

## **Rediscovering the “Third Place”: What Our Country Must Do to Foster Unity**

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The increasing presence of technology in daily life has been harmful to American identity and unity. Although it connects those living thousands of miles from one another, I find its impact has destroyed the concept of the “third place.”

“Third places” are communities that exist outside of someone’s home or work environment. Examples are church communities, Elks and Moose Lodges, and local social clubs. Many Americans participate in these organizations today, including my own involvement in my local Catholic parish and the Oregon Italian American organization known as Club Paesano. However, participation in these clubs is becoming less common among Millennials and Gen Z.

This is not to say younger Americans are neglecting service, advocacy work, or connection. Online fundraising and video conference platforms such as GoFundMe and Zoom allow for Americans to reach thousands of people. Communities, friendships, and relationships originating online is becoming more common. I participate as an Advocacy Leader with the Ovarian Cancer Research Alliance completely over Zoom and work a fully remote job. However, I believe the absence of in-person connection has contributed to the lack of unity in our country. Online communities can be more selective in their members due to the large number available to participate, and this can lead to isolation and lack of diversity in thought.

When more Americans participated in these clubs, they were not only face-to-face with other members on a routine basis, but oftentimes these communities brought different people together who may not have connected otherwise. This sounds like the function of online communities; however, the difference is the face-to-face interaction and shared physical location.

In-person connection provides a variety of benefits. It allows those engaging in conversation to observe body language, tone of voice, and general demeanor of a person, which is not always available behind a computer or phone screen. These in-person conversations allow people to relate easier as fellow human beings with more similarities than differences, and this is sometimes difficult when speaking virtually. True connection requires focus and attention, and online interactions can prevent these due to the ability to disengage and multitask during internet conversation. The reestablishment of the “third *physical* place” can bring Americans together and foster unity within the country because it allows human-to-human connection that is not available online.