

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 113: PRIYA PARKER

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak, and live all things disruption.

My guest today is Priya Parker, a facilitator and strategic advisor who helps people create gatherings in their work and life that are transformative. She's also the author of *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters*.

Whitney: Priya Parker, welcome. We are delighted to have you on the podcast.

Priya: Thank you for having me.

Whitney: So I have to start off by saying I was at TED. I guess it's been two weeks ago now. Got to hear you speak and you were just, um, incandescent, uh, just fantastic.

Priya: (laughs). Thank you.

Whitney: And I... What was it like for you? Was it a, a like a lovely, terrifying? Like, what was the experience?

Priya: (laughs). All of the above. You know, um, TED is funny in the sense that it's a very developed ritual. I mean I think all gatherings that are repeated over time are. And, um, to come particularly as a speaker, you know, there's kind of to step on that red circle, to wear that, you know, um, earphone, to kind of walk into and do something and partake in a process that so many others have, um, over, you know, 20 plus years, um, it kind of becomes bigger than the component parts. And for me, you know, it was an, it was a huge honor and it's a very strange process.

And I think, you know, Chris Anderson and the various folks of TED will be the first people to say that. But, um, you, are as I think all, uh, gatherings that make meaning over time do, you are part of something that's kind of bigger than you, you are and you use your best abilities to put into words the message that you believe is important for other people to, to consider.

Whitney: It hadn't occurred to me until you started talking about it and analyzing it that really for a person who studies *The Art of Gathering*, which is your book, which is terrific, and we're gonna talk about it in a minute is that this is really a gathering that is, is fascinating to dissect. And it sounds like you've done some of that already and perhaps will do more.

Priya: Absolutely. I mean I think one of the things that... You know, I'm a, a group conflict resolution facilitator by, by training and by background. And then when you, you know, spend five years writing and researching gatherings, the problem is you can't ever go to a gathering again and not turn off (laughs) that lens. Um, and I, and I think that's true also when you read the book.

But for me, TED and I, you know, I studied it for the book and I interviewed, um, a curator for it. It, it didn't make it into the text, um, except for one paragraph, but, um, I think it's a fascinating, uh, organization and pa- particularly unit of gathering to study. You know, one of the, um, curators that I did interview ahead of time was, um, was Bruno. This was in, in my book research.

And he said this to me, you know, on the record. He said... I asked him at one point, um, you know, I said there's many copycats of TED and, you know, it's become its own thing outside of TED. I'm at many conferences that say, you know, give a TED Talk, but even within companies. Um, and I, I said to him, you know, I recently got a, um, an email from a new organization that said, "Come to our amazing conference. It's Burning Man meets Summit Series meets TED." And I said, "What do you think of that?"

Um, and he started laughing and he said, w- "Everybody... Every gathering has its own unique chemical composition. And you need to find your own. So the idea that people are gonna replicate or combine these three very unique gatherings that have their own chemical compositions which are a specific group of individuals over a series of years making a thousand different decisions, that's not really something someone can replicate."

Um, and I just thought that was such a beautiful way of thinking about the organism of a live gathering is having its own unique chemical composition.

Whitney: Hm, that is beautiful. All right. So we will... We're gonna press pause in that for just a minute and, and there might be opportunities to editorialize a bit more as, as we proceed through the, the podcast. I, I wanna back up and have you share with our audience where you grew up and what you thought you would be when you grew up.

Priya: I was born in Zimbabwe, um, you know, as most people are. (laughing). And, uh, my mother is a cultural anthropologist and researcher and my father is a hydrologist. And for the first five years of my life, for the first kind of eight or nine years of their marriage, they lived in different, um, communities in Africa and Southeast Asia, um, often in fishing villages because that was kind of the Venn diagram of their work. Researching and studying communities and, um, and how communities interact with, with foreign aid and keep kind of their, their sense of decision making in what's called participatory development.

Eventually, they moved back to the US and, uh, settled in Northern Virginia. First in Arizona and then in Virginia. So I kind of, you know, bounced around for the first nine years of my life. And then for the next 10 years, I had the opposite experience in a way which was I was deeply embedded in community in Northern Virginia. I played, um, you know, basketball. I played softball, I, uh, very competitively. I, you know, went into grocery stores and ran into people I knew. I kind of, you know, I kind of have the opposite experience of really belonging to a place.

But within that belonging to Vienna, Virginia, I had two households. My, my parents within a year of coming to Virginia separated and then divorced and then each remarried. Um, and I talk about this a little bit in the TED Talk but, uh, my experience then for the next, you know, eight years was going... They had joint custody and so going back and forth between these two households. And they kind of married peop- remarried people that were very different from, uh, each other.

