

The Heart of Democracy¹
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An Excerpt from Parker Palmer's *Healing the Heart of Democracy*²

If you have ever loved someone or something—a man, a woman, a child, a job, an idea, or an ideal—you probably know what it means to have your heart broken by failure, loss, betrayal, decline, or death. Like most Americans, I love democracy, and like many I know, it breaks my heart when democracy is threatened, from within or without. What else should I feel when “We the People” find our will trumped by corporate money, official corruption, and Orwellian lies? Or when we undermine ourselves by indulging in cheap animosities toward those who disagree with us instead of engaging our differences like grown-ups?

For those of us who want to see democracy survive and thrive—and we are legion—the heart is where *everything* begins: that grounded place in each of us where we can overcome fear, rediscover that we are members of one another, and embrace the conflicts that threaten democracy as openings to new life for us and for our nation.

Sermon

“When things we care about fall apart, heartbreak happens.”³ Parker Palmer begins his new book by talking about the heartbreak he felt as he watched what was happening in America during the past ten years. I had received a copy of the prelude to the book, and what he said resonated with my own sense of heartbreak and discouragement about our country. So I ordered a copy of the book, wanting to find something of the healing that was promised in the title, *Healing the Heart of Democracy*.

There are times when I am ready to give up on America. I have been talking to a lot of people in our congregation and in our community who are also feeling discouraged and even despairing about what is happening in our country. It feels as if there are no longer any common values, no concern for the common good, operating in our politics. My misgivings were reinforced when I read an article by a retired Republican staffer, Mike Lofgren, published in September. After almost 30 years working for Congress, he wrote that he had retired from his job and from his party, because it had been taken over by people who were trying to destroy the democratic institutions by which our government is run.⁴

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2 Parker Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, (Jossey-Bass, 2011), p. 57, & p. 10.

3 Palmer, p. 3.

4 “Goodbye to All That: Reflections of a GOP Operative Who Left the Cult,” Saturday 3 September 2011, at Truth/Out.org, <http://www.truth-out.org/goodbye-all-reflections-gop-operative-who-left-cult/1314907779>

Every bill, every appointment—even the most mundane order of business—has become an occasion for threats and filibusters. Most recently, we saw this when disaster aid for victims of Hurricane Irene was held hostage by House Majority Leader Eric Cantor with demands for immediate spending cuts in other areas. Mike Lofgren wrote,

A couple of years ago, a Republican committee staff director told me candidly (and proudly) what the method was to all this obstruction and disruption. Should Republicans succeed in obstructing the Senate from doing its job, it would further lower Congress's generic favorability rating among the American people. By sabotaging the reputation of an institution of government, the party that is programmatically against government would come out the relative winner.

He goes on to say that these tactics—a kind of political terrorism—“are important indicators of an absolutist, authoritarian mindset that is increasingly hostile to the democratic values of reason, compromise and conciliation. Rather, this mindset seeks polarizing division..., conflict and the crushing of opposition.”

I think it is important to acknowledge the truth about what is going on in America. There are some people, included some of our elected leaders, who are not interested in working things out, in finding solutions to help our country; who are not interested in how people are doing, whether they are losing jobs or homes, or even whether the whole economy crashes. There is a lot of cause to be concerned. Bill Moyers wrote, “Democracy in America is a series of narrow escapes, and we may be running out of luck... We have fallen under the spell of money, faction, and fear, and the great American experience in creating a different future together has been subjugated to individual cunning in the pursuit of wealth and power.”⁵

Parker Palmer acknowledges the crisis we are in, and he also admits that “there will always be people with whom dialogue is impossible.” He suggests, however, that perhaps there are 15 to 20 percent on the right and on the left, who cannot be reached. That still leaves 60 - 70 percent who *are open to talking across our differences*, and Palmer believes that can be enough to save the day.⁶

Palmer begins in the place of heartbreak. He believes that there is power in heartbreak, for good or ill. Heartbreak can be perilous, if it is exploited by fear mongers and turned into despair or scapegoating or extremism. But heartbreak can also fuel transformation, and give us the energy to reach beyond our disagreements into compassion and connection. Heartbreak can give us the energy to do the hard work that democracy requires.

His book explores five habits of the heart that he believes are necessary for sustaining a democracy. These are habits we can cultivate in all areas of our lives—in our families, our schools, our congregations, our public life, as well as in our politics.

5 Quoted in Palmer, p.18-19.

6 Palmer, p. 16-17.

In order for democracy to thrive, he says,

We must understand that we are all in this together.
We must develop an appreciation of the value of otherness.
We must cultivate the ability to hold tension in life-giving ways.
We must generate a sense of personal voice and agency. [and]
We must strengthen our capacity to create community.⁷

One of the things that most intrigued me was his approach to conflict and tension. He talked about how, from the very beginning, democracy affirmed conflict. The founding fathers could not agree among themselves, and so created a system of government that makes room for disagreement, that seeks to maintain tension over time, rather than moving too quickly into incomplete solutions.⁸

He writes,

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.

"And yet," he goes on, "this is one of the most crucial lessons of the twentieth century: tension is a sign of life, and the end of tension is a sign of death."⁹

He talks about how the Constitution intentionally blurred the lines of authority—its checks and balances assure that no part of the government has ultimate decision-making power. And this is its inherent strength—because this holding in tension of important questions makes it possible for creativity to flourish, and new invention to take place.

When I was in college, I remember having a conversation with a fellow student about the lines of authority in marriage. My friend was arguing that there needed to be someone who had the last word—if the wife and husband could not agree on something, then the husband should be the one in charge. Even though I was much more compliant at that age than I am today, I remember arguing that a couple could work these things out—that you just had to keep at it until you found a way forward.

