Cooking Up Connection
by Shaylyn Romney Garrett

What a Month-Long Challenge of Hosting Dinner Parties Taught Me About the Art and Importance of Social Gathering

As of a month ago, I very rarely invited friends over to my house. It just felt like there was always a reason not to: I’m too busy. It’s too much work. I can’t afford to make a fancy meal. I’d have to find someone to watch my daughter. My house is a mess. But these “reasons” were actually just excuses—artificial barriers I’d constructed to keep my private life private, and to stave off the vulnerability of showing my friends what was behind the curtain of my less-than-perfect life. I was always game for meeting up for lunch at a restaurant, or a play date in the park. But the thought of bringing people into my home felt too stressful, too exposed. It became that item on my to-do list that got perpetually bumped to the bottom.

Whether or not my trepidation about hosting social gatherings is widely shared I can’t be sure, but what is certain is that we’re all doing less and less of it. According to sociologists, one of the clearest changes in Americans’ social behaviors over the past few decades has been a marked decline in the frequency with which we’re entertaining in our homes. Similarly, neighborly get-togethers have seen a steady drop since 1940. But rates of socializing outside the home have risen. We’re now more likely to meet friends at a softball game or a bar than to invite them over for dinner or a barbecue. The “why” behind these trends is less clear, but the reality is stark: we are living in a cultural moment where there is a growing bifurcation between our private home life and our public social life.

Could the fact that our efforts to connect happen largely outside our homes—separate and distinct from the epicenter of our lives—be a driver of our widespread feelings of social dislocation? In the month of March, I decided to find out. As part of a year-long personal journey to find ways of strengthening my own sense of community and connection, I challenged myself to host people in my home at least once a week. Four gatherings of friends or neighbors in my home in just 30 days.

Considering that I work full time, live on a budget, am the mother of a small child, and haven’t hosted a dinner party more than a handful of times since I got married (which was over a decade ago) I knew it wasn’t going to be easy. But I was motivated to see how honing my hospitality skills might help me feel more connected. And how replacing a night of Netflix with a gathering of friends might help me develop a greater sense of community.

I completed the challenge—barely—and the transformation in how I feel about opening my home as a gathering place has been dramatic. Here are some of the lessons I learned along the way.
Several years ago I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Jordan, where I spent two years struggling to communicate with villagers who spoke no English. And for the first few months, as I wrestled with learning Arabic, the only source of connection I really had with my hosts was food. As a result, I passed countless hours eating and drinking tea—on humble floors, on breezy rooftops, at picturesque picnics, and huddled around kerosene heaters in the teachers’ room at the school where I taught. I quickly came to understand that preparing and sharing food is one of the most universal expressions of love and friendship there is.

There’s a unique sort of bonding that is initiated when we provide sustenance to others, especially because it happens relatively infrequently in our culture. This month I found that the people I invited to my table experienced and expressed a heartfelt gratitude, even when the meal I had made was simple. They felt—as I did nearly every day in Jordan—special, taken care of, and honored by the gesture. And being on the receiving end of their appreciation turned hosting into a delight for me, whereas I used to view it mostly as a burden.

Perfection Is the Enemy of Connection

When I first started hosting people, it would take me days to prepare. The floors had to be swept and mopped, the carpets vacuumed, and the toilets scrubbed. My unfinished projects had to be gathered up and hidden away, and every marker, crayon, and toy returned to its proper place. Social media’s culture of curation has conditioned us to believe that only our most polished face is socially acceptable. We’ll have a barbecue when we finish building the deck. We’ll host a Christmas party when we finally get around to putting up lights, we think. We feel we can’t invite people to our homes unless they are the perfect reflection of who we want to be in the world, and this has become a huge cultural impediment to the most basic human habit of gathering.

Once I let go of the need to put forward a perfected picture of domestic bliss, it finally felt possible to have friends in my home on a regular basis. And the freedom to be fully me—mess and all—was liberating. It was also an important part of laying the groundwork for true and meaningful connection. Our perfected selves may be magazine-worthy, but are often unapproachable, even forbidding. Look at this house—she must be some sort of domestic goddess, we think when we see a friend going for Martha Stewart gold. Perfection invites distance and comparison, rather than warmth and connection, which is what we are all after, after all.

It’s Better Together

Before I set out to host on a weekly basis, having people over was a major production—not just because of the cleaning, but because of the food. I felt that I had to have a full selection of exotic snacks and drinks on hand, and an ambitious, well-planned menu. And everything had to be elegantly displayed and ready to eat the moment my guests arrived. Not having the right array of serving dishes was becoming a major source of stress. I quickly learned that this approach to gathering is exhausting—and totally unrealistic. And yet it’s often the Instagram-fueled standard to which we hold ourselves when we consider inviting people over.

