

Healing
THE *Heart* OF
Democracy
DISCUSSION GUIDE

With Links to Video Interviews
with Parker J. Palmer



Rick Jackson and Megan Scribner

[INTRODUCTION TO
THE DISCUSSION GUIDE]

Welcome to an opportunity to explore more deeply, individually and in groups, some of the key ideas in *Healing the Heart of Democracy*.

As Parker J. Palmer writes, “When we choose to engage, not evade, the tension of our differences, we will become better equipped to participate in a government of, by, and for the people . . .”

We can take an important step in that direction by using this book to frame and focus conversations about politics with family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and others. In the course of these conversations, we will learn more about what it means:

- To listen to each other openly and without fear, learning how much we have in common despite our differences
- To deepen our empathy for the alien “other” as we enter imaginatively into the experiences of people whose lives are radically unlike our own
- To hold what we believe and know with conviction *and* be willing to listen openly to other viewpoints, changing our minds if needed
- To seek out alternative facts and explanations whenever we find reason to doubt our own truth claims or the claims made by others, thus becoming better informed

- To probe, question, explore, and engage in dialogue, developing a fuller, more three-dimensional view of reality in the process

The work required to develop these conversational and civic skills will yield great rewards. We will grow in our ability to deal with political conflict, holding that complex force field in ways that unite “We the People” and allow us to hold our leaders accountable to the common good. We will become better able to participate in collective problem solving in every area of our lives, generating more creative solutions as we entertain competing ideas. Ultimately, we will feel more at home on the face of the earth, enjoying the fruits of diversity amid differences of many sorts.

This Discussion Guide is designed to encourage and support a thoughtful exploration of three areas of inquiry suggested by this book:

- ***What is most important to me as an American citizen?*** What animates my deepest hopes for my country? How do I want to give voice to those hopes?
- ***What is the role of “We the People” at this moment in American history?*** How can we join with others—locally, regionally, and nationally—to explore the many issues facing our country? How might we create a more open, respectful, and life-giving political conversation in a quest for the common good?
- ***What are you and I now called to do?*** Among the myriad challenges facing our communities, nation, and world, what is each of us most gifted, skilled, and positioned to do—or continue doing—to help heal the heart of democracy?

Resources

In this Discussion Guide—and at the website noted in the following text box—you’ll find a rich collection of resources for exploring the themes that run through *Healing the Heart of Democracy*. These include:

- Brief quotations from: (a) the book; (b) related online videos; and (c) a handout titled “Five Habits of the Heart That Help Make Democracy Possible.” All of these are accompanied by questions to help focus the discussion.

- Links to thirty-two brief online videos of Parker Palmer speaking about particular topics. These videos will help group participants feel more directly in dialogue with the author.
- Links to six brief online videos of Parker exploring a question with his friend and colleague, singer-songwriter Carrie Newcomer, followed by Carrie singing one of her songs that relates to that question. Music adds a vital dimension to any exploration of our fears and hopes, taking us to depths that words alone can't reach.

As you can see, there is indeed a rich collection of resources for discussion groups here, most likely more than any one group can use. As you begin planning for your discussion group, we recommend that you look through all these resources to choose those that strike you as best suited for the participants you expect, the number of times the group will meet, and your goals for the group.



For links to the videos and the “Five Habits” handout—as well as the other handouts listed below—please visit www.couragerenewal.org/democracyguide. There you will also find this entire Discussion Guide in the form of a downloadable document with live links to all of the resources named in this section. Whether you access these resources directly from the website or from the downloadable Discussion Guide, all of them are easily accessible, “just one click away.”

In our experience, forming and facilitating a discussion group requires deep thoughtfulness—especially when the focus is related to politics, a minefield of hot-button issues. So at the website noted in the preceding box, we have provided the following handouts to help you prepare to convene and facilitate a discussion group of any number of sessions. We urge you to take advantage of all four of them, which can be downloaded at no cost and printed for distribution to your group:

- Suggestions for Organizing a Discussion Group
- Touchstones for Creating Safe Spaces

- Guidelines for Reflection and Discussion
- Five Habits of the Heart That Help Make Democracy Possible

Thank you for your interest in *Healing the Heart of Democracy*—the idea as well as the book—and for your desire to dive deeper into it with a group, on your own, or both. We hope that this Discussion Guide will encourage people like you to participate more actively in our democracy so that together we can create “a politics worthy of the human spirit.”

[DISCUSSION QUESTIONS WITH
QUOTATIONS AND VIDEO LINKS]

Hope Is Fueled by Human Connection

Video with Parker J. Palmer and Carrie Newcomer (9 min.)

In the video, Carrie tells Parker: *“To sing together is a powerful community-building sort of thing. It also does each individual heart good. You can’t help but feel more connected with someone you’re singing with. It seems like an old-fashioned idea, but it still works.”*

This video could be a good opener for your first meeting. You might say to the group: “Many people today feel isolated and hopeless, which fuels cynicism and withdrawal when it comes to politics. We are gathered in part to create a community of conversation that supports hope. What experiences of connection or community have you had—whether or not they involved singing—that have helped give you hope?”

Healing the Heart of Democracy: Dedication and Epigraph

The Dedication

Video with Parker J. Palmer (2:50 min.)

In memory of

Christina Taylor Green (2001–2011)

Addie Mae Collins (1949–1963)

Denise McNair (1951–1963)

Carole Robertson (1949–1963)

Cynthia Wesley (1949–1963)



I dedicated the book to five young girls who died way too young. Four of them were murdered in 1963 in a Ku Klux Klan bombing. . . . [The fifth] died in the recent shooting out in Arizona where Representative Gabrielle Giffords was severely wounded. . . . [These tragic deaths] remind me that a nation is not to be judged by how well the strongest in its midst can do but by how well it cares for the weakest and most vulnerable in its midst. (Excerpt from video)

Q. How do you respond to the book's dedication and to what Parker says about the standard by which a nation should be judged?