So, uh, I went back and forth within two households. And my mother, uh, married an Englishman, a white Englishman and that household was a sort of Indian and British, um, agnostic Buddhist, atheist, you know, vegetarian, incense-filled, um, liberal democrat household.

And then every other Friday afternoon, I would go to my father's house and, um, that was a white Evangelical Christian conservative republican, twice a week church-going family with two step siblings that were still in the house.

And so I grew up basically between these two radically different households but in a way, well, in a way belonged to both and in a way were, you know, not in each household every two weeks. So it was a... And I'm an only child, so it was kind of this, you know, fragmented but rich existence.

Whitney: All right. So, given that highly unusual background, um-

Priya: What did I wanna be when I grew up? (laughs).

Whitney: Yeah. According to me... And maybe in your world, maybe you know lots of people who have a background similar to yours, but in my world that is unusual.

Priya: Yeah.

Whitney: What you... what did you want to be?

Priya: From a very young age, I always said I wanted to be a diplomat. Um, and if I... And if that didn't work out, I wanted to be a dance choreographer. And so I sort of became both. (laughing). I feel like a gatherer or a designing... a designer of experience is half choreographer, you know, half diplomat. (laughs).

Whitney: That's interesting. So I could totally see the diplomat and as I'm thinking about it, you're right. When you put together gathering, which you're gonna talk about in just a minute, I'm hoping anyway, you really are choreographing something aren't you? Something quite - a dance.

Priya: Yeah. And when I, when I thought, you know, my kind of happiest moments in childhood, I think like many people are like very simple whatever expression they come in. But it was often, um, I found my kind of voice and my place among many routine sports and through dance choreography. And so I, you know, I played softball very, um, seriously both in school and then in, you know, at least in my area, it was called travel sports.

And in softball, uh, uh, at least, you know, there's a very strong tradition of, um, of cheering, um, of vocalizing, of kind of, of almost intimidating the other team when you're up to bat. Um, in a way that is different than, uh, the cheerleading function of a football, uh, a football game or, um, or a basketball game in that the players are also the vocalizers of the cheers, right? There's not a separate cheerleading team.

Whitney: Huh.

Priya: And I think part of... Right? You're sitting in the... You're sitting in the dugout and at least in softball rituals, you're, you're saying, you know, you learn 30 or 40 or 50 different cheers and chants and jeers. And I think particularly for, for me and for young women, it's one of the few, um, you know, sports is ritual. It's kind of a coded way or rules we all agree upon where you can behave differently for a certain amount of time. And it was one of the few areas where I as a young woman could kind of yell and scream and intimidate the other side and lead cheers, and I found a lot of my voice through that process. Um, I mean I didn't realize that that was happening.

And then I think the other moments were like choreographing dances with my, you know, with my girlfriends to Paula Abdul or you know, Madonna. (laughing) And growing up taking dance classes, I always found, uh, a really, a beauty in kind of synchronized rhythms and physical motion, but each person having their own way of expressing it through their body.

Both the physicality of dance and the physicality of sports and the kind of, um, allowance for, uh, both coordination but still a space for self-expression was always extremely... I mean I wouldn't have articulated it that way as a child, but looking back, it was al- it was deeply formative to me and also were the moments I, you know, often felt most alive.

Whitney: That is so fascinating Priya. The... Not only the, the piece about the dance but there... this, this is a form where you can use your physical body in a very acceptable way in terms of interacting with people, but also the aspect about sports. I had never heard that before that in softball, there's this ritual around what people say and what they do and how you can heckle and like you said, jeer the other players and it's just... i- it's a rule of engagement that is **there**.

Priya: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Exact... It was like... It w- you were able to be tough. You were able to, particularly as a girl, like not be nice. You were able to be strong. You were able to kinda make fun of. But it was all through cheers that the other side also kind of knew.

Whitney: Yeah.

Priya: But you know you see this in, um, in New Zealand and, and some of the different, uh, like rugby traditions of having these opening dances, I think they're called haka, but don't quote me on that, um, where, where part of the opening rituals like intimidat- It's like physical rituals of intimidation of the players of the other side. When cheerleaders do this whether they're men or women and they're not the players, that's a different role, right?

Whitney: Oh, absolutely.

Priya: So the interesting thing with softball was when the players themselves, you go up and then you, you know, you cheer and you jeer and then you bat a home run or you bat a, you know, you, you, hit the ball and you run to third. It's all interconnected to say that like we have voice where we are the players and we can also win in a lot of different ways by psychologically creating an atmosphere of power.

Whitney: That is fascinating. So I was a cheerleader in high school.

Priya: Hm.

Whitney: So, I'm thinking about this experience of, of the two being very separate. And you think about Jungian psychology, which I'm sure you've studied, and this idea of, you know, the masculine and the feminine.

