

THE GATHERINGS: STORY EDITION

Written by

Laurie Simons & Terry Sterrenberg

ACT ONE:

NARRATOR

Soft morning light filters through the window. Dennis pulls open a drawer in the sideboard. The year is 2040.

DENNIS

There they are. Allison you need to see this.

ALLISON

Are those the early Gathering recordings?

DENNIS

Yep. And this one - the interview from 5 years ago. You're in it.

ALLISON

Hmm...You know I don't like being in the spotlight.

NARRATOR

Dennis inserts the memory drive into his laptop and we hear Allison's recorded voice from the interview.

ALLISON

People said it wouldn't work But the world was a mess. It felt like everything was falling apart.

NARRATOR

Sixteen years earlier. 2024. Children scuffle on the playground.

AARON

You're supposed to take the green flag!

LORENZO

I wanted the red one!

NARRATOR

Allison appears. Firm, but calm.

ALLISON

Hey. Both of you. Let's head inside.

NARRATOR

Back inside the third grade classroom, chairs scrape. Kids quiet.

ALLISON

Sometimes we fight when something important to us isn't happening.

LORENZO

He didn't pick me for his team

AARON

You wanted to be on my team?

NARRATOR

Allison watches the argument shift.

LORENZO

I did.

NARRATOR

Another student raises a hand

STUDENT 1

But what about countries. When they fight?

STUDENT 2

Like Ukraine and Russia

STUDENT 3

And Israel and Hamas

STUDENT 4

They started it!

STUDENT 3

But kids are dying

NARRATOR

The bell rings as arguments of the world enter the classroom.

NARRATOR

A few days later, Allison sits across from the Principal in his office.

PRINCIPAL

You encouraged students to attend a protest. That crosses a line.

ALLISON
So. You're firing me.

PRINCIPAL
Please pack up your things.

NARRATOR
The hallway is deserted as Allison walks out of the school, carrying a small box. The heavy door closes behind her.

NARRATOR
The next day Allison weaves through a busy New York street. Horns blast, sirens scream. A disheveled man approaches her.

MALE VOICE 1
I'm hungry. Can you spare a dollar?

NARRATOR
Allison hands him a dollar, then glances at her phone to check the time. Banners of news headlines intrude on the screen: Conflict Escalating. Housing Crisis. Congress Deadlocked. Allison keeps walking.

NARRATOR
She crosses the grassy lawn. Dennis is there.

DENNIS
You look hassled.

ALLISON
I got fired.

DENNIS
You loved that job

ALLISON
I couldn't stop thinking. There has to be a better way to solve problems instead of fighting about them.

DENNIS
Hmm.

NARRATOR

Dennis watches her carefully. He has seen this expression before.

NARRATOR

Back in her apartment, Allison sits cross legged on the couch, staring at her laptop screen. It's a Zoom meeting where she meets Ximena for the first time.

XIMENA

When people feel truly heard, something unexpected happens. They begin thinking together instead of against each other.

NARRATOR

Allison's eyes remain locked on the screen as Ximena continues.

NARRATOR

Late into the night, Allison reads for hours- articles about small groups tackling impossible conflicts. Strangers discovering solutions no expert had predicted. She pours another coffee.

ALLISON

This could change everything.

NARRATOR

A memory surfaces. Years earlier. Allison is eight. Her uncle Steve reads to her.

UNCLE STEVE

The boy throws a starfish back into the sea. The old man says it won't matter.

NARRATOR

Uncle Steve turns the page.

UNCLE STEVE

And the boy says: "It mattered to that one".

NARRATOR

The next morning Allison meets Dennis at the coffee shop.

ALLISON

What if it's not complicated? What if people just need a way to hear each other?

NARRATOR

Dennis watches her carefully

DENNIS

You've got that look

ALLISON

I think this is it, Dennis. I think this is why I'm here

NARRATOR

The year is 2149. In the museum's central hall, a glowing hologram appears overhead. The word reads: BREAKTHROUGH. Micah steps closer.

