

Winthrop Valley Life: the Worthwhile Inconvenience of Community

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I recently heard a radio piece that cited a Bureau of Labor Statistics study showing that only 4.1% of Americans hosted or attended a social event on an average weekend or holiday in 2023. Convinced I had misheard, I looked up the study and there it was in black and white: 4.1%—a 35% drop since 2004.

The NPR story, which featured chef and author Garrett Schlichte, then went on to discuss dinner parties, which are apparently in precipitous decline. We're too tired, we're intimidated by media images of other people's picture-perfect hosting, we're insecure about our own culinary skills, we can't bear the thought of all those dishes, we want our homes to be sanctuaries for ourselves, not subject to others' scrutiny.

And yet dinner parties can play a critical role in building community, Schlichte says, so we should push on, forge ahead, and make the effort to host—and to show up when invited. He says "it is worthwhile to be inconvenienced to have community."

There it is: the acknowledgment that having people over for dinner isn't effortless and the reminder that relationships take work. Throwing a dinner party is less an exercise in culinary arts and more an investment in people. It shows your guests that you cared enough to do something extra for them—to invite them into your space, messy and chaotic as it may be, and to feed them, all for the pleasure of spending time with them. It's a gift you give the people you care about.

A dinner party is a tangible offer of affection. As Schlichte says, "somebody else was taking care of me tonight...doing a little something for me. It's great to give and receive that kind of love and nurturance amongst friends."

Dinner parties are an antidote to the isolation and self-preoccupation we are, apparently, experiencing as a society. "Particularly as we get older, the world wants us to be so much more separate," Schlichte says. Dinners with friends and family are "just a perfect reason to be together."

So here we are, in the week of the biggest dinner party of the year. It's an excellent time to remind ourselves that—despite menu planning and grocery shopping, despite timing the turkey and monitoring the gravy, despite jockeying for oven space—it's not about the food. The meal may be magnificent, but what's more important is the act of gathering, of reinforcing old relationships and forging new ones, and of building bridges that offer a pathway out of egocentrism by connecting us to community.