As I began to focus more on being with my guests, rather than impressing them, I felt
the Better Homes and Gardens version of hosting my mother raised me on begin to thaw. I started letting people bring things when they offered, instead of saying oh, no—we’ve got it taken care of! and then sweating my way through an entire Saturday of cooking. And as I relaxed into a pattern of preparing food with my guests—often for the first full hour of a dinner party—I felt the welcoming warmth of an ancient practice come into my home: gathering around the hearth to enjoy cooking and eating together, as a community.

Gathering Should Be a Family Affair

Speaking of things being better together, over the past month I’ve come to believe that whenever possible, kids should be included in our gathering rituals, rather than handed an I-pad and told not to interrupt the conversation. When I invited friends with young kids to have dinner at our house, more than one replied that they could come only if they could find a babysitter. They were surprised that I was willing to welcome their children—and mine—to the table.

Looking back, this was another lesson I absorbed from my Jordanian hosts, whose kids were a ubiquitous part of the culture of visiting. Indeed, multi-generational socializing is likely a significant contributor to the iron-clad chain of cultural transfer that is responsible for Arabs’ world-famous hospitality. By contrast, American popular culture has fetishized the idea of entertaining as an adults-only activity, making it expensive and inconvenient, rather than a regular part of everyday life.

Like most of my Jordanian friends, I don’t have a big house, or a fancy playroom, or even a backyard to send the kids off to. But we managed just fine most of the time. Sometimes it’s nice to have an adult conversation, or simply a break from parenting. But in general, I realized that by excluding my daughter from dinner parties I was missing a major teaching moment. Off in her bedroom, in front of a movie, or spending the night at a friend’s house, she wouldn’t be exposed to the rhythms and joys of preparing food, or the warm comfort of laughing with friends. When we choose not to include our children in social gatherings, we perpetuate an unnatural cultural norm of compartmentalization, and we risk setting the rising generation up for the same crippling isolation and loneliness that is rampant among adults today.

Conversation Matters

Cocktail banter. The mere thought of it inspires dread in most people, myself included. And this month I came to see that one of the biggest challenges of hosting friends or neighbors—especially those who don’t already know each other well—is the tendency to get trapped in small talk. The first dinner party I hosted this month was with a group of friends with whom I had worked a few years back. The biggest thing we had in common was the woes and dramas we’d shared as colleagues in a particularly challenging work environment. Before I knew it, an hour had been consumed by swapping remembered horror stories and gossiping about what had happened since we’d all gone our separate ways. Not only was it a downer, the topic excluded the spouses and significant others we’d all brought along. So when the conversation lulled, I went out on a limb: I invited everyone to play a game called Vertellis, which is a deck of conversation cards developed by a group of friends in the Netherlands who are passionate about fostering meaningful connections at gatherings.

At first, it was awkward—I’ll admit it. Taking turns answering questions like, “Reflecting upon the past year, what was your biggest mistake?” isn’t usually how people expect to
spend a Friday night. But I was amazed at how quickly we all settled into the intimacy the game invited. Within minutes, we were hearing about each other’s goals and aspirations, and relating significant challenges we’d all faced in recent months. Things I never would have guessed started tumbling out of people. One person shared a struggle with mental health. Another admitted to never feeling fully authentic in social situations. My husband discovered a deep shared passion with someone he hadn't met before, and with whom, on the face of it, he had nothing in common. At the end of the evening, everyone expressed a sense of amazement at the magical cord of connection that simple exercise had forged, and the new chapter it had opened up in our friendship.

Just Do It

As everyone gathered up their coats and we said our goodbyes at the end of the last dinner party I hosted this month, one of my friends said emphatically, “There should be more get-togethers! Why don’t we do this more often?” Why don’t we do this more often? Gathering in our homes to break bread with friends and family is perhaps the most basic form of community imaginable. Sharing food is arguably the reason humans formed communities in the first place. It’s elemental. And yet we have slowly stripped it out of our culture—and we are suffering as a result.

For years I nursed that long list of reasons why I couldn’t or shouldn’t host people in my home: My house was too small. I didn’t have a proper dining table. I was nervous about breaking the ice. I was unmotivated to spend an evening making small talk when what I longed for was meaningful connections. It just didn’t seem worth it.

But having spent a month challenging myself to host people at least once a week, I’ve come to understand exactly what I’ve been missing: the joy of serving other people and making my home a beacon of connection in a lonely world. Hosting friends and neighbors isn’t always a breeze, but none of the downsides outweighs the enormous benefit of feeling surrounded by friends on a regular basis, and the liberating comfort of being known—from the inside out. By swapping my privacy and my downtime for community and connection, I’ve felt happier, lighter, and more open. And so have all of the friends, family members, and acquaintances that have graced my table this month. So much of today’s rhetoric about community building has to do with creating spaces where people can gather. But the truth is that each of us has just such a space right in our own kitchen or living room or back porch. We just have to find the courage and resolve to invite people in.

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