The Epigraph

Video with Parker J. Palmer (2:40 min)

"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 (49)

Q. What thoughts and emotions do these words evoke in you? How do you answer the questions in the quote? As you watch the video, what are your thoughts about examining your own “citizen’s heart” and inviting people in your life to do the same?



Prelude: The Politics of the Brokenhearted

The Politics of the Brokenhearted

Video with Parker J. Palmer (3:25 min.)

Despite our sharp disagreements on the nature of the American dream, many of us on the left, on the right, and in the center have at least this much in common: a shared experience of heartbreak about the condition of our culture, our society, our body politic. That shared heartbreak can build a footbridge of mutual understanding on which we can walk toward each other. (59)

Q. What are your primary concerns about how our democracy is functioning? Do you think it’s possible for people who disagree with each other politically to come together around shared concerns for democracy itself?

Within us is a yearning for something better than divisiveness, toxicity, passivity, powerlessness, and selling our democratic inheritance to the highest bidder. Within us is the courage to pursue that yearning, to hold life's tensions consciously, faithfully, and well, until they break us open. The broken-open heart is a source of power as well as compassion—the power to bring down whatever diminishes us and raise up whatever serves us well. We can access and deploy that power by doing what every great social movement has done: put time, skill, and energy into the education and mobilization of the powers of the heart. As history consistently demonstrates, heart talk can yield actions just as practical as those driven by conventional forms of power. (23–24)

Q. Does the phrase “the politics of the brokenhearted” resonate with your own experience? What stories come to your mind and heart? What is the “something better” you are yearning for in our common life?

Lincoln's Melancholy

Video with Parker J. Palmer (3:25 min.)

In his second inaugural address, delivered on March 4, 1865, a month before the end of the Civil War, Lincoln appealed for “malice toward none” and “charity for all,” animated by what one writer calls an “awe-inspiring sense of love for all” who bore the brunt of the battle. In his appeal to a deeply divided America, Lincoln points to an essential fact of our life together: if we are to survive and thrive, we must hold its divisions and contradictions with compassion, lest we lose our democracy. Lincoln has much to teach us about embracing political tension in a way that opens our hearts to each other, no matter how deep our differences. That way begins “in here” as we work on reconciling whatever divides us from ourselves—and then moves out with healing power into a world of many divides, drawing light out of darkness, community out of chaos, and life out of death. (4)

Q. What does Lincoln's melancholy—and the way he dealt with it by embracing both the darkness and the light—have to teach us about how we hold heartbreaking experiences? About the heart or the human spirit? Do you believe that deeply interior personal qualities such as those Parker writes about can and do play out in the public or political arena?

Sharing Our Stories

Video with Parker J. Palmer (3 min.)

Hearing each other's stories, which are often stories of heartbreak, can create an unexpected bond. . . . When two people discover that parallel experiences led them to contrary conclusions, they are more likely to hold their differences respectfully, knowing that they have experienced similar forms of grief. The more you know about another person's story, the less possible it is to see that person as your enemy. (5)

Q. Can you tell a story about two people—possibly yourself and another—who hold differing convictions on a moral or political issue, and yet have found a way to move from distrust to understanding by learning more of each other's stories? How do you understand the fact that it's rare in this society for people who have regular access to each other—neighbors, colleagues, congregants, and others—to know very much about each other's stories?

Democracy: The Endless Experiment

Video with Parker J. Palmer (3 min.)

Our differences may be deep: what breaks my heart about America may make your heart sing, and vice versa. Protecting our right to disagree is one of democracy's gifts, and converting this inevitable tension into creative energy is part of democracy's genius.

You and I may disagree profoundly on what constitutes a political failure or success, but we can still agree on this: democracy is always at risk.

Government “of the people, by the people, and for the people” is a nonstop experiment in the strength and weakness of our political institutions, our local communities and associations, and the human heart. Its outcome can never be taken for granted. The democratic experiment is 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 community, conflict into the energy of creativity, and tension into an opening toward the common good. (9)

Q. How do you assess the state of the democratic “experiment” today? Where do you think the risks lie for “blowing up the lab?” What do you regard as the most promising next steps to help keep the experiment going for future generations?



Chapter I: Democracy’s Ecosystem

A Certain Relish for Confusion

[Video with Parker J. Palmer \(2:50 min.\)](#)

“The thing about democracy, beloveds, is that it is not neat, orderly, or quiet. It requires a certain relish for confusion.”

—MOLLY IVINS (11)

Q. Does Molly Ivins describe your experience of democracy? How do you respond to the “confusion” that occurs when there are diverse opinions, backgrounds and stakes in the issue at hand? Do you relish or run from that confusion, and why?

Creative Tension-Holding

Video with Parker J. Palmer (3:25 min.)

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. (45)

Q. Do you have a personal story about a contradiction of the sort described in the quotation—a contradiction you held in a way that turned out to be life-giving for you? For example, have you ever been conflicted about your own beliefs, but managed to hold that conflict in a way that opened you to new beliefs that enhanced your life? If so, what helped you to do that?

The Suffering in America

Video with Parker J. Palmer (4 min.)

We suffer from a widespread loss of jobs, homes, savings, and citizen confidence in our economic and political systems. We suffer from a fear of terrorism and the paranoia it produces. We suffer from a fragmentation of community that leaves us isolated from one another. We suffer, ironically, from our indifference to those among us who suffer. And we suffer as well from a hopeless sense that our personal and collective destinies are no longer in our hands. What shall we do with our suffering? That is one of the

most fateful questions human beings must wrestle with. Sometimes suffering rises into anger that leads to murder or war; at other times it descends into despair that leads to quick or slow self-destruction. Violence is what we get when we do not know what else to do with our suffering. But when the human heart is open and allowed to work its alchemy, suffering can generate vitality instead of violence. (19)

Q. What forms of public suffering do you see or experience right now? Do you have a story about how suffering—personal or public—has been transformed into creativity instead of violence to self or others?