MICAH

Breakthrough?

NARRATOR

Images form. A small room. People seated in a semicircle. Two facilitators standing before them.

MICAH

Is that the first one? The first Gathering?

ELIANA

Yes. People began to gather. In small groups. To listen and think together.

NARRATOR

More circles appear on the holographic screen. Then more.

MICAH

That's just normal now.

NARRATOR

The gatherings multiply into constellations of light around the world.

MICAH

Someone had to start it.

ELIANA

Maybe. Or maybe people were simply ready.

NARRATOR

The year is 2024. Allison exits the tutoring center. Then later, back in her apartment, she sends a text to Dennis.

ALLISON (TEXT)

Found a tutoring job. Still can't afford rent. Can I move in with you?

NARRATOR

She waits holding her breath. Then

DENNIS (TEXT)

I'll add your name to the mailbox.

NARRATOR

Later that week, Allison sketches in a notebook while Dennis watches.

ALLISON

Imagine twelve people seated in a semicircle. A facilitator up front. Everything said gets written down.

DENNIS

Like capturing the room's brain.

ALLISON

Exactly. After everyone's heard, something shifts.

NARRATOR

Allison draws a circle labeled Projects.

DENNIS

Hmm. Are the projects the goal or side effect?

ALLISON

Still figuring that out.

NARRATOR

Allison flips the page and writes FOLLOW-UP.

ALLISON

Afterward we call people. Ask what stayed with them. See if they'd host another.

DENNIS

So you want me to build a website.

ALLISON

Would you? That way, when Gatherings create projects, people can join in.

DENNIS

You're thinking big.

ALLISON

I have to. Are you in?

DENNIS

It's crazy... but let's build it.

NARRATOR

Allison sits in a coffee shop chatting with an old friend, Mel.

ALLISON

Look, thanks for introducing me to Ximena. It gave me an idea. Small group. About twelve people. One weekend event. I want Ximena to facilitate.

MEL

And the point?

ALLISON

Listening. Thinking together. Just start somewhere.

NARRATOR

Mel studies her.

MEL

It's not what I would do. I don't think it'll work. But I don't own the idea of listening. But hey, Go ahead. Plant your seeds.

NARRATOR

Later that day. Papers are scattered on the table in Dennis's apartment.

DENNIS

How do you even get people to show up?

ALLISON

If we wait for perfect, we never start.

NARRATOR

Dennis calculates on his phone.

DENNIS

Divided by 12. So, six hundred thousand Gatherings for New York City.

ALLISON

No, we aim for the 3.5 percent rule.

DENNIS

Oh, so let's see. That's just 23 thousand Gatherings.

ALLISON

Yes. So we better get started!

DENNIS

You're serious.

NARRATOR

Dennis begins organizing papers beside her.

NARRATOR

The next morning, Allison finishes up an email and hits "send". Her phone rings almost immediately.

XIMENA (PHONE)

What's this idea you mentioned?

ALLISON

Wow. Ximena. That was fast! I believe your work could change the world. I want to host a Gathering of twelve neighbors – and I'd like you to facilitate.

XIMENA

Wow. It's a tall order. Hmm. Well, all right. I'll do it. But I'll need to bring a co-facilitator.

NARRATOR

It's the day after the 2024 presidential election, Allison and Dennis walk with groceries. Neighbor Eric is sweeping the sidewalk. A big smile on his face.

ERIC

We're safer now. Trump'll protect us.

NARRATOR

After they pass—

DENNIS

Why talk to that guy?

ALLISON

People are scared. I could see him at a Gathering.

NARRATOR

Back at the apartment, Allison stares at her phone, talks to herself.

ALLISON

Wow, I thought we could use the library. Hmm. Wait, what about the Brooklyn Army Terminal!

NARRATOR

Allison taps a text message to Jamal.