Priya: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: And in so many instances, the two are separate.

Priya: Yes.

Whitney: And what you're telling me is that in this ritual for-

Priya: Yes.

Whitney: ... young women, the psychological development oppor- developmental opportunity is stunning to me because you were given, every time you played a game, the opportunity to integrate your masculine and your feminine.

Priya: Yes. Beautifully said.

Whitney: And that is really interesting.

Priya: That's exactly right. And that it was okay to be both.

Whitney: Yes.

Priya: And that a woman could be both, and then inherently, a man can be both. Um, and that it's not, uh, either weaker to have less power to be the ones, um, you know, performing a feminine act.

Whitney: Cheering.

Priya: Exactly.

Whitney: Yeah, yeah.

Priya: And then and even in the nature of the cheers, many of the cheers had elements of masculinity and femininity. And that both were powerful.

Whitney: Is there one that you, you remember that you can tell us?

Priya: Some cheers were to intimidate the other side and some cheers will build up your own.

Whitney: Yeah.

Priya: So, um, you know, one, if you're like... if, if a, if a player, if a pitcher throws a ball not a strike and the batter doesn't swing, you just like... Um, one that's come up is like, um, good eye, good eye, good eye, G double O D-E-Y-E, good eye, good eye, good eye. Way to watch it. Way to way to watch it. Way to watch it, way to watch the ball. Do it again. Do it again. We like it. We like it. Do it again. Do it again. We like it. We love it. We want more of it.

But there's... and then you can like-

Whitney: I love it.

Priya: (laughs).

Whitney: I love it, thank you. That was so fun.

Priya: First time you've had a softball cheer on your show.

Whitney: (laughs).

Priya: But like I'm not doing it now, but you could... depending on the context, you can, you can have your voice go lower. You can have it go quieter. You can go a little louder. You can elongate the words and, and you can jeer, you know. And some of them... And then there are word... There were some cheers that were really aggressive and some parents would get upset, you know. So all of these various context of what is an appropriate atmosphere within a context of rules was something that we could explore as we were also collectively figuring out voice as teenagers.

Whitney: That was super interesting. Thank you for l- le- exploring that, um, that tangent with us.

Um, so you go to college. You go to University of Virginia and after you graduate from college you do something called Training People in Sustained Dialogue. Can you tell us what that is and sort of the evolution of how that got you to what you do now?

Priya: Um, my formative experience in college was discovering this ex- this process called Sustained Dialogue. Um, and I did work in it afterwards but it was the story starts a little bit earlier. Um, you know, I'm biracial and I went to the University of Virginia and, um, even then the first question people would ask me was "what are you."

Whitney: Hm.

Priya: You know, before like where do you live or what dorm are you in or, you know, where are you studying.

And I, I actually didn't understand the question at first. And then I figured out that they meant like racially, and it, it, it upset me that that was seen as the most important first question in order to basically contextualize the meaning, you know, the meaning of my identity in this specific context or world. And so but UVA has a very strong sense of student self-governance and older students said to me, if you have a problem, do something about it.

And so I started studying the history of race at UVA. I got a fellowship to look at the history of desegregation, um, and integration. I, you know, I, I kind of looked at it academically but then I also studied it socially and asked older students like what are the various ways students have tried to figure out how to change the cultural climate, the racial climate here.

And, um, what I learned then was there were a- every four years, every six years, you know, colleges are rev- revolving doors. So on one hand, you can actually change a culture relatively quickly but on the other hand, you could also forget, you know, kinda...

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Priya: ... recreate the wheel over and over again. And, um, I learned about this process called Sustained Dialogue which, which is a, um, group dialogue process that was created by a guy named Hal Saunders, um, who in government for 40 or 50 years as a diplomat, left government, retired and started working with citizens on the ground.

And he basically looked at what is the natural process when people who are in conflict and commit to coming together to change their underlying relationships. Like can you, can you consciously change relationships if you set up a process for it?

I met Hal, uh, the summer of my freshmen year when I was in this kind of studying, you know, studying what to do, and he agreed to bring... help me and a, and a friend of mine, Jacqueline Switzer, bring Sustained Dialogue to UVA. We sent the letter out to the university announcing were starting this process on September 10, 2001.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Priya: And of course, 9/11 happened the next day. And in part beca- and this is... I talked about this in the book, you know, a gathering begins at the moment of invitation. It doesn't begin when people when people walk in the room. And a gathering begins at the... what I call in the book the moment of discovery. The moment... Whoever your intended guest in... guest is learns that there is an intended event in the future.

