

Five Habits to Heal the Heart of Democracy

BY PARKER PALMER

The human heart is the first home of democracy. It is where we embrace our questions. Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions? And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up—ever—trusting our fellow citizens to join with us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy?

—Terry Tempest Williams

“We the People” called American democracy into being. Today, the future of our democracy is threatened. How can “We the People” call American politics back to health at a time when, in the words of Bill Moyers, “we have fallen under the spell of money, faction, and fear”? One answer is close at hand, within everyone’s reach. We must return to the “first home” of democracy, which, as Terry Tempest Williams points out, is found not in a centuries-old document or in a distant city, but in the human heart.

A young French intellectual named Alexis de Tocqueville made much the same point when he visited our young nation in the 1830s, returning home to write the classic *Democracy in America*. In it, he predicted that democracy’s future would depend heavily on the “habits of the heart” its citizens developed, and on the health of the local venues in which the heart gets formed or deformed: families, neighborhoods, classrooms, congregations, voluntary associations, workplaces, and the various places of public life where “the company of strangers” gathers. These habits and the places where they are shaped form the invisible infrastructure of American democracy on which the quality of our political life depends. It is an infrastructure we have neglected at our peril, just as we have neglected its physical counterpart.

When Tocqueville and Terry Tempest Williams speak of the human heart, they mean much more than feeling or sentiment. “Heart” comes from the Latin *cor*, so in its original meaning, it points to the core of the human self, that center-place where all of our ways of knowing converge: intellectual, emotional, sensory, intuitive, imaginative, experiential, relational, and bodily, among others. The heart is where we integrate what we know in our minds with what we know in our bones, the place where our knowledge can become more fully human. *Cor* is also the Latin root from which we get the word *courage*. When all that we know of self and world comes together in the center-place called the heart, we are more likely to find the courage to act humanely on what we know.

If “We the People” are to help heal our ailing democracy—and if we do not, who will?—we need to develop five crucial habits of the heart. That, in turn, depends on people in positions of leadership dedicating themselves to forming these habits in the local venues I named earlier: families, neighborhoods, classrooms, congregations, voluntary associations, workplaces, and the various places of public life where “the company of strangers” gathers.

An understanding that we are all in this together. Biologists, ecologists, economists, ethicists and leaders of the great wisdom traditions have all given voice to this theme. Despite our illusions of individualism and national superiority, we humans are a profoundly interconnected species—entwined with one another and with all forms of life, as the global economic and ecological crises reveal in vivid and frightening detail. We must embrace the simple fact that we are dependent upon and accountable to one another, and that includes the stranger, the “alien other.” At the same time, we must save the notion of interdependence from the idealistic excesses that make it an impossible dream. Exhorting people to hold a continual awareness of global, national, or even local interconnectedness is a counsel of perfection that can only result in self-delusion or defeat. Which leads to a second key habit of the heart...

An appreciation of the value of “otherness.” It is true that we are all in this together. It is equally true that we spend most of our lives in “tribes” or lifestyle enclaves—and that thinking of the world in terms of “us” and “them” is one of the many limitations of the human mind. The good news is that “us and them” does not have to mean “us versus them.” Instead, it can remind us of the ancient tradition of hospitality to the stranger and give us a chance to translate it into twenty-first century terms. Hospitality rightly understood is premised on the notion that the stranger has much to teach us. It actively invites “otherness” into our lives to make them more expansive, including forms of otherness that seem utterly alien to us. Of course, we will not practice deep hospitality if we do not embrace the creative possibilities inherent in our differences. Which leads to a third key habit of the heart...

An ability to hold tension in life-giving ways. Our lives are filled with contradictions—from the gap between our aspirations and our behavior, to observations and insights we cannot abide because they run counter to our convictions. If we fail to hold them creatively, these contradictions will shut us down and take us out of the action. But when we allow their tensions to expand our hearts, they can open us to

new understandings of ourselves and our world, enhancing our lives and allowing us to enhance the lives of others. We are imperfect and broken beings who inhabit an imperfect and broken world. The genius of the human heart lies in its capacity to use these tensions to generate insight, energy, and new life. Making the most of those gifts requires a fourth key habit of the heart...

A sense of personal voice and agency. Insight and energy give rise to new life as we speak out and act out our own version of truth, while checking and correcting it against the truths of others. But many of us lack confidence in our voices and in our power to make a difference. We grow up in educational and religious institutions that treat us as members of an audience instead of actors in a drama, and as a result we become adults who treat politics as a spectator sport. And yet it remains possible for us, young and old alike, to find our voices, learn how to speak them, and know the satisfaction that comes from contributing to positive change—if we have the support of a community. Which leads to a fifth and final habit of the heart...

A capacity to create community. Without a community, it is nearly impossible to achieve voice: it takes a village to raise a Rosa Parks. Without a community, it is nearly impossible to exercise the “power of one” in a way that allows power to multiply: it took a village to translate Rosa Parks’s act of personal integrity into social change. In a mass society like ours, community rarely comes ready-made. But creating community in the places where we live and work does not mean abandoning other parts of our lives to become full-time organizers. The steady companionship of two or three kindred spirits can help us find the courage we need to speak and act as citizens. There are many ways to plant and cultivate the seeds of community in our personal and local lives. We must all become gardeners of community if we want democracy to flourish.

If I were asked for two words to summarize the habits of the heart American citizens need in response to twenty-first-century conditions, I would chose *chutzpah* and *humility*. By *chutzpah* I mean knowing that I have a voice that needs to be heard and the right to speak it. By *humility* I mean accepting the fact that my truth is always partial and may not be true at all, so I need to listen with openness and respect, especially to “the other,” as much as I need to speak my own voice with clarity and conviction.

American Democracy is a non-stop experiment in the strengths and weaknesses of our political institutions, local communities, and the human heart. The experiment is

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endless, unless we blow up the lab, and the explosives to do the job are found within us. But so, also, is the heart's alchemy that can turn suffering into compassion, conflict into community, and tension into energy for creativity amid democracy's demands.

Today we are in the middle of another election cycle. Once again, false claims, half-truths, hateful rhetoric, fear-mongering and demonization of the opposition dominate our civic space, driving out the genuine issue-oriented debate a democracy needs to survive and thrive. We need citizens with chutzpah and humility to occupy our civic space and call American democracy back to health. There is no reason, at least no good reason, why our number cannot be legion.

Parker Palmer drew the ideas for this article from his book, "Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit."