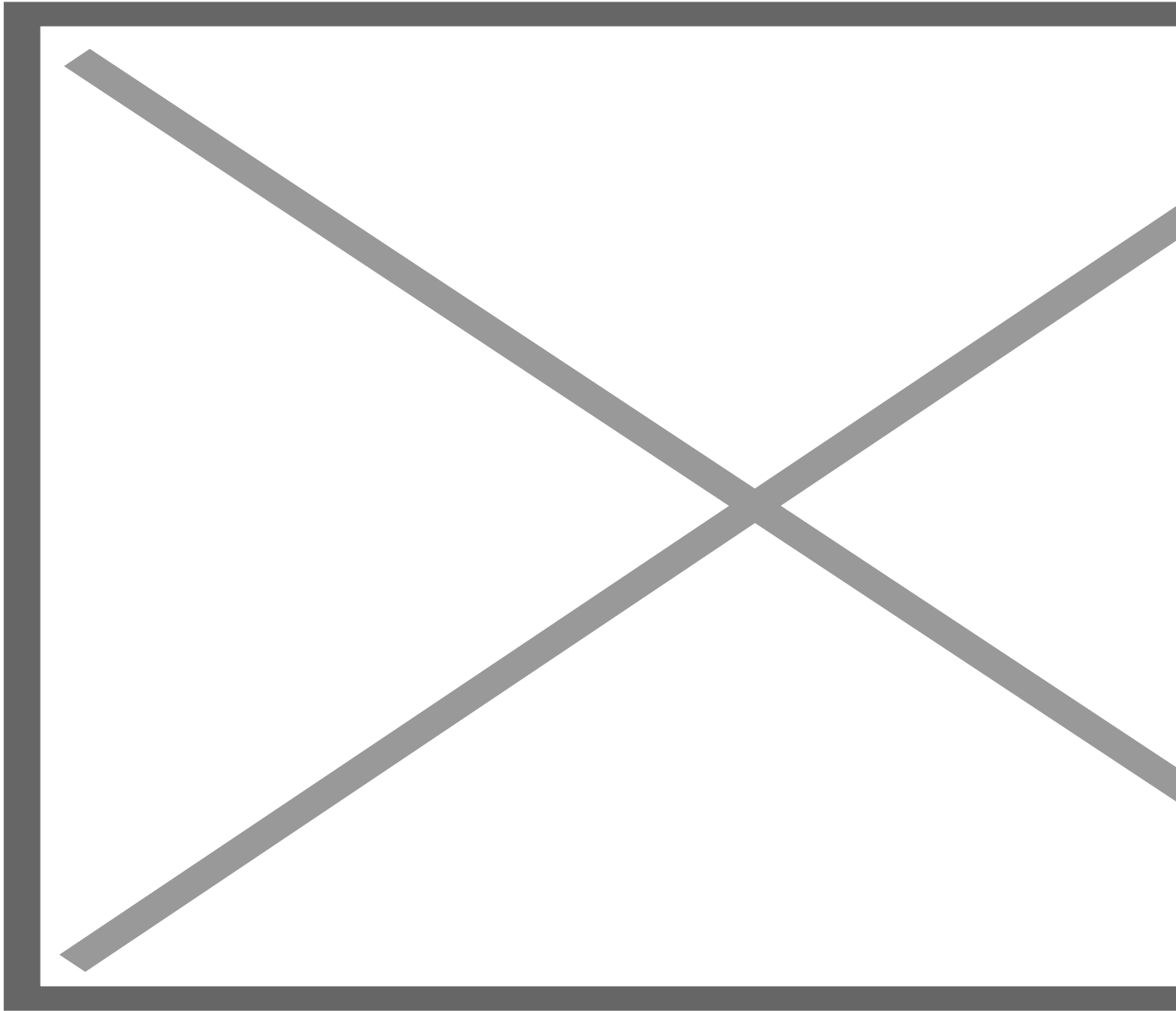


Intentional conflict

“Conflict is not sin,” says Priya Parker. “It’s heart; it’s relevance. People don’t fight about what they don’t care about.”

by [Martin B. Copenhaver](#)

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Priya Parker is a facilitator, consultant, and author of the best-selling The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters. Her new book, The Art of Fighting: The Transformative Power of Conflict, builds on her first

book's themes and draws on the experiences of people in a wide variety of settings who seek to address conflict well.

How do you describe what you do?