And because we sent out this letter, we had psychologically already created this gathering that didn't yet exist, but then there is this deep need, this 9/11, this crisis on our campus, and

Sustained Dialogue became this kind of psychological container that people's like, you know, fears and anger and, you know, mixed emotions and all of this went into. And so, we're at the right place at the right time, and in the first year had... I think it was seven dialogue groups.

And so what it basically is, is in... on college campuses is it's groups of 12 to 14 students who each... diverse groups who commit to meeting every two weeks for three hours to, to explore their relationships to race and to each other over the course of a year. So it's a real time commitment.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Priya: Um, and it's a process that believes that if you can transform the underlying relationships, you can build the trust and the perceptions and the capacity to begin to then also make a... understand what needs to structurally happen e- externally and start to agitate for it.

Whitney: Wow. Okay.

Priya: (laughs).

Whitney: So, you did this all through college. What's interesting to me is that, you know, we, we have a daughter who's a senior in high school, getting ready to go to college. And just thinking about your, your convening power and your conviction as a freshman in college, I, I think that I really am impressed by that that you did that at that point in time.

So let's talk a, a bit about and just, just in the interest of time 'cause I really want people to be able to think through the arc of a gathering. You've just made the comment gathering begins when the invitation begins. Um, I have some notes that I can kind of talk you through where I'm going. So you said it begins with the invitation, but you start with a purpose. Um, and can you just talk a little bit about the purpose, the gue- guest list and the where will you gather first.

Priya: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And just to set up a little context, I think, you know, I, I went on a journey where I interviewed over 100 extreme gatherers, people who, who create group experiences that the people who are in those experiences call meaningful and transformative. So I wanted to see who in the world beyond my own, my own craft of facilitation, outside of the world of facilitation is creating gatherings that people deeply remember and ever are changed by.

And I asked them why do some gatherings take off and others don't. And the first thing I would say is none of them took for granted the time we have with other people.

And so even before you think about like the introduction or the component parts, I would say the first thing for your listeners is to first just see that we're gathering all of the time. Whether it's in board meetings or staff meetings or with our friends for, um, you know, a game night or a town hall or, uh, you know, public, personal, baby showers, weddings, funerals. And the first thing I would say before just saying how, you know, how can we make them transformative is to begin to just see this as a unit that you can actually influence.

And we all are doing this all of the time. So it's not doing something or not. It's actually pausing and seeing this as a unit of influence and power and meaning. Um, and the first thing that I'd say that a lot of these different people said to me was they all knew why they were gathering and they had a specific disputable purpose.

And what I mean by that and when I look at the, the, um, the mistake most of us make is we assume the purpose is obvious, and the more, um, obvious seeming the purpose of the gathering, the more likely we are to skip it.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Priya: So, like weddings where it's rare for a, a bride and groom or with their parents to say, well, so why are we... not where are we getting married but why are we having a wedding, you know, versus going to c- city hall.

Are we having a wedding to honor our parents or are we... First and foremost, are we having a wedding to bring together our collective and modern tribe to, you know, unify us and hold us to account when, you know, things get tough? And because we don't usually have that conversation we... it ends up going into proxy war. So you debate whether to invite, you know, your mother's colleague or your long lost college buddy. But what you're really arguing about is who should this go to. Who should this invitation go to? Well, who is this for first, right?

And so particularly in a work context, you know, we tend to for staff meetings or for board meetings, we think, um, that the, that the meeting... that the meaning and the purpose is obviously and so, uh, often within a meeting or within a board meeting, because we don't pause to say what is the best possible use of this group's time together, what is our desired outcome, um, many gatherings are not transformative or meaningful because there is a collection of an, uh, implicit purposes.

Whitney: Hm.

Priya: And so the first step to creating more meaningful transformative gatherings is to just pause and say what is the purpose of this mee- this gathering? Why do I wanna have a birthday party? Rather than saying, okay, I want to have a birthday party cake and candles, and I think most adults, many adults I know don't have a birthday party anymore because they kinda feel like I don't really need people to come together and blow out candles. Right?

Like, so, so... But that's because we first assume that there's a specific form to a gathering, a birthday... I talked about it at the TED talk a little bit. Birthday party, cakes and candle. Instead to ask the question, uh, what is, you know, what is the moment of life I find myself in? And if I were to be able to bring a specific group of people to help mark that in my life, you know, what would that look like?

Whitney: Yeah.

Priya: So if it's like I want more adventure in my life or I'm just coming out of a, you know, tough divorce or I'm leaving, you know, my, my, uh, my first, you know, real job and I'm getting ready to move across the country. Whatever it is, to actually use these moments to say, I actually want more adventure in my life. Who in my life, you know, always inspires me to be more adventurous? What if I just invite those five people and have my quote, unquote birthday party, I'm using air quotes but can't see me, (laughing) um, as 5 a.m. morning trip to the fishing dock watching the fishermen pull their fish in.

