERYONE'S ENVIRONMENT TO FILL THE CONTEXTLESSNESS OF VIRTUAL GATHERINGS

**The room and location do a lot of work to set the context for a group.**

A ballroom signals a different set of norms than a mosh pit. The level of light in a restaurant primes guests to the level of intended intimacy. The height of a judge's bench conveys authority.

Virtual gatherings suffer, in part, because there's almost no inherited context to set up "the room."

We do very little to counterbalance that. We place our cameras in front of the blandest backgrounds we can. Instead, invite people to help co-create the room by sitting and placing their cameras in front of spots that have meaning for them, or that adds beauty or color to the many frames everyone else will be looking at. It will add warmth, context, and point to other parts of people's lives.

**"ON ZOOM, YOU CAN BUILD THE ROOM THROUGH A DOZEN WINDOWS."**

*- Priya Parker*



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## STEP 3

# HAVE A CLEAR HOST WHO KNOWS HOW TO USE THE MUTE BUTTON.

**Whether the gathering is four people or 4,000, know who's in charge.**

A good host is a deft traffic cop, especially for online gatherings that are clunkier by nature. A good host orients her guests to the gathering's purpose, and connects, protects, and equalizes her guests. Be strong where you need to be but chill in unexpected ways.

After the 2016 election, I learned of a progressive political nonprofit that hosted an open conference call to reassess their priorities for the following four years. More than 60,000 people dialed in.

Rather than just talking through the entire call, the host welcomed everyone, and then announced they were going to turn off the master mute button and invited everyone to give one giant scream. Within minutes, the hosts had established their purpose: to remind people that they were not alone.



**"POWER EXISTS IN EVERY  
GATHERING. ON ZOOM,  
DISPROPORTIONATE  
POWER LIES IN THE MUTE  
BUTTON."**

*- Priya Parker*



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## STEP 4

# CREATE AN OPENING RITUAL

**A consistent opening ritual connects people and establishes who's in the room and their relevance to the meeting.**

Don't just "get straight to business." Invite people to bring a beverage in a favorite mug (or timezone appropriate vessel) and open the meeting by asking them to show the mug (this helps create a common shared moment across distance), and then answer (in one sentence or less) a relevant opening prompt that informs the discussion and shows their own relevance to it.

Have guests share a physical object they keep in their work space, and why it matters to them. (On my desk, you'd find a large smoothed stone with the words "Hal Saunders. Listen deeply enough to be changed by what you hear. 1930-2016.").

You will get insights into your colleagues that can explain what they care about, how they make decisions, and other parts of their histories.

And, of course, the traffic cop should keep this moving along.





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## STEP 5

# SHARE, BUT DIGITALLY

**We can share things with each other instantly that previous generations couldn't have imagined.**

Send a relevant episode of a podcast for guests to listen to ahead of the call. Share a relevant article, video, and a specific agenda that orients people to the new purpose of the gathering.

Send a digital gift that arrives at the end of the gathering: an app that's related to your gathering's purpose, a digital subscription, a Venmo payment with your favorite relevant emoji, a screenshot of the gathering that just occurred.



**"THE GATHERING BEGINS  
FROM THE MOMENT OF  
DISCOVERY, NOT THE  
MOMENT THE GUEST WALKS  
IN THE DOOR."**

*- Priya Parker*



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## STEP 6

# ALLOW PEOPLE BBC MOMENTS

**A home office is just that. A home. Also, for now, an office.**

Remember when those children burst into the office of their dad while he was explaining the world?

We need more of these moments, not fewer! They remind a group that everyone has multiple things going on in their lives (which is a good thing). And though you may be hanging out in the digital ether, there are real living, breathing, interesting human beings on the other side. Many of them have cats who'd like to say hello.



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## STEP 7

# BREAK IT UP: HOST DIFFERENT CONVERSATIONS IN DIFFERENT ROOMS

### Shake it up.

In a conference, if there's a new session, we move to another room.

Ed Cooke, a memory expert, tells us that people are more likely to remember different moments of an evening when they occur in different rooms.

To break up different sessions of your call, have people change rooms or even just camera angles. (Take stretch breaks in those transitions.) They will be more likely to recall different parts of the meeting later on.



**"CONNECTION HAPPENS  
WHEN YOU REMIND PEOPLE  
WE ALL HAVE MANY SIDES.  
AND, THOSE SIDES MAY  
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## STEP 8

# DON'T DITCH THE COCKTAIL HOUR

### **Keep the time for celebration, banter, and release.**

Invite people to bring a drink of choice. Invite people to move into a part of their space that would be the closest thing to a cocktail hour. Consider sending them a \$12 drink credit, so you're still "hosting" them.

With their permission, screen-share their cellphone numbers, and allocate part of the hour for one-on-one phone chats, just as they would have milling around at a cocktail hour.

Make time for toasts and chitchat. It will help close your offsite/meeting/virtual summit. It gives a sense of camaraderie. And it is a moment to make meaning.



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## STEP 9

# KEEP CALM AND GATHER ON (ON ZOOM, AT LEAST)

**In times of isolation, we need each other more than ever.**

Don't pretend that this isn't strange. But don't retreat, either. The human spirit is resilient and creative. The same creative people who show up to your conference, or glass blowing lesson, or sidewalk sale, still carry that spark when they're behind a screen.

Instead of being what Sherry Turkle has astutely termed "alone together," we have an opportunity to be creative with the digital tools that previous generations couldn't have imagined.

During this tumultuous and unpredictable moment, let's invent creative, meaningful ways of being together apart.



