

The Dinner Party by Lennon Flowers

Beginning with a gathering of friends in 2010, The Dinner Party (TDP) has grown to include thousands of people engaged in the mission of transforming life after loss, from an isolating experience into one marked by community support, candid conversation, and forward movement. Today, in over 90 cities and towns worldwide there are 234 Dinner Party tables bringing together people mostly in their 20s and 30s who have experienced significant loss. TDP helps to create space for supportive, in-person connections, at local potluck gatherings by recruiting and training members of their community to be hosts, matching guests with available tables, and serving as a resource for powerful, enriching, and wholehearted conversations.

Co-Founder and Executive Director Lennon Flowers spoke with the gratefulness team about how TDP is “pioneering tools and community through which young people who’ve experienced significant loss can use their shared experience as a springboard toward living better, bolder, and more connected lives.”

What sparked the founding of TDP?

All of this began very much by accident, back in Fall 2010, when a friend and colleague of mine, Carla, invited a handful of people over for dinner to talk about something we otherwise didn’t.

My mom was diagnosed with Stage IV lung cancer my senior year of high school and died my senior year of college. And in that time I became really good at living what I’ve come to understand were parallel lives: one that was all about cancer and everything that was going on at home and the other that was about staying really busy to compartmentalize my life. And that pattern continued after my mom died.

I met Carla about three years later, right after I moved to Los Angeles. A few months into our friendship, she mentioned that her dad had died about six months before.

I found I lacked vocabulary to talk about my mom who she was, and how her life and her absence continued to show up in who I was, in everything from jobs to relationships to what I wanted out of life.

By that point in my life, I’d long since adjusted to a new normal and didn’t really identify as grieving even. But I found I lacked vocabulary to talk about my mom who she was, and how her life and her absence continued to show up in who I was, in everything from jobs to relationships to what I wanted out of life. So when Carla invited me and a few others who’d likewise all lost a close family member or friend over for dinner one night, I said

yes.

Out of that very first dinner grew a really good group of friends. And slowly, as we became more comfortable with our stories, more friends heard about it, and their friends heard about it, we began to realize that our story was more of a shared story than we thought it was.

So in late 2013, I quit my job, we launched a crowdfunding campaign, and we opened our doors.

Since then, our work has really been about three things: First, we have been building a host community of people who can show up authentically in these conversations as peers, but who are also in a place where they can really be space-holders for other people as well. Much of our work is then about matching people who want to attend a dinner party to others nearby, who are roughly the same age and living through similar milestones. And then finally, we're really interested in the culture-change aspect of all this — how to give people self-permission to talk about the things we otherwise don't — so a lot of our work is about creating accessible tools and guidebooks as well as story-sharing to more accurately reflect the stories and themes we witness everyday.

Today, there are thousands of Dinner Partiers active at 234 current tables in over 90 cities and towns worldwide, powered by a staff of seven: three full-time and four part-time.

How does TDP fill a need for millennials who are grieving? How do you connect with people who could benefit from TDP?

The common thread in our community isn't type of loss, how a person died, or the nature of their relationship — it's the fact that most people are among the first in our peer community to go through this.

It's not unusual for a 25-year-old to go to a grief support group and be the only person under 50 present. So in a certain sense, it's an audience that's underserved by traditional grief support, but the problem is bigger than that because this is also a generation that's moving away from institutions en masse, leaving behind the spaces — whether religious or otherwise — that we once relied on for community and support in our moments of greatest need.

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For many young adults, loss thus becomes a source of deep isolation at precisely the moment in time when we are poised to launch careers and families of our own and to find our footing in the world. We are left, at worst, trapped in a victimizing narrative, and at best, unable to openly share and process an experience of profound importance in shaping who we are.

In a study released spring 2018, millennials and members of Gen Z (ages 18-22) had loneliness scores that were higher than those of people 72 and older. Interestingly, social

media wasn't the predictor: Young people with the highest rates of social media use reported very similar feelings of loneliness to those who barely use it. What was consistent, however, was the fact that those who reported more in-person social connections — whatever their age — reported being less lonely.