You know like that can be a birthday party. So a huge part of this is not saying like how do we have, you know, more beautiful cakes and candle? But it's actually saying how do we think organically about the time we spend with each other in ways that actually help mark the moments of life that were in.

Whitney: Yeah. It's interesting that you say that which goes to... you alluded to this idea of proxy wars a little bit. Because once you know your purpose for the gathering then it's much easier for you to decide who to actually invite.

Priya: Exactly. And I think part... To go to your second question, who should be there, I think we often think... We often start with the guest list and we back into purpose, which is, which is fine. Um, and we do it, you know, kind of intuitively. So say for example, like, you know, you and your partner wanna have a dinner party. Great. Who should we invite?

And you start saying, well, you know, Mary and Atul and Joe and, um, you know, and Jasmine and, uh, Sridave. And he's like, "Well, I don't really know about Sridave." It's like, well I don't... you know. Well, well, what is this for? Well... You know, and you kind of start... We often back into purpose by finding the person that you have to argue about, right? (laughs).

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Priya: And, and that's true in a meeting or in other context. We'll say, "Well, why do we need marketing there if we're talking about product?" And then you say, "Well, you know, the best way to think about getting marketing involved in the product is getting them to deeply understand and bring in like the perspective of the user or our brand promise." And then you actually are arguing about purpose but you backed into it by figuring out who should be there or not.

And all I'm saying is, if you first figure out your purpose, then figure out who's gonna be there. We tend to over include, um, because we don't know how to say no or there is not a culture of like, it doesn't make sense for you to be here." Um, but when you actually figure out who should be there for the purpose, then it doesn't feel so personal when you don't invite everybody. It's purposeful.

Whitney: Okay. Yeah. You have a great quote. you said purpose is your bouncer.

Priya: Yes. Purpose is your bouncer.

Whitney: I love that. Purpose is your bouncer.

Priya: I actually got that... You know, I write about this in the book but, um, one of the characters in the chapter ca- on Generous Authority, the chapter is actually called Don't be a Chill Host. But, um, her name is Nora Abousteit. And she is half German, half Egyptian and she to me models kind of this extreme idea, um, of, of being **willing** to enforce your norms, your purpose, your rules in the moment because she realizes you're protecting your purpose even if it feels controlling in the moment.

And her father with the Egyptian side, he started a bar. He, he was a Egyptian immigrant to Germany as a PhD student, and he started the first student-run bar in this small town in Germany. And it was a big deal that it was students only. And people thought it was super cool that there was a student's only bar and that was its purpose. But one day, this vice mayor of the town came and knocked and wanted to come in. He wasn't a student. And the bouncer said, uh, "No, you can't come in. You're not a student."

And he was a kind of a big man around town, and he said, "What do you mean like, you know, I can't come in?" And they went and, um, you know, got Mr. Abousteit and, uh, and, and he came. He was the owner and he was a student at the time, and he basically said, "No, this is a students' only bar." And in- And yes, he said it was a students' only bar in theory, and he did certain things like one of the first times as Nora related to me that, uh, students drank directly from the bottle. And, and in that era that was seen as kind of gauche.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Priya: Um, and a little, you know, risqué. (laughs) But he defined the purpose by actually enforcing the rule that even the vice mayor can't come.

Whitney: Fascinating.

Priya: He consummated the purpose through that act.

Whitney: Right, right. So I love that you say you actually... You have a Jerry Seinfeld quote in here. I don't know if you have the book in front of you. It's page 54. So Jerry Seinfeld says, "The room is doing 80% of the job."

Priya: So this came from an interview he did on a radio show, and, um, someone sent it to me and I loved it. And he basically talked... He told a really funny story about how he loves performing in old vaudeville houses around the country in part because of the, the acoustics and in part because of the way the theater is set up that all rows, all seats are focused on this like person on the stage. And, and in a sense, the physical architecture focuses on the person on stage having all of the focus and the power in the room.

So, as he puts it, some rich guy sees you, you know, in comedy club or in one of these theaters and thinks, "Wow, this is amazing. I'm going to have Jerry Seinfeld come to my birthday party." And you go to the birthday party and you stand in the living room and you'd go down the toilet, and everyone thinks "That guy is not that funny."

And what it basically says is like the room is doing all of the work. It's doing the, you know, 80% of the work. And when he's going into a living room, and this is true for every gathering in context, he has to fight against all of the things that aren't set up for him. So whether it's elevation, physical elevation of the stage or of the, um, you know, of the rows in the theater of whether it's the acoustics or whether it's having somebody else, an opener or the emcee quiet down the crowd versus it's kind of awkward in the party even if it is Jerry Seinfeld to like, shut... you know, hush down the last two people that were whispering and giggling at the bar.