I am trained as a conflict resolution facilitator, and I still think of that as my first craft. My second craft is writing and speaking. I'm trying to take something that we've been doing for time immemorial—whether it's gathering or fighting—and give people the skills to get better at life with other people.

Bookstores have a section for self-help. But where is the group-help section? I think it's time for a group-help revolution. Modern life is confusing and hard for many people, and I think the freedom of choice that we have has resulted in us throwing out a lot of what actually makes life rich and meaningful with other people. And so a lot of my work, I would say, is deeply modern.

Are you suggesting that life is more challenging in the modern world because people have to make it up as they go along?

In most communities today, at least in the United States, you can marry who you choose. You can live where you want, be friends with who you want. You can always choose a different church, or you can leave the church. More traditional communities had a way of gathering, praying, eating, mourning. For many people, a lot of these ways felt oppressive, and there was a desire for more freedom. But with that freedom comes the pain and the confusion that there is nothing built-in left to bind us. We have to bind us.

One thing you've written about gathering is that it's important for groups to ask fundamental questions about a gathering's purpose.

The biggest mistake we make when we gather is to assume that the purpose is obvious and shared. Oh, I know what a church meeting is; I know what a wedding or a funeral is. We don't pause to actually ask, Why are we doing this? Who is this for? And the forms we fall back on may or may not actually fit the needs or the community in front of us.

My favorite part of writing my books has been interviewing people. I talked to more than a hundred different types of gatherers for *The Art of Gathering*, and from all walks of life—a photographer, a hockey coach, a rabbi, DJs—and I found that one reason they were able to have relevant, fresh gatherings is that they didn't assume that they knew what the purpose was. And they were willing to be very specific and to not be for everyone.

Once you figure out what you call the “specific and disputable” purpose of a gathering, can you then discern who needs to be there and who does not?

I was once teaching an online class in which one of the students, who runs an LGBTQ center at the university, wanted to host a gathering for LGBTQ students. A bunch of allies showed up and asked, “Oh, can we come?” Her honest answer was, “I don't know.” The instinct is to say, “Of course! The more the merrier.” But the presence of an ally fundamentally changes the dynamics of the room.

The request forced the center to ask, Who is this gathering for? Where and how do we help allies? At some level, an entire university should be an ally, right? It became a wonderful moment for the staff member to pause and ask, with deep intention: Who is this for? And even, What is our purpose as an organization?

They ended up deciding to exclude the allies from their regular meetings, but they also created a specific night with and for allies. They started asking this wider community, What do you need? How can we help you?

Whatever your context is, you're going to have a different conversation based on who's in the room. Sometimes, in closing the door, you open up the room.

I had a professor of liturgics at divinity school who said that the best way to learn how to lead worship is to put on a big dinner party. He never explained what he meant by that. He just laid it out there, and I've been pondering it ever since. Do you have any insights?

First of all, I think that's brilliant. He's reverse engineering what worship is, which I imagine is like wrangling a bunch of cats. At some level, a dinner party is pastoral care. It is trying to understand everyone's needs—human needs, spiritual needs, somatic needs. That includes figuring out how to start and end an evening and what to do in between.

Also, there are so many power dynamics at a dinner party. What manners are expected? Do you have one conversation or many? Are children allowed? Everyone's needs come together. And yet, if done well, dinner parties are medicine for the soul.

Many churches never fully recovered after the COVID-19 pandemic. Congregations stopped gathering in person, and many simply never came back. Do you have any thoughts about why this happened?

Whenever an institution or even a simple ritual gets massively interrupted, it's a time for everyone involved to ask questions. Why do I do this? Do I need this? Are these really my people? Is this how I want to spend my Sunday? The beauty and danger of these moments is that they're existential.

I recently had a conversation with Shanta Thake, who is the chief artistic officer at Lincoln Center. She said that she had just assumed that after the pandemic, everyone would rush back to the theater like she did. Everyone would be so desperate finally to be able to go again. But many did not come back. What might bring them back?

The staff at Lincoln Center discovered that a lot of New Yorkers' weddings were canceled by the pandemic. And they realized that *they* could host a wedding, in a Lincoln Center way. The symphony was there. They had faith leaders of all traditions. So 500 couples showed up in their wedding gowns and suits to get married. The leaders of Lincoln Center came to understand that they couldn't lean on what they had always done. They had to look out into the city and ask, What is the need? What can we uniquely do?

In this polarized time, would you say we are getting worse at dealing with conflict?

I think that as a society we are pretty terrible at conflict. We oscillate between avoidance and dehumanizing, abusive conflict. We haven't been taught how to hold what I call "healthy heat."