Chapter II: Confessions of an Accidental Citizen

Citizenship as a Way of Being in the World . . .

Citizenship is a way of being in the world rooted in the knowledge that I am a member of a vast community of human and nonhuman beings that I depend on for essentials I could never provide for myself.

I see now that I have no choice—at least, no honorable choice—except to affirm, celebrate, and express my gratitude for that community in every aspect of my life, trying to be responsive to its needs whether or not my immediate self-interests are met. Whatever is in the common good is, in the long run, good for me and mine.

But if I believe in the importance of that community, I cannot afford to let my vision of citizenship drift off into a romantic fantasy about the body politic as a place where everyone agrees that there is a common good, let alone on what it is. Political life in a democracy is too gritty, imperfect, and conflicted for that. Glossing over our differences diminishes democracy's potential: those differences are grist for democracy's mill, if we know how to hold them in life-giving ways. (31)

Q. How do you respond to Parker's definition of citizenship? How does it compare with other statements you've heard about what citizenship means?

Citizenship Lite Is Not Enough

Video with Parker J. Palmer (3:30 min.)

For many, many years, I was engaged in citizenship lite. I wasn't doing anything detrimental to democracy. But neither was I deeply engaged with the shadowy corners of democracy, with the places where this democracy lets down people who don't look like me, who don't have my benefits. As the years have gone by, I've come to understand that citizenship lite is not enough. That those of us—and especially those of us who have the kind of privileges I do—are really called to a much deeper engagement with democracy, its future and its problems, than we may be comfortable with. (Adapted from video)

Q. How is Parker's story as a citizen like and unlike your own? How might you engage in a more active form of citizenship? What is the risk in doing so? In not doing so?

The Prophetic Alexis de Tocqueville

Video with Parker J. Palmer (3:40 min)

The human heart, this vital core of the human self, holds the power to destroy democracy or to make it whole. That is why our nineteenth-century visitor, Alexis de Tocqueville, insisted in his classic Democracy in America that democracy's future would depend heavily on generations of American citizens cultivating the habits of the heart that support political wholeness. (35)

The greater our tendency toward individualism, the weaker our communal fabric; the weaker our communal fabric, the more vulnerable we are to despotic power. Tocqueville's hope that the communal instinct might provide a counterbalance to American individualism and help us avoid the danger of despotism was based on the vigor he observed in religious, civic, and other organizational life. (42)

If "We the People" are to hold democracy's tensions in ways that reweave the civic community, we must develop habits that allow our hearts to break open and embrace diversity rather than break down and further divide us. (36)

Q. In your own life, and the larger life of the community in which you live, what are some examples of individualism and communalism? Are the two tendencies in balance or are they out of kilter in one direction or the other?

Unlike the political and the private, which are realms of relative order, the public is an arena of unpredictable and uncontrollable disorder. Things get noisy and messy when strangers gather, creating a yeasty mix of demographic differences and diverse interests, a tension-ridden and constantly shifting jumble of influences and alliances. Without this public vitality there would be no social ferment except, perhaps, underground. The public is the primordial soup that breeds new social life, the leaven that keeps our lives rising—and that potential for uprising is precisely what autocrats fear. . . .

And yet it is an observable fact that the critical public layer of democracy's infrastructure is eroding at a pace that barely attracts our attention and raises very few alarms: we are so obsessed with our private lives that we are largely oblivious to our public diminishment. If we continue to ignore the decline of the public space, with its opportunities and energies that help animate democracy, the private life we cherish will be weakened and ultimately undermined. (102)

Q. In the book, Parker describes our social structure as consisting of three “layers”: the private, the public, and the political. Focusing for the moment only on the public realm, how much time do you spend in “the company of strangers”? What do you value most about public life? What worries you most about it?

The First Habit of the Heart: We’re All in This Together

Video with Parker J. Palmer (1:25 min.)

“Habits of the heart” are deeply ingrained ways of seeing, being and responding to life that involve our minds, our emotions, our self-images, our concepts of meaning and purpose in life. I believe that these five taken together are critical to sustaining a democracy. Ecologists, economists, ethicists, philosophers of science, and religious and secular leaders have all given voice to the idea that we are all in this together. 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 on and accountable to one another, and that includes the stranger, the “alien other.” At the same time, we must save this notion of interdependence from the idealistic excesses that make it an impossible dream. Exhorting people to hold a continual awareness of global or national interconnectedness is a counsel of perfection, achievable (if at all) only by the rare saint, that can only result in self-delusion or defeat. (“Five Habits of the Heart That Help Make Democracy Possible”)

Q. Do you live with a conscious belief that “we’re all in this together”? If so, do you have a story that illustrates how you came to that belief? What are some ways you live—or would like to live—in recognition of our interconnectedness? What are some of the obstacles to living that way?

The Second Habit of the Heart: An Appreciation of Otherness

Video with Parker J. Palmer (1:50 min.)

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 need 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 our way of life. Of course, we will not practice deep hospitality if we do not embrace the creative possibilities inherent in our differences. (“Five Habits of the Heart”)

Q. Do you have a “tribe”? If so, how would you describe it? Do you have a story about crossing lines of difference in a way that made your world a larger and more inviting place? What are some of the ways you extend, or can imagine extending, hospitality to “the stranger”?

The Third Habit of the Heart: A Capacity to Hold Tension Creatively

Video with Parker J. Palmer (1:15 min.)

