

8. The Jeffersonian Dinner and Other Community-Building Tools

“Silence is the element in which great things fashion themselves together; that at length they may emerge, full-formed and majestic, into the daylight of Life, which they are thenceforth to rule.”

Thomas Carlyle

We’ve discussed how to make your first connection with an individual prospective partner, as well as how to navigate the sometimes choppy waters of The Ask—the request for an initial commitment from a person who is ready to become your partner. Now we’ll move on to describe some of the tools we’ve developed for connecting groups of people with important shared causes. Perhaps the most powerful and universally relevant of these tools is something we call the Jeffersonian Dinner.¹

The Jeffersonian Dinner can be a great way to launch the creation of a new cause-centered community. It can also help you to expand the network of individuals connected with an existing community. And although money is *not* the central focus of the evening, it’s likely that, in the end, a Jeffersonian Dinner can

¹ Those interested in a quick oral introduction to the concept of the Jeffersonian Dinner might enjoy Jeff Walker’s TED Talk on the topic, available on the Internet at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HuAT0YHQz94>.

activate far more resources than such traditional fundraising events as the annual gala.

So what is a Jeffersonian Dinner? To introduce the concept, we invite you step into a time machine . . .

Imagine being invited to a dinner in 1819 at Monticello, the elegant Virginia home of Thomas Jefferson—president, scientist, farmer, connoisseur, scholar, and author of the Declaration of Independence. Around his table, you’d encounter some of the leading spirits of the age—men and women steeped in politics, literature, the arts, the sciences, theology, history, mores, and manners—people that Mr. Jefferson invited because he found them, intriguing and delightful to spend a stimulating evening with. And an evening like this was also a prime source of education both for Mr. Jefferson himself and for the guests around the table, all of whom were engaged citizens, eager to share and debate the varied ideas that would shape the fortunes and spur the development of their rapidly-growing young nation.

This was the original Jeffersonian Dinner. Starting with dinners held for years in Monticello itself during the years when Jeff served as chairman of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, we’ve turned Jeffersonian Dinners into opportunities to connect people and foment discussions about many different topics. As a result, vibrant networks and a host of passionate connections have been created around a host of important causes.

A Dinner Party—With a Twist

For a Jeffersonian Dinner, approximately twelve individuals, some of whom may already know one another but others of whom do not, gather in a home, a private dining room, or other quiet location for an evening of food and shared conversation with a purpose. The dinner is often organized under the auspices of a particular nonprofit organization, and the attendees may include one or more individuals who are somehow associated with that organization—as staffers, board members, donors, or partners. However, the dinner is usually hosted by someone not directly affiliated with the nonprofit group—for example, a friend of a friend who may have access to a suitable dining room and is willing to provide the appropriate hospitality.

The attendees generally include people with no past link to the group, chosen because they are likely to be interested in the group’s mission, have supported other related causes, or have background knowledge and connections that will enable them to contribute to an interesting dialogue about the work. Thus, the guests at a dinner organized by a nonprofit dedicated to education reform might include a professor of education from a local college, a veteran high school teacher, a producer of educational videos, a parent who is an active member of her local school board, the education reporter from the local newspaper, and the founder of a nearby charter school. There should be no dominant individual who will serve as the focal point or “star” of the evening. The dinner invitation includes a request for a brief written biography of the attendee. These bios are emailed to the participants a day or two before the dinner, so those who’ve never met before will have a least a general sense of the identities and interests of their dinner companions.

Unlike a fundraising event, there's no formal presentation about a cause, an organization, or a social problem, nor is there a pitch for contributions or memberships. The purpose of the Jeffersonian Dinner is to build a sense of community and partnership around a shared interest or theme. (As you might imagine, the theme is generally related to the work of the nonprofit organization on whose behalf the gathering is being held.)

Most important, the dinner should be held in a setting where everyone in attendance can easily participate in a single conversation. Unlike the typical dinner party, guests are *not* encouraged to engage in one-on-one dialogues with their partners on either side. Instead, everything that is said should be directed to the entire group, just as Thomas Jefferson himself ordained. The following description of dinner at Jefferson's White House is from *The First Forty Years of Washington Society* (1806) by author Margaret Bayard Smith:

At his usual dinner parties the company seldom or ever exceeded fourteen, including himself and his secretary. The invitations were not given promiscuously, or as has been done of late years, alphabetically, but his guests were generally selected in reference to their tastes, habits and suitability in all respects, which attention had a wonderful effect in making his parties more agreeable, than dinner parties usually are; this limited number prevented the company's forming little knots and carrying on in undertones separate conversations, a custom so common and almost unavoidable in a large party. At Mr. Jefferson's table the conversation was

general; every guest was entertained and interested in whatever topic was discussed.