In many ways, *The Art of Gathering* was my attempt to help stave off the so-called loneliness crisis. OK, we can come together and it can still be bad. This is how to make it meaningful. This is how to get people out of their houses, off their screens. But *The Art of Fighting* is also an attempt to stave off the loneliness crisis. I wrote this book in part because, as a facilitator, I've realized that, in many places, our communities are falling apart and our relationships are ending in part because we're conflict averse. We don't know how to have a good fight. And I'm conflict averse myself—I'm a conflict resolution facilitator in part because I am conflict averse. In part, it's my question for my own life: How do we fight with those we want to belong to?

Why do so many of your examples of conflict come from faith communities?

Because they're full of conflict! Also, one thing I found interesting is that the books that were deeply helpful to me were primarily books about the unit of the church. I think that is in part because we have a deeply

individualistic culture. I know that churches are struggling with membership. But where there's actually some understanding that this is a community, then at least there's a boundary around that membership: We need to function together as a group. I think that's why there are so many books about it.

The church, like the family, is a setting where you have to live with people you did not choose. I once heard a psychologist say that church is valuable because it is a place where we can learn to stand one another. I used to think that was a small claim, but now I think it is quite a large one.

There are so few places in modern life where people choose to go back every week and see the same people over and over again. As seekers become more discerning, they recognize that they have more choices as to how to spend their time. Beyond that, there are more questions as to whether or not you actually need an institution to commune with the Divine. So churches also need to be asking fundamental questions like, Well, what are we about? What is our model as a church?

The first chapter of *The Art of Fighting* examines how all of our instincts lead us to just want conflict to go away. We ask questions like, Why is this happening now, at this wonderful moment? Why is this happening to this good group? Why does this feel so bad? And one of the things I find is that in some contexts, this aversion to conflict goes beyond people simply feeling conflict is bad form or out of place; they feel it is immoral. This can be a big problem in churches, where the real impediment to artful fighting is often the wrongheaded belief that conflict is sin. Conflict is not sin. Conflict is helpful, natural, and normal. There is a way to have conflict that is not good, but conflict in and of itself is heat. It's relevance. Groups need fights to figure out who they really are. People don't fight about what they don't care about.

My favorite concept in the book is one I learned from a conflict resolution facilitator I interviewed: "relational longing." It is the longing underneath the hurt that, if you can tap into it during the fight, is your best chance of moving through. It is the residual desire to connect that we feel even when we're hurt or mad at each other, even when things are hard.

Another concept in the book I found interesting is what you call the "visible mend."

This is a term from the Japanese art of stitching to repair a tear in a piece of cloth. When there's a rip in the cloth, instead of trying to fix it so that the tear is not visible to the eye, you mend the tear in a way that makes the tear beautiful and part of the history of the cloth.

I learned that healthy groups incorporate the stories of their ups and downs into the narrative of the group. I tell a story near the end of the book about a restaurant in Mumbai where the cocktail menu lists drinks they no longer offer, that were complete flops, along with the drinks that customers love. They preserved the memory of both. I just thought that was wonderful.

Rarely does a congregation do anything like that. If someone writes a church history or there is a celebration of a church's anniversary, any conflict that is part of that history tends to be alluded to ever so slightly, if at all.

The psychologist Marshall Duke says that family narratives tend to take one of three shapes: an "ascending narrative" of continual improvement, a "descending narrative" of decline, or an "oscillating narrative" of ups and downs. An oscillating narrative says, *We've had hard moments, and we've come through. We've stuck together in spite of all the ups and downs.* Duke says this is the healthiest option. It helps people feel a part of something larger. It can be empowering to know that conflict is normal, that people who love each other fight. Even the painful stories have a place.

This is not just true in families. It can be incredibly empowering when an institution can talk about its failures in a way that can use the “forgiveness tense.” It’s not kicking up old stuff. It’s telling our story—the whole story. And being able to admit a shortcoming shows strength, a kind of strength of collective ego.

When Zohran Mamdani was running for mayor of New York City, his campaign engaged you as a consultant. What do you think the Mamdani campaign picked up from your work?

They didn’t think of gathering as this sweet thing to do on the side. They understood and used gathering as a way to give people the lived experience of the values they were running on. They understood that gatherings are how you move people, that they are where and how people understand what you’re about. Hosting gatherings people actually want to be at, where there’s joy and humor and people meeting each other where they are, is actually one of the most powerful and radical things you can do when you’re trying to change a city.