American democracy at its best is like that island of restored prairie. In a world where human diversity is often suppressed—where authoritarian regimes have kept people lined up like rows of cultivated corn, harvesting their labor and sometimes their lives to protect the interests of the state—the diversity that grows in a democracy delights the heart as well as the eye.

Our diversity consists only in part of demographic differences such as race, ethnicity, and social class. Equally important are the wildly different lenses through which we see, think, and believe. At the center of America's public life is a marketplace of ideas that only a free people could create, a vital, colorful, chaotic bazaar of religious, philosophical, political, and intellectual convictions. . . .

Just as a virgin prairie is less efficient than agribusiness land, democracy is less efficient than a dictatorship. We often move too slowly on matters of moral or practical urgency. And yet this loss of efficiency is more than offset by the way human diversity, freely expressed, can strengthen the body politic—offering resilience in the face of threat, adaptability to change, creativity and productivity in everything from commerce to science to culture. (12)

Q. In making a case for “creative tension-holding” amid our differences, Parker likens social diversity to the biodiversity of a prairie, with its resulting capacity for resilience, adaptability, and productivity. How does this analogy fit with your understanding and experience of American diversity? How do you understand and weigh the benefits of diversity versus efficiency when it comes to urgent social issues?

The Fourth Habit of the Heart: A Sense of Voice and Agency

Video with Parker J. Palmer (1 min.)

Insight and energy give rise to new life as we speak and act, expressing our version of truth while checking and correcting it against the truths of others. But many of us lack confidence in our own 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 use them, and know the satisfaction that comes from contributing to positive change—if we have the support of a community. (“Five Habits of the Heart”)

Q. Do you have a story to tell about an experience in which you discovered your “voice” or your “agency,” one that helped you articulate a vision and/or bring it closer to reality? If so, what were the critical elements in that experience?

The Fifth Habit of the Heart: A Capacity to Create Community

Video with Parker J. Palmer (1 min.)

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 manner that multiplies: it took a village to translate Park’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 kindle the courage we need to speak and act as citizens. (“Five Habits of the Heart”)

Q. What communities or relationships have helped you develop and deploy voice and agency? Do you have such a group right now? If not, are there one or two people that you might reach out to for mutual support?

The Role of Religion

Video with Parker J. Palmer (3 min.)

The true intent of all the great world religions is to help people find meaning and purpose amid life's endless tensions—especially the tension involved in trying to live a meaningful life despite the certainty of death, which would seem to obliterate all meaning. (83)

At their core, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and all of the major world religions are committed to compassion and hospitality. As the religious historian Karen Armstrong has written, "All the world faiths insist that true spirituality must be expressed consistently in practical compassion, the ability to feel with the other." In this fact lies the hope that we might reclaim their power to help reweave our tattered civic fabric. (40)

Q. Have you had an experience in which religion helped heal divisions? Have you had an experience in which religion created divides?



Chapter III: The Heart of Politics

Speaking Our Truth: "I Believe"

Video with Parker J. Palmer and Carrie Newcomer (8 min.)

- *I believe in democracy—in its indisputable achievements and its unfulfilled promise.*
- *I believe in American political institutions—in the genius inherent in their design and in the undeniable good they have done when put to their best use.*
- *I believe in the power of the human heart—in its capacity for truth and justice, love and forgiveness. (32)*

Q. As you think about the kinds of beliefs Parker writes about or Carrie sings about, what can you say about what you believe? In the video, Parker says that the question is not what you are willing to die for but what you are willing to live for. How would you answer that question?

Our Overconfidence in Rationality

Video with Parker J. Palmer (2 min.)

We live in a culture that is overly confident about rationality and science and objective data, as if everything can be settled at that level. . . . The human self, individually and collectively, is a lot more complex than that simple model would suggest. We operate on so many levels not only intellectual and factual but also emotional and relational, that to try and reduce everything to rational equations just doesn't work. But there is a way of thinking with the mind descended into the heart. The heart as that core place in us where all of our ways of knowing converge, where rationality and emotional and practical experience all come together to create the kind of knowledge that we actually operate with day in and day out—and that we don't get access to when we pretend that our solutions are all to be found in rational analyses and collections of facts. (Excerpt from video)

Q. Can you think of an example of a time in your personal life (e.g., in relation to a child, a partner, or a friend) when you practiced what Parker calls “thinking with the mind descended into the heart”? How does that differ from thinking with the intellect alone?

“My Farmer’s Heart”

Video with Parker J. Palmer (3:25 min.)

A man at one of my retreats had spent a decade in the Department of Agriculture following twenty-five years of farming in northeastern Iowa. During the retreat, he spoke anxiously about a policy decision he had to make. He said, “My farmer’s heart knows what I need to do, but doing it will get me in trouble with my superior.” As the retreat ended, this man said he now knew that he needed to settle the issue in favor of his farmer’s heart. Someone asked him, “How will you respond to your boss?” “It won’t be easy,” he replied. “But during my time in this circle, I’ve understood something important. I don’t report to my boss. I report to the land.” What he heard from his heart did not give him practical strategies and tactics to negotiate the complexities that lay ahead. But it gave him solid ground on which to take next steps. (55–56; adapted from the story as told in the book)

Q. Do you have a story, or know of one, about the power of joining head and heart in support of a difficult decision in your work or public life? In your own life and work, to what or to whom do you ultimately “report”?

A “Heart Disease” That Weakens Democracy: Consumerism

Video with Parker J. Palmer (2:50 min.)

When spending time online or going to the mall to buy consumer goods become a primary purpose of our lives—leaving us no time

or energy to engage our neighbors and build our community—democracy is weakened. By exiting the public sphere to engage in private consumerism we create a vacuum, and into that vacuum rush all kinds of other powers that want to control our democratic society. . . . One of democracy’s great threats these days is a quiet takeover by an oligarchy of wealth that calls the shots in national and state capitals, trumping the will of “We the People.” How would one even know the will of the people if we’re all down at the mall buying stuff? (Adapted from video)

Q. How do you assess the role of consumerism in your community? In the lives of people you know? In your own life? Have you personally experienced the impact of the power of big money on our political process or on the distribution of wealth in this country?