Think about when you're gathering ... How is the room gonna work for your purpose? So again, we tend to accept the default set up of a room whether it's walking in and accepting the way the chairs are set up at a... or even at a restaurant, you know, if you have six people at, uh, uh, at a table and having three sit on one side and three sit on the other, I almost always ask the waiter if we could take out one table and have one person sit on one end and one person sit on the other 'cause you're closing the circle. Otherwise, it's like a ping pong match.

Um, but we don't think we can do that because that's not how the room was set up. Um, and, and so, so it could be just changing the actual furniture you're given in the room wh- or at a table if there's nine chairs and there's only eight guests. Like move that one chair so that there's not a ghost kind of sitting around your table the entire time. It's leaking kind of psychological and physical energy. Um, but also just does the context of the place match your purpose.

Um, I give an example in the book from a, a former banker named Chris Borellos and, um, he talks about this huge, uh, deal um, in the late '90s between Lucent and Alcatel. And it's... It was a between a French company and an American company, a merger. They were so sure it's gonna go through. The, the... Basically, the price has always been pre-published in the Wall Street Journal.

And at the, at the very end they were gonna do... most of the due diligence, they always did meetings in like drab hotel rooms, you know, in New Jersey near the airport. Often sometimes, uh, in the airport like the hotel airport to keep away from the press, to also keep it low, you know, low key so if anything went wrong, no one really knows about it.

But at the last minute, a director on the French side got sick, and they just asked, "Could we do it in France instead?" And so they said okay, and so they all went over to France and Alcatel had, um, had a, uh, chateau I guess as the French do (laughing) that they often use meetings for. And they, they hosted this, um, this meeting, um, in the, in the chateau.

And as Chris described it to me, over the course of two days, the French who were already... It was supposed to be a merger among equals, but, but everybody kind of knew that the French were kind of the more equal of the two, but up until the point, they had done it in a way that saved

face for everybody. And over the next two days, the French were getting more, as he describes it, more and more arrogant and saying things like well we... "When we, you know, control you, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah."

And there was, you know, paintings of Louis XIV on the wall. And Chris says, you know, "To my dying day, I will swear that the reason the deal fell apart was because of the, the, the, the chateau brought out the Frenchness of the French, you know, totally politically incorrect. Um, and he said, "If we have done it in the hotel room, I swear, I believe to the end that this deal would have, this deal would have gone through."

And what he was basically saying in my language, I call it the Chateau Principle in the book, is basically if you make sure that the context of the, of the location and of the room and of the building and of the meaning of the place matches the purpose. And we all play roles and scripts in different moments and for different reasons. And make sure that whatever role that your environment is setting up for people to play matches the outcome that you want to, uh, emerge.

Whitney: That's fascinating. Fascinating. Okay. So let me ask you, um, one other question on this as we start to, start to move toward the wrap up. So, on page 74 of the book, you say, "Hosting is inevitably an exercise of power."

Priya: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: Can you talk about that for just a moment?

Priya: We tend to think of power, many people think of power as this kind of unfortunate thing that happens in groups. And as a conflict resolution facilitator, you know, one of the first things that one is taught and knows is that anytime two people let alone three or more, which is what I define as a gathering, um, or group, power exists. And, um, and if you think about power as, as... Strip away kind of all of the baggage around it and just think of it as decision making.

So in a moment, and you can think about a family, a group of, you know, let's say a nuclear family of four people decides, somebody says, "Hey, let's go out for dinner tonight. And somebody else says, "Great. What... Should we have Chinese?" It's like, No. I want Indian, I want Mexican, I want Italian." How... In that moment, how does a group, how does a family decide where to go for dinner? Is it because the same person always decides? Does mom always basically get the veto? Does the youngest daughter get her way all the time?

Like, whatever it is, decision making power in any... In any moment in a gathering, if you actually slow things down, three or more people come in together for a purpose. You... Technically, anybody could do anything at any moment, right?

Four people could stand up and start jeering the panel. In a, you know, in a press conference like reporters could do whatever they want technically, but there is etiquette and decorum and norms that we tend to not break. That said, a host is somebody who understands and doesn't abdicate the role of if you... and the responsibility. If you're gonna get people to gather you should know why you're doing it. You should know what, what I called the social contract is. What are you actually inviting them for. What are you asking them to do implicitly or explicitly?

And for a dinner party, that could be bring a bottle of wine or that could be come with a question or that could be **whatever**, like RSVP. I don't care if you come or not. Just RSVP. Like, it doesn't have to... Social context don't have to be these deeply formal things. They're simply an agreement that people find to be legitimate for a specific moment in time.