Most people hear about TDP via word of mouth from a friend or therapist, or by reading about us. We don't market or advertise.

How does grief and loss "color" life, and how does gathering with others who have experienced the same help?

There's a poem by W.S. Merwin that reads, "Your absence has gone through me / Like thread through a needle. / Everything I do is stitched with its color." That really captures it for me. That stitching can shape us in an infinite number of ways — changing our relationships with the living, the families we come from, and the chosen families we belong to as well. Thus shifting our priorities so that the result that seemed important before is less so after. It can make us more resilient, knowing that we're stronger than we thought possible, and it can also make us more fragile as we're acutely aware that there's so much we can't control, and that we're longing to fix something that can't be fixed. It shapes us in ways that change over time and that are different for every person.

Talk of self-care is everywhere. But that's just because we live in a culture that values individualism above community. What we're really interested in is collective care. When you start a relationship with the stuff that we normally hide or shy away from, you're often able to get to a place that's deeper and more honest than you would in other relationships, so sharing this stuff can actually be the fuel for really meaningful friendships and community.

We're not trying to professionalize anything. We're trying to humanize everything.

Tell me more about TDP's goal to "reimagine and reinvent 'grief support.'"

I don't know that I'd describe it that way these days. When we first started, we considered ourselves the "punk rock" grief support. But more and more, we realize that we're a complement to, not a replacement for, traditional grief support. Therapists and grief counselors tend to be one of our biggest referral sources. And for a lot of people, joining The Dinner Party is a gateway experience to other sources of support: Suddenly you're in an environment where asking for help is devoid of stigma, so people freely trade therapists' contact info or realize for the first time, "I'm ready to process this."

As one advisor of ours puts it, "We're not trying to professionalize anything. We're trying to humanize everything."

How do you see your work as being connected to grateful living?

It's become a cliché to say that grief and gratitude are two sides of the same coin, but it's no less true.

There's this poem by Maya Angelou, *When Great Trees Fall*, that ends with the lines, "Our

senses, restored, never; to be the same, whisper to us./ They existed. They existed./ We can be. Be and be/ better. For they existed."

There's a difference between moving on and moving forward. Part of that difference, to me, is about what we choose to carry with us and the ways a person can be known, long after they're gone, through the rituals, habits, values, and memories embedded in the people they leave behind.

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Of course, not all relationships are or were positive relationships, and we also grieve what we never had, to begin with. There are times that gratitude practices are a cover for our inability to sit with what can't be fixed. A lot of our work is about making it okay to name what's not okay.

Which is why, to me, grateful living is less about the dead, than it is about the living. It's about having something life-affirming attached to the sources of your heartbreak, and understanding that the presence of one doesn't undo the presence of the other.

We just released a survey to our community, and a quote that really leapt out at me was this: "TDP has not only given me a community of people in my city who have become like family, but it has taught me an entirely new realm of language and practice in communicating and holding space for others and their stories. I am 100 percent a better person, a better friend, a better communicator, and a better leader because of The Dinner Party."

What are some of the most important components of Dinner Parties? How are they supported by the organization, hosts, and guests?

Across time and culture and spiritual tradition, people have been sitting in circles telling their stories to each other. We tell our stories to our hair stylists and baristas and that stranger at that party, in those rare and chance moments when the veil between each other lifts, and we're able to see each other's truth without being scandalized by it, to witness and be witnessed.

It turns out people aren't looking for counseling at our tables: They have counselors for that. They're looking for connection. Dinner Parties are created for and by friends. While we offer in-person and online trainings for hosts, there is no script, and the host is every bit as much a participant as everyone else. We've found that's the best way to keep things casual, fun, and personal. And when everyone has only their own story to go on, it means we're all equally "an expert": We're less prone to advice-giving or attempts to fix something, recognizing that what most of us are looking for is a chance to hear and be heard and to identify with others who've been there.