A “Heart Disease” That Weakens Democracy: The Empty Self

Video with Parker J. Palmer (2:50 min.)

The other heart disease is what I call the syndrome of the empty self, the self that can’t find meaning and purpose, that has in effect “lost heart.” This is a self that is totally disoriented by lots of things—the collapse of traditions that gave us meaning and purpose, the cacophony and noise of our culture, the frantic speed and pace. In the conditions of modern life it’s really very easy to lose any sense that I have a reason for being here, or that I am somebody whose life has worth. (Excerpt from video)

Q. What “heart diseases” in modern life most trouble you? Have you seen evidence of “the empty self” at work in the world? For you and the people you know best, what allows you to engage the world and its problems with a “full heart” as contrasted to an “empty self”?



Chapter IV: The Loom of Democracy

A Government That Functions Like a Loom

Video with Parker J. Palmer (5 min.)

In American-style democracy, the incessant conflicts of political life are meant to be contained within a dialectic of give-and-take, generating and even necessitating collaboration and inventiveness. These principles create a political system that can and does try our souls. It frustrates, maddens, exhausts, and appalls us when big problems go unsolved because we cannot muster enough agreement to solve them or when problems we thought we had put to rest are called back into play. . . .

A political system that allows us to keep working on collective solutions to vexing problems but refuses to take any question off the table permanently calls forth creative capacities that lie dormant under autocratic rule. If we are willing and able to hold the tensions that American democracy deliberately creates, the system itself will help us develop the habits of heart required for the health of the body politic. (75–77)

Q. If you have neighbors, friends, a partner or a spouse, if you have helped raise a child—especially a teenager!—then you have been challenged to hold tension creatively. Tell a story from these or any other parts of your life (e.g., workplace or religious community) when your capacity for tension-holding made a difference. What helped you hold that tension in a way that opened things up rather than shutting things down? If you have been able to hold tension creatively in your private life, have you been able to extend that to your public life? If not, what makes it difficult to use that capacity when dealing with political differences?

Cultural Inventions to Hold Tension Creatively

Video with Parker J. Palmer (4:50 min.)

Everyday life brings divergent demands of many sorts. These “provoke” our abundant inner supplies of “love, beauty, goodness, and truth,” powers that can transform tension from a destructive force into creative energy—if we hold tension long enough to let it open our hearts so they can work their alchemy. (72)

Q. In the video, Parker speaks of language, education, and various forms of art as among the “cultural inventions” designed to help us learn to hold tension in life-giving ways. Can you identify ways in which one or more of these cultural inventions have helped you develop this capacity?



Chapter V: Life in the Company of Strangers

The Choreography of Democracy

Video with Parker J. Palmer (3 min.)

I’ve often thought that if we could really see the comedy in the company of strangers—including that which we provide for others!—we would never have to buy a ticket to see a humorist perform again. It’s all out there. It’s the human comedy. So the public places and spaces in our cities and smaller communities are very important—the cafes, the sidewalk cafes, the bookstores, the coffee shops, the city parks, the streets themselves, the athletic events that bring people out in masses. All of these opportunities to realize that we not only can live together, we are living together, and we can do it very well by learning a pretty simple dance. (Excerpt from video)

Q. Please share a personal story about an experience you've had in "the company of strangers" that you found life-giving and hopeful, perhaps even humorous, one that enriched your sense of the possibilities of the human community.

Embracing Diversity

Video with Parker J. Palmer (3 min.)

As long as we equate the stranger with the enemy, there can be no civil society, let alone a democracy where much depends on holding the tension of our differences without fearing or demonizing the other. . . . Public life happens in all the places and on all the occasions where strangers can freely mingle face-to-face, where our relations with each other have a chance to become "more pleasant, more strong, and more durable," thus enhancing "the bond of social and political union among us." (96–97)

In nearly every traditional setting of public life, our daily opportunities for face-to-face encounters with strangers are contracting, not expanding. . . . we are an increasingly private and therefore deprived people, deprived of meaningful opportunities to develop democratic habits of the heart. . . . we must reclaim our public life before we sink any further into privatism at the expense of democracy and of the privacy we cherish, a privacy that requires public vigilance if it is to be preserved. . . . One key to renewing our public life is to reclaim the hospitable physical space it requires. (104–108)

Q. What is your personal relationship to America's diversity? Do you find it promising, problematic, or both? Do you have a story that illustrates your response to that question? As you think about "public life"—all those settings in which strangers have a chance to mingle freely—are there particular settings that you especially appreciate and enjoy? Can you imagine ways to increase your participation in public life, ways that might allow you to interact with "the other" more frequently and fruitfully?

An Appreciative Eye for Humanity: “Betty’s Diner”

Video with Parker J. Palmer (8:40 min.)

Parker: “*Betty’s Diner*’ is a song that says a lot about you, Carrie, and the deeply appreciative eye you have for . . . all the shapes and forms in which human life comes. I think that’s one of the key habits of the heart we need in a democracy—an appreciative eye for the human condition.”

Carrie: “I think ‘*Betty’s Diner*’ is really a song about community. . . . Where does the spirit of goodness move through the world and through our lives? . . . Often it’s in unexpected places . . . when people come together from all different kinds of backgrounds and stories. I’ve never met a person yet without an amazing story to tell . . . never once.” (Excerpt from video)

Q. Have you had an experience of “the spirit of goodness” moving in “the company of strangers,” an experience that was reassuring about the larger community in which we all live? Have you felt something change for the better as you learned more about the life story of someone you barely knew, or even a total stranger? Can you imagine ways to give people more opportunities to tell their stories as a contribution to our common life?