To launch the conversation at a Jeffersonian Dinner, a pre-announced question is used to elicit personal feelings, stories, and experiences relevant to the evening's theme. Some samples:

- For a dinner focused on the life-changing potential of philanthropy: "Describe a gift you made that produced a real difference."
- For a dinner about education reform: "Who is your favorite teacher of all time?"
- For a dinner related to plans for a new film center: "What movie is your favorite guilty pleasure, and why?"
- For a dinner related to technology: "What technology innovation in the last ten years has most changed your life?"
- For dinner about bringing music to school kids in New Orleans: "What's the first record you ever owned?"
- For a dinner about collaborative philanthropy: "Give an example of a time when you worked collaboratively with others successfully to have an impact."
- For a dinner about non-profit leadership: "Who do you know who is a good role model for non-profit leaders, and why are they?"

Crafting the right initial question for a Jeffersonian Dinner is important. It must be designed to elicit stories (rather than, for example, canned opinions,

theoretical discussions, or examples drawn from the media). Avoid a question that can be answered with a Yes or No, while also choosing a question that can be answered in around two minutes. The goal is to enhance the potential for personal connections among the guests, as well as a personal connection with the evening's theme.

For example, here is an initial question that proved to be too cerebral when it was used to kick off a Jeffersonian Dinner hosted by supporters of a university dedicated to the arts: "What's a design idea that made a difference in your life?" For the average person (not someone engaged professionally in the world of art), the notion of a "design idea" is a bit too abstract and too difficult to connect in a visceral way to everyday life. A more effective alternative might have been a question like, "Describe a work of art that changed your mind or opened up your perspective about something." Almost everyone has experienced at least one painting, sculpture, building, or other artwork that has altered their perceptions in some way, and this question invites personal stories about such encounters.

After each attendee has had a chance to answer the thematic question, open conversation ensues, gently guided by a moderator whose purpose is to channel and challenge the energies of the participants toward considering how they might begin to work together in some way that is connected to the issue of the evening. When the moment is right, the moderator introduces a follow-up question. This is the first time in the evening when a direct connection between the gathering and the nonprofit organization behind the dinner is likely to be broached. For example, when Jeff hosts Jeffersonian Dinners related to the work of Millennium Promise, he

often uses a follow-up question like, “Do you think we can end poverty in our time? Why or why not?” or “What do you think might happen if we had a million community health care workers on the planet?”

Moderating a Jeffersonian Dinner is an art in itself. The exact nature of the follow-up questions you ask may vary depending on the specific goal of the dinner (as discussed in the next section of this chapter). One effective approach is for the moderator to gently guide participants along the pathway of the public narrative as described by Marshall Ganz. That is, after each attendee has had a chance to describe one or more personal experiences related to the theme of the evening (a story of self), the moderator can ask how these experiences are connected with the interests of the entire group (a story of us) and then with the work of the nonprofit organization that has sponsored the dinner (a story of now). It’s an effective structure because it works!

Finally, as the time for concluding the dinner approaches, everyone in attendance is asked how they plan to follow up on the evening’s discussion. There’s no pressure to respond in a particular way. (And there’s certainly no intention to elicit donations or pledges in support of the nonprofit organization.) One participant may offer a response as simple as “I intend to learn and think more about the topics we’ve discussed.” Another may make a specific commitment growing out of the evening’s conversation: “I’ll be calling Susan, whom I met for the first time this evening, to find out more about her work and to learn whether my company might be able to support her in some way.” And occasionally, the follow-

up promises include the birth of a major new philanthropic commitment. Every response, from the most modest to the most ambitious, is entirely acceptable.

In any case, virtually every Jeffersonian Dinner we've hosted or heard about has generated a host of informal connections, networking opportunities, and follow-up conversations among dinner attendees, with long-term benefits that may take months or years to explore and develop.

Why Hold a Jeffersonian Dinner?