Whitney: Hm.

Priya: And a host is somebody who understands that if you're **going to** bring people together, you have an informal and I would say in some context, formal role to, you know, choreograph, (laughs) play police, cop, you know. It depends on what the, what the, what the dynamics and the norms are.

I, I talk about the Alamo Drafthouse in the book because I, I think it's a lovely example of, of, of a, of a host, in this case, a theater, the company, um, the movie theater, and understanding that they're actually hosting something. So, most movie theaters have rules that you can't text on the phone or you can't talk loudly. They have jingles at the beginning of a, you know, at the beginning of the film. And the a- and AMC and Loews do this as well.

But at AMC or Loews or most theaters, if somebody actually then breaks the rule or breaks the norms of texting or they're talking loudly, they... It's on the other patrons to turn around to hush them. Right? You're sitting there, someone's texting behind you or talking or laughing loudly. How do you... How do you do it? Do you ignore it? Do you turn around and give them a bad look? Do you hush them?

And the only time the formal authority or the host comes out is literally if they have to send in security, right? Unless it escalates so much. And I've been in movie theaters where people are sending in, you know. There's, there's, there's, such bad behavior that security is sent in. At the Alamo, they have the same rules, but they have a, a, a, enforcing mechanism that is socially appropriate which is you can order drinks or food through this, through putting, through a little card but they also writing it down and putting your card like vertical so that the staff can see it.

You can also say, "Hey, this person behind me is texting or, you know, tweeting or whatever they're doing." And the staff will come over and no one else knows if you've ordered a beer or, you know, rat out your, your fellow, um, moviegoer. But if the staff themselves will go over and give them one warning. And if they do it again, they'll kick them out.

Whitney: Hm.

Priya: And what they're doing... And you could say wow that's really hard core. But what they're actually doing is they know what their purpose is which is to bring them going, you know, in an age of Netflix to, to make it worth going to the movies, right?

Whitney: Yeah.

Priya: And to bring the, the experience of going to the movies, to make... to bring the magic back to that experience. And that they realize that if they're gonna have that and... as their purpose, they better protect it. And by basically making your guests ba- you know, combat each other, you're not... you're putting too much weight on your guests. So they're enforcing their norms and their practice in what I call generous authority. It's authority that's generous to all of the other guests, to the purpose. Um, and that, that says, "Hey, I... Here's the social contract and I'm, I'm conscious enough to help enforce it and not put this on you."

Whitney: So, what kind of gathering would you like to host professionally or personally or, or both?

Priya: Um, you know, professionally, I'm really interested in reinventing the, the kind of the public American town hall. Um, I think we're at a moment of deep fracture and of not knowing each other, um, and not liking each other frankly. And, I think I'm very interested in, um, rethinking what it looks like to collectively have live in-person dialogue with people we don't agree with but like 300 people in the room or 1,000 people in the room.

And I've been playing around with this model on my, um, you know, I'm... I talk about the book in different context all around the country, and I try to do all of those meeting engagements as live

ex-facilitated experiences, um, with up to, you know, 450 people in the room, you know, mics running around and all of this stuff. And I'm very curious to see how do we create modern collective gatherings that allow us to think and allow the problems of our time with people we disagree with in a way that allows us to truly understand each other's perspective and have some heat.

Um, and I think on the personal side, I'm really interested in, in seeing other people do this and when I'm invited or asked to do this with my circle of friends, inventing modern rituals for modern realities that we don't yet have ways of gathering around because these challenges or opportunities didn't exist in the past. Um, you know, I'm really curious about divorce parties and, you know, conscious decoupling. I think it's really interesting. I don't think it's for everybody but I think it's really interesting.

I'm really interested in, um, uh... A friend of mine recently lost her father and it's an... She is an immigrant and, um, and as many people in New York City are kind of transplants, she went home to... for her father's funeral and came back and felt really disconnected to her community. Um, what does it look like to create a gathering that's not a funeral for the father but an integration for that woman into her current life? And we created a... We designed a gathering around that.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

People are endlessly creative and what I wanna do is really give people permission like explicitly that we can all do whatever we want all of the time. Um, and, and it takes thought and it takes courage, but I think reinventing modern ritual in thoughtful ways for our modern needs is something that's very intriguing to me.

Whitney: Hm. So, as we wrap up, you, you talked about, um, the importance of endings in a gathering.

Can you talk us through that as we wrap up our conversation or our brief gathering together, um, this, gathering of, of two and, and of, of many over time. But talk about the importance of endings.