Chapter VI: Classrooms and Congregations

Our Quest for Meaning and Purpose

Video with Parker J. Palmer (3 min.)

- *Do I have gifts the world wants and needs?*
- *Does my life have meaning and purpose?*

- *Whom and what can I trust?*
- *How can I rise above my fears?*
- *How do I deal with suffering, my own and that of my family and friends?*
- *How can I maintain hope?*
- *What does my life mean in the face of the fact that I am going to die?* (124)

Q. Parker proposes that “spiritual but not creedal questions” such as these are important to explore together in the public sphere, including in such places as our public schools. Do you agree? Where and when do you believe we should explore such “inner life” questions? Do you see a connection between a healthy democracy and open explorations of questions such as these?

Rebuilding Democracy’s Infrastructure: Classrooms

Video with Parker J. Palmer (3:45 min.)

If we want to teach democratic habits of the heart in our classrooms, we need to help our students explore their inner potential. At the same time we need to help them explore their outer potential—in the school community and in the larger civic community—drawing them into a live encounter with democracy in action. (128)

Q. What habits of the heart did you develop in school (K–12 or beyond), that relate to your participation in American democracy? What kinds of experiences, curricular or extracurricular, contributed to the development of those habits? What habits of the heart do you see students developing today? Among the many jobs we expect our schools to do—from teaching academic content, to preparing students for the work force, to contributing to their moral development—what priority should be given to forming good citizens?

Rebuilding Democracy's Infrastructure: Congregations

Video with Parker J. Palmer (3:40 min.)

Open and honest conversations in a setting of deep hospitality, held as an ongoing program in a congregation, can plant seeds of healing and civic unity around this and other contentious and painful issues of our time. (143)

Becoming people who offer hospitality to strangers requires us to open our hearts time and again to the tension created by our fear of “the other.” That is why many wisdom traditions highlight the creative possibilities of a heart broken open instead of apart. Only from such a heart can hospitality flow—toward the stranger and toward all that we find alien and unsettling. (149)

Q. Do you have a story about how a religious community helped you to develop democratic habits of the heart? How might the practice of “hospitality”—a central feature of all major religious traditions—help heal democracy? What forms might that practice take in congregational life? How have you offered or received hospitality in that context?



Chapter VII: Safe Space for Deep Democracy

Getting the News from Within

Video with Parker J. Palmer (3:50 min.)

When we give the media exclusive rights to define our political world, we are almost certain to end up with a distorted sense of reality and deformed habits of the heart. (153)

If we fail to turn inward for some of our news, we cannot embrace the questions that Terry Tempest Williams names as those on which democracy depends—questions about our inner capacity for mutual respect, generosity, listening openly to others, courage, trust, and resolve. (155)

We need safe spaces, silent and solitary spaces, where we can get the news from within. But when it comes to forming the habits of the heart that make a democracy work, solitude has its limits. We also need safe spaces for small gatherings of the “company of strangers,” spaces where citizens can come together to explore the challenge of living heartfelt lives in the neighborhood, in the workplace, and in the larger world. (158)

Q. Do you have safe spaces where you can “get the news from within”? What kind of “news” do you receive from within? How does that news help you to be the kind of citizen a democracy needs? Do you know of spaces safe enough for strangers to gather and share their fears and hopes about the challenges of our common life?

Cyberspace and Democracy

Cyberspace can facilitate the kinds of connections that get people working together, people who would never have met had it not been for this “notional space.” As I have seen how cyberspace can help us form democratic habits of the heart, I have also seen how it can deform us. The more we live in virtual communities, the more privatized our lives become, undermining the foundations of our public and political life. . . .

It is good for democracy that the digital media allow more and more of us to become producers as well as consumers of political opinions and information. It is not good when, as consumers, we make no effort to question what we read, compare it to other sources, and attempt to separate the wheat from the chaff. Some of the new producers are among our finest journalists, while others are apparently devoted to making Orwellian prophecies come true. As consumers of their wares, we need to set our bunk detectors on high. (173–174)

Q. What kind of experiences have you had in the online environment, as a consumer or producer of information, or as a participant in interactive social media? Do those experiences give you reason for hope, concern or both when it comes to the Internet's implications for democracy? Why?



Chapter VIII: The Unwritten History of the Heart

Personal and National Mythologies

Video with Parker J. Palmer (4:30 min.)

Even the longest, most detailed, and most expressive obituaries always omit the essence of a life: the history of a person's heart. How many of us wish that we had asked more questions of someone we loved, not about what happened and when but about the inner experience of being that person? About hopes and fulfillments, failures and regrets? . . .

The heart of the world itself has an unwritten history. Historians write about visible movements: the movements of populations, cultural artifacts, and technologies; natural resources and money; armed forces and political power. But as the poet Rilke reminds us, "there is a boundary to looking." The deeper movements that shape our world are impulses of the heart invisible to the eye: the hope and greed that move markets; the loves and hates that rouse armies; the desires to create or control that galvanize political power. (175–176)

Q. What do you think about Parker's idea of "the unwritten history of the heart"? Whether it is an individual's heart or "the heart of the world"? What sort of distortions set in when some dimensions of history remain unconscious and unexamined, while others claim all

of our attention? If we became more aware of the neglected histories of people we know—or of our own country—how might our own hearts be changed?

Nations, like individuals, have myths rooted deep in their histories, myths that are always contradicted by their complex realities. . . . If we remain clear about the gap between America's aspiration and its reality, our founding myth can continue to energize movement toward our goal. But when we imagine or pretend that it describes America's reality, the myth becomes an enemy of its own aspiration. (178–180)

Q. Do you agree that we have national myths that are contradicted by the facts of American life? If so, what are some of those myths? If we acknowledged the gaps between them and the realities of our nation, what might change in us or in our political life? How might we retain certain elements of those same myths as aspirations that continue to call our nation to something better?