NARRATOR

The next day, Allison stops several neighbors and awkwardly invites them to come to the first Gathering.

NEIGHBOR 1

Sorry, I have other plans that weekend.

NEIGHBOR 2

Gosh, Allison, I don't know.

NEIGHBOR 3

Maybe. I'll have to check my schedule.

NARRATOR

November 22, 2024. Twelve mismatched chairs form a semi-circle in Jamal's art studio at the Brooklyn Army Terminal. Flip chart papers line the wall.

CAROL

Um, is this the right place?

NARRATOR

Eleven participants take their seats. Ximena steps forward.

XIMENA

Welcome. I'm Ximena. This is Lenny. Tonight and tomorrow we are co-creating desired futures. Our question is: What is one meaningful step we might take to improve the quality of life for everyone in our community. Let's start with introducing why we are here.

NARRATOR

Eric raises a hand.

ERIC

Feels like I woke up in a foreign country. I don't recognize my own neighborhood anymore.

SUZANNE

Maybe I'm part of the invasion. I just want to meet people who don't assume I'm a threat.

NADIA

I was born here. I just want to walk my daughter to the store and feel safe.

JASON

I want my kids safe... but also free.

DAMIAN

Nice talk doesn't pay rent or fix broken pipes.

CAROL

I've marched and voted. Maybe change starts in rooms like this.

NARRATOR

Introductions wrap up and Ximena steps forward again.

XIMENA

Eric, can we come back to something you said?

ERIC

Sure.

XIMENA

You said the neighborhood feels unfamiliar.

ERIC

I'm the stranger now. On my own block.

NARRATOR

Lenny writes Eric's words up on the flip chart paper.

XIMENA

If it were up to you, what would you do about this?

ERIC

Well, I was going to say "Send them back." But I don't know. Maybe get to know people? Make friends? Not much chance of that.

NARRATOR

Eric glances toward Nadia awkwardly. Suzanne speaks next.

SUZANNE

You said "send them back"? What about people like me?

NARRATOR

Ximena directs Suzanne's attention to the front of the room.

XIMENA

Right here, Suzanne. Say it to me.

SUZANNE

I don't want to have to disappear just to feel safe.

NARRATOR

Words go onto the chart.
No argument. Just listening. Nadia
speaks next.

NADIA

There was a day on the subway...
smoke, panic. My daughter asking
why people were screaming.

NARRATOR

The room goes silent.

NADIA

I want Brooklyn to be safe for
everybody.

NARRATOR

The next day, flip chart papers
filled with words cover the walls.
Participants sit closer. Lenny
steps forward.

LENNY

Looking at everything here, what
stands out?

NARRATOR

Heads turn toward the papers,
scanning.

JAMAL

Connection. That's what I see.
People wanting to matter to each
other.

CAROL

Not just safe from danger. Safe
with each other.

DAMIAN

What if we actually did one of
those meals we talked about?

CAROL

You mean like a potluck?

DAMIAN

My restaurant's closed Mondays. We
could try it there!

SUZANNE

Add music. Something that brings
people in.

NADIA

And kids. Let them feel like it belongs to them too.

NARRATOR

Lenny writes quickly as ideas overlap. Ximena watches quietly.

XIMENA

Before we finish, I invite each of you to share one thing you're taking with you from this Gathering.

NARRATOR

Chairs move into a circle. Participants look tired, but lighter.

ERIC

I didn't expect to agree with anybody here. But I feel different walking out than I did coming in.

SUZANNE

I thought this would be awkward. It was. But in a good way.

NADIA

I feel less alone.

NARRATOR

People start gathering their things, but no one rushes away. They exchange phone numbers. Dennis operates the video camera quietly from a distance. Allison approaches Ximena.

ALLISON

Did it go the way you expected?

XIMENA

It never does.

NARRATOR

She pauses for a moment. Then

XIMENA

That's how you know it's working.