As we've seen, a Jeffersonian Dinner is *not* a fundraising event. No pitch or presentation is made, no brochures are distributed, no checks or pledges are solicited or accepted. So why are more and more nonprofit organizations choosing to use Jeffersonian Dinners as part of their community-building programs? What purposes do they serve?

Jeffersonian Dinners can help you achieve a number of important goals:

- *A Jeffersonian Dinner enlists new allies.* The list of attendees at the dinner should include a number of people who are new to you and your organization. The unusual nature of the evening will make your organization stand out as a place that is focused on collaboration, feedback, and community building.
- *A Jeffersonian Dinner helps to create and disseminate ideas.* Conversations around the table at Jeffersonian Dinners often help to spark fresh thinking about important topics. The interesting, partly-random assortment of attendees is

likely to generate interesting insights that may provoke worthwhile new initiatives: “The story you just told reminds me of something we did in my community. What if the two ideas were combined somehow? . . .”

- *A Jeffersonian Dinner expands attendees’ networks.* Almost every Jeffersonian Dinner we’ve attended has led to valuable new connections among people. We wish we had a dollar for every time we’ve heard an attendee say, “It was so great to have a chance to speak with so-and-so! We have so many interests in common, I can’t imagine how it is that we never met before!”
- *A Jeffersonian Dinner spreads knowledge about and interest in your organization.* Organize a Jeffersonian Dinner around the topic of your work helps to position your organization as a “thought leader” in the community. It will also greatly increase the visibility of your organization as a leader in thinking about the topic, perhaps even the “go-to” group whenever related issues are mentioned.

Fledgling organizations have used Jeffersonian Dinners to recruit partners, brainstorm solutions to policy problems, and spread the word about their team among those doing parallel work. Established organizations have used Jeffersonian Dinners to stay in touch with old friends, to meet new ones, and to get feedback and advice about potential new programs or changes in direction. Organizations that are about to embark on major fundraising initiatives or expansion programs have used Jeffersonian dinners to energize the community and get the word out about their exciting new plans.

Most important, Jeffersonian Dinners are *fun*. Participants almost invariably find them far more stimulating, thought-provoking, and engaging than either the typical purposeless dinner party (dominated by small talk and chitchat) or the traditional fundraising event (in which speakers “talk at” the audience rather than engaging in true, open-ended dialog). For nonprofit partners who have become weary of the ritual—and the expense—of the annual gala, the informality, openness, and intimacy of the Jeffersonian Dinner can be a breath of fresh air. And the simplicity of organizing a Jefferson Dinner—or even a series of dinners held throughout the year—is in stark contrast to the complexity of planning, funding, publicizing, preparing, and pulling off a star-studded gala. Most people, including nonprofit leaders themselves, regard the usual social activities in the nonprofit space as boring and enervating; they’re a major cause of burnout among nonprofit managers and fundraisers. By contrast, people who’ve attended a Jeffersonian Dinner love to talk about the experience with friends; they’re thrilled when an invitation to a second such dinner arrives, and many of them get turned on to the concept of hosting a Jeffersonian Dinner of their own. Rather than producing burnout, Jeffersonian Dinners create energy.

How To Host a Jeffersonian Dinner

Step 1: Planning (Beginning Four Weeks in Advance)

- Invite between 8 and 15 people who have a common interest (e.g.

music and kids, innovation in education, women's health care).

- It's usually best to invite a mix of people, some of whom know one another while others do not.
- Avoid inviting a "big kahuna"—a celebrity, powerful business executive, or political leader whose power or charisma are likely to lead others at the dinner to defer to him or her. Everyone at the dinner should feel equally free to contribute.
- If the dinner is to be focused on an objective, such as spreading knowledge of and interest in a nonprofit group, then work with the CEO of the group to tailor a topic that will interest the dinner participants.
- Choose a quiet location where the conversation can comfortably be heard, possibly a home or private room in a restaurant.
- Select an opening question that is related to the dinner theme and encourages each person at the table to tell a personal story (e.g., "Who was your favorite teacher of all time?").
- Solicit brief written biographies (100-150 words) from each participant in the dinner.
- Send out the opening question and biographies ahead of time so people will be ready to carry on the conversation.
- Select a dinner moderator—someone with a light style but who can move the conversation around and stimulate discussion.