Never Doubt the Power of Love: “One Woman and a Shovel”

Video with Parker J. Palmer and Carrie Newcomer (9:25 min.)

In practical political terms, what does it mean to reclaim the aspirations found in our myths and work toward achieving them? The best answer to that question is found by studying the great movements for social change—movements that have made a difference in the lay and the law of the land, movements so well chronicled that they provide the closest thing we have to a written history of the heart of politics.

Look, for example, at the international movement for women's rights; the movements for liberation in South Africa, Eastern Europe, and Latin America; the American civil rights movement

of the twentieth century; and the never-ending movement called American democracy that began in 1776. The history of these momentous processes of change points to a simple fact: without an uprising of vision and energy among those who suffer most from the gap between vision and reality, little progress can be made on the challenges facing humankind.

Movements of social transformation are sparked by people who are isolated, marginalized, and oppressed but who do not fall into despair. Instead, they respond to their condition by taking the poet Rilke's advice that we go inward "and do heart-work / on all the images imprisoned within" us. Having released those images, they return to the world of action resolved to live in a way that will help it become a place in which their humanity is honored. Under the right conditions, their witness can tap a collective yearning that contains enough energy to move the world closer to the heart's aspirations. (184)

Q. Think about a social movement that has unfolded during your lifetime, such as the civil rights movement, the women's movement, or the movement for gay and lesbian rights. To what extent do you think these movements have been fueled by "the power of love" that Carrie sings about in "One Woman and a Shovel"? To what extent do you believe in "the power of one" that the song illustrates? Is there anything you care about so much that you have picked up or would pick up "your shovel" to do something about it?

Social Movements, Stage One: Divided No More

The first stage of all social movements lies in what I have called the "Rosa Parks decision." Rosa Parks did not launch the American civil rights movement by herself, to say the obvious. She became the public icon of a long line of oppressed African Americans who had an "imprisoned image" of themselves as free

women and men while being externally imprisoned by cultural and institutional racism. Rosa Parks spoke for all of them when she made the decision to “live divided no more,” to act outwardly in a way that reflected the truth she knew inwardly: that she was nothing less than a human being, whole and worthy and free. (184–185)

Q. Few people have made the decision to “live divided no more” and triggered a mass movement as Rosa Parks did. But many people have made that decision in their personal and public lives—a decision about a relationship or work, for example—affirming and preserving their identity and integrity in the process. Do you have a story you can tell about such a decision in your own life? What did you learn from making it?

Social Movements, Stage Two: Communities of Congruence

Stage two involves the formation of “communities of congruence,” such as that tiny independent black church near Americus, Georgia (Chapter II), or the Highlander Folk School, or a circle of trust (Chapter VII). In communities like these, people gather to support each other’s resolve to live by the heart’s imperatives. . . . Communities of congruence help people develop the habits of the heart that agents of social change, and all engaged citizens, must possess. They help people master the information, theories, and strategies that will allow them to advance their cause. And they offer people small-scale opportunities to become the kinds of leaders that a large-scale movement demands. (186–187)

Q. Do you have a supportive community in your life? If so, how does it encourage and challenge you? If not, how might you call such a community together, remembering that it can consist of as few as two or three people who share your values and goals?

Social Movements, Stage Three: Going Public

[The third stage of “going public”] seems simple and self-evident. If a movement did not go public in order to spread its message and try to create social change, it would be a secret society, not a movement. But there is another, equally important reason why a movement must go public if it is to become a force for good: only by doing so can a movement gain the critics it needs. The shadow side of any movement is the belief that “we are right and everyone else is wrong,” a belief that goes unchallenged when people talk only with those who share their views. (187)

Q. What is the role of critics in relation to our most cherished beliefs, values, and commitments, both personal and communal? Have you ever received criticism that has compelled you to rethink your beliefs and change the way you do things, perhaps even redirect your life?

Social Movements, Stage Four: Punishment and Reward Transformed: “Stones in the River”

Video with Parker J. Palmer and Carrie Newcomer (8:40 min.)

A movement’s success is signaled by a slow accretion of small changes in the system of institutional rewards and punishments by which all societies exercise social control. Qualities, commitments, and actions for which people in an earlier era were unjustly punished begin to become sources of reward in a process so gradual that it attracts little notice. . . .

In this fourth stage of a movement, there is an inward as well as an outward transformation, and it brings us back full circle to stage one. A movement gets under way as advocates realize that no punishment could possibly be greater than the one we

lay on ourselves by conspiring in our own diminishment. In the final phase of a movement, advocates begin to understand that no reward could possibly be greater than the one we give ourselves by living our own truth “out loud” and in the light of day. (188–189)

Q. “Stones in the River” is a song about people who keep making their small contribution to a goal they care about, even though they may not see the final outcome, or even measurable short-term progress. Is there a stream of activity in your life where you have kept tossing “stones in the river”? If so, what has kept you at it? What are the rewards of living your life that way?

Standing and Acting in the “Tragic Gap”

Video with Parker J. Palmer (4:35 min.)

Of all the tensions we must hold in personal and political life, perhaps the most fundamental and most challenging is standing and acting with hope in the “tragic gap.” On one side of that gap, we see the hard realities of the world, realities that can crush our spirits and defeat our hopes. On the other side of that gap, we see real-world possibilities, life as we know it could be because we have seen it that way. (191)

Q. Is there a part of your life where you find yourself standing in the tragic gap—in your family, your workplace, your community, or the larger world? If so, have you ever been tempted to “flip out” into “corrosive cynicism” or “irrelevant idealism”? What helps you stay in the gap and keep acting there? What might further strengthen your ability to do so?