An 80-page guidebook is no better than one that's 15 if no one is going to read it. When it comes to training, we recognize that we cannot predict everything that will unfold around a Dinner Party table, so we've chosen to focus on principles and tools, rather than scripts

and strict methodologies. Rather than attempt to walk new hosts through every conceivable scenario — which can induce anxiety and therefore backfire — we've found it's far more important to screen for the right people at the outset and to ensure that hosts feel comfortable coming forward if something's amiss.

We could either find a lower-touch approach and thereby increase the number of relationships that each staff member could hold, or we could find a low-cost way to scale the number of people who were holding those relationships. We chose the latter.

This approach requires regular check-ins and close personal relationships with each of our hosts. As The Dinner Party grew, we faced a choice: We could either find a lower-touch approach and thereby increase the number of relationships that each staff member could hold, or we could find a low-cost way to scale the number of people who were holding those relationships. We chose the latter. We launched a Regional Organizers program in each of our Hub Cities where there are frequently 10-40 tables at a time. Those Organizers — themselves current and former hosts — serve as the first point of contact for local hosts and Dinner Partiers in the area, and when necessary, can loop us into any issues or challenges on the ground so that our staff can help to problem-solve.

What are some of the challenges that arise for your organization and Dinner Parties/participants, and how are they held?

The most common challenges have to do with flakiness or one person dominating a conversation. Part of it is about setting expectations: making sure that every host knows that chances are, someone's going to flake the day of, due to a variety of reasons, ranging from a busy life schedule to just not being ready to take a seat at the table yet, and it's not at all a reflection on you.

But the most important thing is building trusting relationships with each of our hosts, so that we can name when something isn't working, and they can do the same. The response will look different for every person and every table, but it requires learning to lean into uncomfortable conversations and then figuring out next steps with a combination of candidness, compassion, and care.

What does the lasting impact of Dinner Parties look like for hosts and guests?

We've had people quit the job they hates, make a decision to go on a trip they've been wanted to take, and even meet their partners. But what I really love are all the seemingly little things — the conversation you have with a surviving family member that you wouldn't have otherwise or the way you respond and support a colleague or a friend when they find themselves accosted by grief — that reflect changes in empathy and self-efficacy, as well as our comfort with our own stories and being in our own skin.

How does TDP plan to grow as an organization?

In the long-term, we envision a future in which other organizations and peer networks comprised of people with a shared experience — veterans groups, organizations serving the formerly incarcerated and their families, or support networks for survivors of domestic violence or sexual assault — can launch their own tables.

What inspires the staff at TDP personally about this work?

Our success to date has been born, in no small part, out of our ability to use the “we” pronoun: Nearly seven years since our first dinner, we remain a community of peers. Every member of our staff and every volunteer has experienced loss firsthand, and are both fluent in the language of loss and can lead with vulnerability. We’re not a program serving “other” or a group of amateur psychotherapists; we’re peers creating the same community we want to be a part of.

If TDP could share one message about grateful living in the context of grief and loss, what would it be?

Heartbreak and hope are not mutually exclusive. We can be angry and sad and filled with longing for something we cannot have, and simultaneously we can be grateful for what we’ve got — aware, for reasons we’d never choose, of what really matters and what doesn’t.

If you could encapsulate one message for TDP participants, what would that be?

You are your own best expert. All of our stories are different because all of our relationships are different. So many of us think that whatever it is we’re doing or feeling, we’re doing or feeling the wrong thing: We should be happier, seizing every moment, or we shouldn’t have the right to feel happy after something so devastating, and on and on. What feels good for one person might not be true for the next.

How does gratefulness inspire you to make change in the world?

I arrived at my first dinner because my mom died. I helped start The Dinner Party because she lived and because of the values that she passed on to me. What keeps me going are extraordinary people I get to work with everyday and the chance to experience more meaning in my life than I ever thought possible. All of which is to say: The Dinner Party grew up not out of grief but out of gratitude.