NARRATOR

In Dennis' apartment the next day. Photos of the flip chart papers glow on his laptop screen. Allison paces.

ALLISON

They created that potluck project. It's a start! Do you think one or two of them might want to host another Gathering? And then from that one, there might be people who want to host others?

DENNIS

Like replication.

ALLISON

Like a ripple.

NARRATOR

Sixteen years later. Dennis and Allison watch the recording of the first Gathering on a laptop.

DENNIS

Look at that room.

ALLISON

We almost cancelled. Remember?

DENNIS

Because only eleven people confirmed. You really didn't know what this would become.

ALLISON

I didn't. Not then. It just kept happening.

NARRATOR

A hundred and nine years later, Micah stands in the museum beneath expanding holograms of Gatherings spreading across continents.

MICAH

So nobody knows who started it?

ELIANA

People argue about that.

MICAH

You don't know?

NARRATOR

Eliana shakes her head.

ELIANA

What mattered was that people kept showing up.

NARRATOR

Micah visits the Archives Library to find out for himself. He talks to Zen the Archive master.

ZEN

Some records were lost in the Brooklyn flood.

MICAH

So there's no way to know who started them?

ZEN

Guess not. Sorry.

NARRATOR

2024, a hundred and twenty five years earlier, in Dennis's apartment, Allison and Dennis are surrounded by notes and papers.

ALLISON

The project from the first Gathering is taking hold. They want to do a potluck every month.

DENNIS

Well that one really took off.

ALLISON

Suzanne wants to host a Gathering next month. And Carol wants to become a facilitator and do a Gathering for her sister in Ohio. What if it spreads fast?

DENNIS

Then it stops being yours.

ALLISON

Good.

NARRATOR

Dennis turns the laptop toward her, shows her a simple webpage draft.

DENNIS

So. What do we call it?

ALLISON

The Gatherings.

NARRATOR

Dennis types it in. They look at the screen together.

NARRATOR

2149. Micah and his aunt Eliana look at the calendar display projected above the counter. A green block reads Gathering. 7 pm.

MICAH

I get to go next month, after my birthday.

ELIANA

You'll be 12. Nervous?

MICAH

A little. Also, kind of excited.

ELIANA

Me too.

NARRATOR

November, 2024. Allison is making a call on her phone.

ALLISON

Um, would you like to join us for a Gathering?

NARRATOR

April, 2149. Micah is now twelve years old. He steps inside the entrance of the meeting room at Civic Hall. Chairs are arranged in a semi-circle. People talk quietly as they take their seats.

FACILITATOR

Hi. You must be Micah.

MICAH

Yeah. First time.

FACILITATOR

Glad you're here. You can sit anywhere. We're really happy you came.

NARRATOR

Micah scans the room, choosing a chair between two strangers

FACILITATOR

Welcome, everyone.
Let's begin with introductions.
Tell us your name... and something you hope might come from our time together.

MICAH

I can go. I'm Micah. I just turned twelve. So this is my first Gathering. I guess I want to understand how people figure things out together.

NARRATOR

Micah watches as his words are written on the screen.

FACILITATOR

Thank you, Micah. Who else would like to go?

PARTICIPANT

I will. I'm Mara. Some of us have been building a sea town for folks who've been living at the shore. The sea level is rising faster than we thought. So some of those folks will need places to stay here in the city for awhile. So I'm here to see how we might welcome them.

NARRATOR

In the year 2040, Dennis and Allison are watching Allison's interview from 2035, five years before. Allison's voice comes from the screen as she addresses a large audience in a University lecture hall.

ALLISON

I'm surprised and grateful to know that so many of you have experienced a Gathering.

(MORE)

ALLISON (CONT'D)

Honestly, I didn't expect that. It means you're still listening. To each other. That's all I ever hoped for.

NARRATOR

In 2149 Micah's Gathering continues.

FACILITATOR

Who'd like to share something they care about improving?

NARRATOR

Several participants eagerly raise their hands.