From Effectiveness to Faithfulness

Video with Parker J. Palmer (4:50 min.)

If we are to stand and act with hope in the tragic gap and do it for the long haul, we cannot settle for mere “effectiveness” as the ultimate measure of our failure or success. Yes, we want to be effective in pursuit of important goals. But when measurable, short-term outcomes become the only or primary standard for assessing our efforts, the upshot is as pathetic as it is predictable: we take on smaller and smaller tasks—the only kind that yield instantly visible results—and abandon the large, impossible but vital jobs we are here to do.

We must judge ourselves by a higher standard than effectiveness, the standard called faithfulness. Are we faithful to the community on which we depend, to doing what we can in response to its pressing needs? Are we faithful to the better angels of our nature and to what they call forth from us? Are we faithful to the eternal conversation of the human race, to speaking and listening in a way that takes us closer to truth? Are we faithful to the call of courage that summons us to witness to the common good, even against great odds? When faithfulness is our standard, we are more likely to sustain our engagement with tasks that will never end: doing justice, loving mercy, and calling the beloved community into being. (192–193)

Q. Is there a cause—personal, social, or political—that you have committed yourself to for the “long haul”? If so, what is your experience of effectiveness and faithfulness in service of this cause? How do you remain committed to tasks that do not yield visible short-term results?

A World of Shadow and Light: “I Heard an Owl”

Video with Parker J. Palmer and Carrie Newcomer (8:30 min.)

If I were asked for two words to summarize the habits of the heart American citizens need in response to twenty-first-century

conditions, chutzpah and humility are the words I would choose. 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. Humility plus chutzpah equals the kind of citizens a democracy needs. (43)

Q. Do you have the chutzpah to speak your voice clearly, and the humility to listen to others openly, in the ongoing effort to create “a politics worthy of the human spirit”? What might help you and others develop those capacities more fully?

Closing Reflections

Video with Parker J. Palmer and Carrie Newcomer (8:30 min.)

Carrie: If you read the news, or you're aware of what's happening in the world, pretty quickly you can start thinking, “Wow, it's a scary place.” And it's true that there are so many sorrows out there and there's a lot of work to be done. And at the same time, I feel very hopeful that everywhere I go, in every community I visit, there are people working very hard to make their community, to make the world, a better, kinder place. They don't always get the front page—sometimes they don't even get the back page. But I'm encouraged by the fact that in every single community I visit, they're there. They're there and they're working in large and small ways. There's still this hope that the world is still filled with fine people.

Parker: [The world] is in our hands, isn't it? To hold with courage and with love. . . . (Excerpt from video)

Thank you for taking time to reflect on these questions and explore these topics. Thank you for being one of the people who understands that “the world is in our hands” and for the work you do to make your community and our world “a better, kinder place.”



This Discussion Guide is a collaborative project of Jossey-Bass and the Center for Courage & Renewal, the nonprofit organization founded by Parker J. Palmer. The Center offers programs and resources to help people cultivate “habits of the heart” that lead to more authentic, meaningful, and engaged lives. Learn more at www.CourageRenewal.org.

[THE DISCUSSION GUIDE AUTHORS]

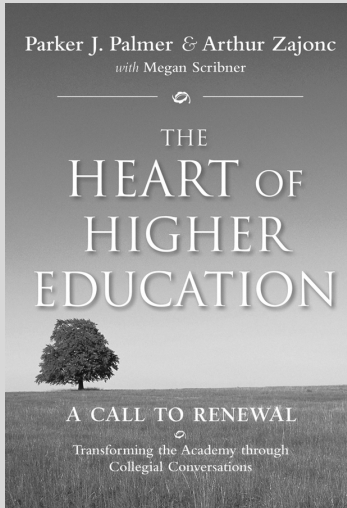
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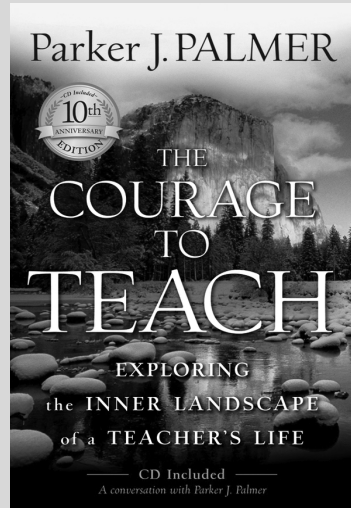


Both authors are long-time colleagues of Parker J. Palmer and have partnered with him on a wide range of projects, including program development and evaluation and a number of books.

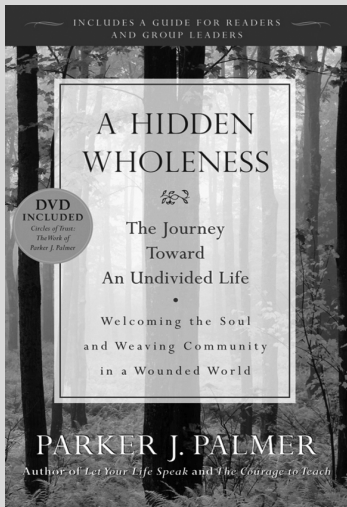
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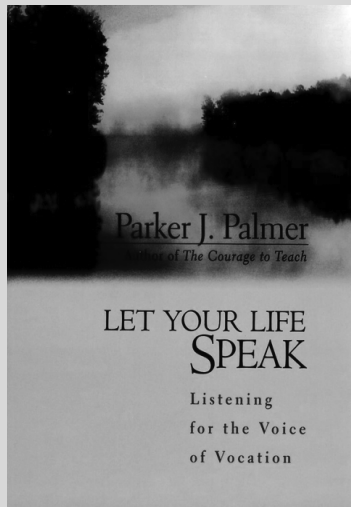
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