Step 2: During the Dinner

- 7 p.m.: Cocktails, light conversation before seating.
- 7:30 p.m.: Moderator opens by explaining the ground rules. Most important: No talking to your neighbor; we are having a whole-table

conversation.

- Ask each person at the table to respond to the opening question.
- Moderator introduces a follow-up question to link the opening answers to the general theme of the evening. This may propose a problem related to it that those at the table can address together. The question could be directly related to the work of the nonprofit organization, e.g., “How can we reduce teacher turnover in schools?”
- Let the discussion begin! Moderator should keep the conversation relevant, prevent side discussions from breaking up the table, and ensure that no one or two people are overly dominant.
- 9:15 p.m.: Moderator asks each person at the table to describe any ideas or thoughts they had during the discussion that they would like to follow up on or work with someone on . . . or just think about more.
- 9:30 p.m.: End dinner. Informal one-on-one conversations usually continue.

Step 3: After the Dinner (Within Two Weeks)

- Moderator or nonprofit CEO sends out a note giving the dinner participants’ contact information and summarizing the follow-up points listed at the dinner’s end.
- Follow up over the next few weeks, helping people connect with one another and with the nonprofit organization if desired. Nonprofit leaders may choose to set up one-on-one meetings with the dinner attendees they thought were interested in following up.
- If you are in the midst of an ongoing campaign of some kind—or in the process of launching one—invite some of the most enthusiastic

participants in the dinner to host Jeffersonian Dinners of their own.

When the Unexpected Happens

One of the most remarkable characteristics of Jeffersonian Dinners is the way they tend to spark unexpected results. This can happen even when the dinner itself doesn't come off exactly as planned.

In 1991, businessman Matt Goldman joined forces with old friends Chris Wink and Phil Stanton to create a unique theatrical company known as Blue Man Group. It has since grown into a multinational media and entertainment enterprise with theatrical and digital media operations across four continents, permanent live performance installations in seven cities, an ongoing theatrical tour of the USA and Canada, and a highly acclaimed show on Norwegian Cruise Line's Epic.

Throughout their long association, Matt, Chris, and Phil have been fascinated by the interconnections between learning, creativity, and community. These interests led them to start Blue School, an innovative, experimental elementary school in New York City dedicated to the spirit of openness, creativity, and fun in learning, using a program guided by the latest findings of researchers and scientists exploring the fields of education, neuroscience, and cognition. "It's the kind of educational program we wish we'd had for ourselves and dreamed we'd have for

our children,” Goldman says, “a place where people feel like there is genuinely no better place to learn and to grow.”

Jennifer and Jeff have become close friends with Matt, who tells the story of a Jeffersonian Dinner gone wrong—and then amazingly right. Shortly after the founding of the Blue School, Goldman and his team were hoping to attract partners who might want to help strengthen, expand, and energize the Blue School movement. In particular, they were seeking some ideas about how the school might find a permanent home in New York’s ultra-expensive, ultra-competitive real estate marketplace. In quest of allies who might help them achieve these goals, they organized a Jeffersonian Dinner around the theme of “changing education.”

“Unfortunately,” Goldman recalls, “we didn’t have the discipline to keep the numbers down. So twelve people turned into sixteen, and sixteen turned into twenty. And after we invited our friend Eric Lewis—an amazing jazz pianist who performs under the stage name ELEW—to perform at the dinner, twenty turned into forty, and forty turned into seventy-five. It was out of control—a kind of Jeffersonian Dinner on steroids.”

Despite the fact that the traditional format had been shattered, Goldman and his team went ahead with a Jeffersonian-style gathering. People gathered in the apartment that Goldman and his wife Renee share with their family. Everyone enjoyed a light dinner, and began sharing their stories and thoughts about education, and those affiliated with Blue School talked a bit about the innovative philosophy behind its program.

But then a big monkey wrench was thrown into the evening. Although the evening had been explicitly billed (in true Jeffersonian fashion) as *not* a fundraising event, one enthusiastic attendee, caught up in the excitement over the Blue School's innovative approach to learning, called out, "I want to make a donation to the school! I'm pledging twenty-five thousand dollars—five thousand dollars every year for the next five years."

The room suddenly went silent. People glanced at one another, wondering whether this "spontaneous" gesture had been pre-planned. Jeff Walker, one of the attendees, spoke up next. "Matt," he asked, "since money has been mentioned, how much do you think you'll need to raise in order to find a home for the Blue School?"

