

PERSPECTIVE | MAGAZINE

Over half of Americans are lonely. In Maine, potluck dinners are helping.

Sharing food and stories helps foster the connection our times so desperately need.

By **Karl Schatz** Updated December 17, 2024, 6:58 a.m.



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We pulled into the parking lot just after sunset, as the moon rose over the fields surrounding the 120-year-old East Sangerville Grange. Located along a rural road in Piscataquis County, Maine, the grange is home to the local chapter of a nationwide farmers' alliance that began in 1867 to educate farmers, advocate for agriculture, and promote social life. We were there for the latter — in the form of a potluck.

The town of Sangerville, about an hour northwest of Bangor, is about as rural as Maine gets, and the grange is located along a stretch of road peppered with farms. Through our nonprofit organization, [Community Plate](#), my wife, Margaret Hathaway, and I have spent the past 18 months hosting free potluck storytelling events all over Maine — this event was our 24th supper and 12th county. Our goal: address the loneliness that's widespread not only in local communities, but across the nation, as a means to foster the connection our times desperately need.

The problem is so serious that last year, the US surgeon general, Dr. Vivek Murthy, declared an [epidemic of loneliness and isolation](#). According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, over half of Americans reported experiencing loneliness even before the COVID-19 pandemic. This lack of connection, Murthy warned, can lead to physical consequences such as an increased risk of heart disease, stroke, dementia, and premature death.

His advisory cited a range of [contributing factors](#), including crumbling trust in institutions and each other; decreasing participation in social communities such as religious organizations; and technologies such as social media that replace in-person interactions. Racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ people, victims of

domestic violence, and rural communities may be at particular risk, Murthy said.

We began to sense a hunger for connection in our state as we compiled materials for our 2020 book, [Maine Bicentennial Community Cookbook](#), a volume of family recipes and stories (and precursor to Community Plate). Seeking to create a snapshot of food being cooked across Maine, the book encompasses both expected regional favorites and dishes representing the influences of immigration around the state. Our glimpses into Mainers' kitchens revealed a diverse, interconnected community and a tremendous human desire to strengthen bonds through recipes and stories.

These stories connect us in ways that are immediately familiar across cultural, social, economic, religious, and political divides. As the pandemic dragged on, the need to bring Mainers together became clearer. So, in March 2023, we held our first story sharing potluck at our family farm in Cumberland County. The connections people made were palpable and immediate.

“Be curious. Make things. Have conversations.” That’s the three-step prescription for addressing loneliness from Dr. Jeremy Nobel, a Harvard Medical School faculty member and author of the book *Project UnLonely: Healing our Crisis of Disconnection* (and a member of the Community Plate advisory board). At a community potluck, those three elements are built in. Meeting new people and learning about their dishes naturally foster inquisitiveness. Preparing and sharing your own dish is an act of creativity and bravery. Conversations naturally follow — and the result is connection and community.

Our potlucks have happened in small church basements, community centers, under tents, and inside a retrofitted cow barn. The impact has been the same each time. In post-potluck surveys, 98 percent of respondents report making a connection with someone they didn't know or didn't know well. Eighty-six percent report feeling more connected to their community, 88 percent report feeling listened to or heard, and 85 percent report feeling generally more optimistic.

Such outcomes, we believe, are part of why Murthy included potlucks in ["Recipes for Connection,"](#) a booklet he released this fall as a resource to help build meaningful relationships.

These gatherings are something anyone can do. They don't have to be fancy, but we have found small touches, such as assorted china, cloth napkins, metal flatware, and flowers, can elevate the meal and bring the best out in people. Don't worry about assigning food — we've organized potlucks for as few as 14 people to as many as 90 — the meal always has a way of working out.

That evening at the grange, the feeling of warmth grew as potluck attendees trickled in. People placed their dishes on the bar, sharing with each other what they brought: winter squash and greens, baked beans and brown bread, sourdough dinner rolls, a box of chocolate chip cookies from the local store. This is how it always goes: The buzz of conversation begins as soon as the dishes are set down.

So, when making your resolutions for 2025, consider organizing — or at least attending — a potluck. And then make a dish. Share a story. Build community.

As one attendee at the grange told us, “Sometimes we just need a reason to get together.”

Karl Schatz is the cofounder and executive director of Community Plate, a Maine nonprofit dedicated to building community through shared food and stories. Send comments to magazine@globe.com.