Priya: Many gatherings don't end, they stop. And what I mean by that is, you know, in the same way... I have a chapter called Never Start a Funeral with Logistics. Um, and you know, a lot of the book is kind of philosophical or based on principles but some of it is very practical. And, you know, if, if you get nothing else from this conversation, don't start your gatherings with logistics and don't end with logistics. Do them second or second to last including thank you's and on purpose.

And we, we disproportionately remember the opening and the closing of an experience and particularly of a talk in the, in the, in the peak moments. And we shouldn't outsource that to telling people where the bathrooms are or where the coat check is, um, you know, or even thanking them for coming. Uh, a part of... Part of what the ending... the power of an ending is, is first realizing you've created a temporary alternative world for this moment in time, right? They've walked into a dinner party and that you've discuss this certain w-world, you played this specific role as the dinner guest, and then people are gonna go back out and go back out into the night, into their homes. Or a conference, um, or a football game. And part of that... those final acts is to think about in the conflict resolution sense, we talk about the language of reentry. How do you close this world and like how people see and, and see each other and remember kind of what happened in the night but then also help them go back out into the world?

Um, and part of that reentry process is realizing that endings are when meaning is starting to be made of what transpired. So, you spend two hours together and everybody has a different read on what happened regardless of whether it was fascinating or totally dull. And one of the ways to make a gathering and the ending, you know, more powerful is to kind of ho- is to, as a host, help your group shape meaning together.

And so whether at a, at a meeting it's spending the last five minutes doing a quick check out not just saying great thanks for coming, but saying what's one insight or aha you're taking from this or what is one thing you might do differently and letting people actually process their meaning together aloud. Um, or whether it's at the end of the night and there was a lovely evening or dinner party to just say, you know, thank you so much for coming, I will always remember. Like, when I think about tonight there's really three things that I... that, that I will remember, and it's Gail's story about this and Steve's story about this and, you know, Bruno's story about this. But what I think we're really grappling with is what does home mean?

You know, basically use your, use your power of host to help shape that collective meaning, um, and to end, on on, uh, on what you want people to remember.

Whitney: All right so, if we end this podcast in that-

Priya: (laughing). No pressure.

Whitney: So what will happen is I will now say to you, thank you Priya, right?

Priya: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: Thank you so much for being on the podcast.

Priya: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Whitney: And then, um, if I read your book properly and because I'm the host, I need to exercise my power, I would say something like we will declare this podcast officially over and clap our hands and, and we'll be done. Is that how you would do it?

Priya: So, so I would do... So if you have any logistics-

Whitney: Yeah.

Priya: Um, so whether it's like... And, and I'll, you know, I'll, I'll say this. One of the things I most love is when people do go out and make a courageous act at a gathering to tell me about it.

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Priya: Um, and you can find me on [Instagram](#) or [priyaparker.com](#). Like, send me your stories and you can sign up to my newsletter there. If you have any logistics, I would have you do them, and then perhaps you close with like, "What is one thing you're taking in this conversation?" Or I sometimes close by reading out my chapter list because it's what I most want people to remember. Those are the tips.

Whitney: Got it. Okay. So, um everyone, you've heard Priya told you how you can find her and if there are stories that you would like to tell, stories of your own gatherings, please share them with her. And where, where Priya is the best place to find you? What's your Instagram handle?

Priya: [Priya Parker](#), my name.

Whitney: Okay. So very simple. Um, I actually have a story that I am going to, um, share on my newsletter so everybody can hear about the story of the gathering and I will share it with you obviously, Priya.

Um, thank you again for being here. And my big insight, um, in listening to you speak, Number one, I loved hearing you talk about a gathering and how sacred it felt and, creating this container

of bringing people together. The second thing that I really, um, loved about this is the, um, talking about the chance of playing softball as a young woman and the developmental opportunity that that created for you and so many young men and young women but young women in particular in this instance.

And the third thing I would like to say is that, um, it was just fascinating to hear you talk about something that you love and to really appreciate the craft of what you were doing. So thank you so much for being here and for teaching me and for teaching everyone who has been here with us today.

Priya: Thank you for having me. You did it. That was awesome.

Rather than risk doing a wrap up after you just heard me do a wrap up at the end of the interview with Priya, I'll just say this -

At the time this interview airs, it is the beginning of June, which is the beginning of summer in the United States and since there are several opportunities throughout the summer to gather people together, I would love for you to create a gathering of your own. And do it deliberately.

Think of the purpose of the gathering. Let that guide the decisions you make around who to invite and what to do. Make sure the room or the space is set up to support the stated purpose of the gathering, and be responsible for the experience your guests are having. I'd love, and I think Priya would love, to hear what kind of gathering you create, so be sure to let us know on social media.

Thank you again to Priya Parker for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributor Emilie Davis and Nancy Wilson and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.