"Well," Goldman replied, "to do everything we'd like to do, we'd need ten to fifteen million."

The silence in the room deepened. And though the conversation about education reform eventually resumed, the mood had been permanently changed. What had been a lively, spontaneous exchange of views was now overshadowed by the question of finances—which had *not* been the intention of Goldman or his Blue School team members.

Goldman was feeling a bit glum the next day when he heard through the community grapevine that one of his friends was particularly upset about how the evening had unfolded. He quickly gave her a call. "Listen," Goldman said, "We did *not* want to turn last night's dinner into a fundraising event. I'm so sorry you got that impression."

“I understand,” said the friend. “But I have to tell you that I’m still confused about the whole thing. What was the point of the dinner? What is it that you need for this school of yours?”

“We need a building.”

“Oh, is that all? Why didn’t you say so?” Goldman’s friend went on to explain that she knew a foreign businessman who was in the process of researching and purchasing undervalued properties on the New York real estate market. “Buying a building and leasing it to you would be right up his alley. Let me give you his number.”

Goldman followed up with a call to the foreign businessman, who requested anonymity but expressed a genuine interest in helping Blue School solve its real estate challenge. He wanted to buy a number of buildings in downtown New York, and he liked the idea of making one building available to the school on a long-term lease. A savvy realtor quickly discovered that a historic building in the South Street Seaport district was looking for a buyer. Within a few months, the school was immersed in the process of renovating its new home, where it now conducts classes for almost 200 happily engaged kids.

The moral of the story? You never know what kinds of serendipitous breakthroughs may occur when interesting people are brought together for a Jeffersonian Dinner—even when the dinner itself gets a little bit out of hand!

Deepening the Connections

In addition to attracting new partners, a Jeffersonian Dinner can also be a great way to enhance the connections among people who are already members of your band. Boards of directors that need an infusion of spirit and energy, for example, can often benefit from a Jeffersonian Dinner.

In some cases, people who are deeply involved in causes but teetering on the edge of burnout have been revitalized by participating in a Jeffersonian Dinner. Take our friend George, for example. We've known George for years, and he is a seasoned philanthropist. He leads a full, meaningful life that includes giving to a number of global organizations. You'll find him at the head of a table at many a gala dinner; his name appears prominently in the programs of the local symphony orchestra and opera company; he has received "Man of the Year" awards from more than one charitable organization. But recently George revealed something to us that caught us by surprise—that his experience of giving is often profoundly isolating.

We were a bit shocked by this revelation. Shouldn't giving a deeply joyful act? Doesn't it make one feel more connected with one's fellow humans? So how could this wise, generous man feel isolated in the act of giving? George explained that he often feels alone after he gives because "It makes me wonder whether people see me as nothing more than a walking checkbook." "I'm happy to give," he hastened to add, "but I have a lot more to offer than just money. Only it doesn't seem as if anybody else realizes it."

George isn't the only generous supporter who has experienced this sense of flagging energy. When you sense that some of your partners are beginning to lose

the spirit of excitement that originally drew them to the work, consider holding a Jeffersonian Dinner as a way of rekindling the flame.

We suggested that George organize a Jeffersonian Dinner with a few partners from his favorite nonprofit organization. The participants might include the executive director, key staff members, some fellow philanthropists, and other relevant stakeholders. For the opening question, he invited each person to tell a story of a time when he or she felt especially connected to the organization, to its work, and to its people.

How did we know this would work? Because, not too long ago, we held a dinner like this for the key board members and senior staff at Millennium Promise . We all shared stories from our visits to Millennium Villages and recalled how those experiences changed the way we viewed the world and the impact of our mission.

That dinner was one of the most powerful evenings of our lives, filled with a deep sense of community, shared experience and passion—not to mention a true solidarity with our partners. The warmth and renewed sense of commitment generated by that evening made each of us want to delve a little deeper to discover what resources we could offer to our collaboration. The evening was an amazing cure-all for whatever feelings of isolation, burn-out, or frustration that we may have had—and it lit every member of the room on fire with a renewed spirit for the mission of the project.

When you sense that some of your partners are beginning to lose the spirit of excitement that originally drew them to the work, consider holding a Jeffersonian Dinner as a way of rekindling the flame.