7 p. 44-45.

8 p. 74.

9 p. 75-6

That memory came back to me as Parker Palmer described how democracy is threatened by anything that undermines its capacity to hold this tension.¹⁰ And this is where the heart is so important. He quotes Terry Tempest Williams: "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?"¹¹

A broken open heart can stretch enough to listen to the other, to the one who has a different heartbreak than our own. It can stretch enough to give voice to its own wisdom and values. And when we practice this open-hearted speaking and listening, holding a space for the tensions between us, we are strengthening democracy. Democracy happens at all levels of our lives. We can do this in our families, our congregations, and our schools, as well as in our political life. Parker Palmer draws hope from these many ways we can live the principles and habits of democracy, even when our elected leaders are not doing so well at it. Because democracy rests on "we the people."

I have been thinking about Occupy Wall Street. Occupy Wall Street started in mid-September with a march of about a thousand people, 200 of whom camped out in Zuccotti Park in New York City's financial district. It has grown into a nationwide movement. Calling themselves the "Ninety-nine Percent," protesters are challenging the greed of Wall Street, the policies that enable the upper one percent to be making enormous profits while thousands of people are losing their homes, are unemployed, or just getting by. I found it ironic that a letter writer in the *Portland Press Herald* criticized the protesters with that old complaint "why don't they get jobs?" Many of the protesters seem to be young adults, likely with thousands of dollars of student loan debt, and no job prospects in sight.

On Salon.com, Glenn Greenwald talks about the scorn that has been heaped on the protesters by the mainstream media, including the criticism that the protesters don't have a clear message. He chides, "Does anyone really not know what the basic message is of this protest: that Wall Street is oozing corruption and criminality and its unrestrained political power—in the form of crony capitalism and ownership of political institutions—is destroying financial security for everyone else?"¹²

Occupy Wall Street gives me hope for our democracy. Parker Palmer quotes Alexis de Tocqueville, a Frenchman who wrote a book about American democracy in the early 19th century. He wrote: "Democracy doesn't give people the most competent government, but it does what the most competent government is often powerless to do. It spreads throughout the entire social body a restless activity, a superabundant strength, an energy that never exists without it."¹³

10 p. 79.

11 p. xv.

12 Glenn Greenwald, "What's behind the scorn for the Wall Street protests?" September 28, 2011 at http://politics.salon.com/2011/09/28/protests_21/

13 Quoted in Palmer, p. 86.

Occupy Wall Street expresses the restless activity that can fuel transformation.

It seems strange to applaud conflict and disagreement. Most of us tend to want to avoid it. But Palmer embraces conflict as an elixir that brews new possibilities and positive changes. He notes, "Only in a totalitarian state is conflict 'banished.'"¹⁴ Taking this approach to conflict can be liberating, even if it is never easy.

How often do we avoid conversations with those who think differently than we do? Even in our most intimate relationships, we tend to shy away from disagreement. How often do we seek to understand the feelings that our political opponents are carrying in their hearts? Palmer suggests that we can't solve our conflicts at the level of the mind alone. It is only when our minds are joined to our hearts that we have the capacity to find common ground.

We are all in this together. The other, the stranger, the one who is so different from who I am, offers me the opportunity to grow, to learn, to expand. When we can hold within our hearts the tension between opposites, new possibilities can emerge. This requires both chutzpah, and humility. We must have the courage to speak with conviction and listen with curiosity. We must cultivate community.

Palmer tells the story of John Woolman, a Quaker of the 18th century whose heart was broken by the degradation of slavery. He was torn by the contradiction between the Quaker belief in the equality of all people, and the fact that many well-off Quakers owned slaves. He traveled among his fellow Quakers for twenty years, speaking to them about his belief that slavery was evil, and bearing witness by his own practice of never using anything that was made by slaves. He encouraged Quakers to stop owning slaves.

John Woolman acted with conviction, and yet did not break the bonds of community between himself and his fellow Quakers. And his community also held this tension between their beliefs and practices as they sought a way forward. In the Society of Friends, all decisions are made by consensus. It took twenty years for the Quakers to officially condemn the institution of slavery, and collectively to banish it from their lives. But they were the first religious community to condemn slavery, eighty years before the Civil War.¹⁵

So where do we go from here? Can we acknowledge our heartbreak over the struggles we face in our own times? Can we embrace the contradictions, and yet also embrace the common ground we share with all of those in this land?

14 p. 61.

15 p. 20-22.

Palmer writes:

...your heart will at times get broken by loss, failure, defeat, betrayal, or death. What happens next in you and the world around you depends on *how* your heart breaks. If it breaks *apart* into a thousand pieces, the result may be anger, depression, and disengagement. If it breaks *open* into greater capacity to hold the complexities and contradictions of human experience, the result may be a new life. The heart is what makes us human—and politics, which is the use of power to order our life together, is a profoundly human enterprise. Politics in the hands of those whose hearts have been broken open, not apart, helps us hold our differences creatively and use our power courageously for the sake of a more equitable, just, and compassionate world...¹⁶

I would like to invite us to take a few moments of silence, and then take a few minutes for conversation. I invite those who wish to share how your hearts are being broken in these times, and what gives you courage and hope for our democracy...

Congregational Conversation

Closing Words

Please join hands for the closing words.

Our closing words are from the poem "A great need" by the 13th century Persian Poet, Hafiz:¹⁷

Out
Of a great need
We are all holding hands
And climbing.
Not loving is a letting go.
Listen,
The terrain around here
Is
Far too
Dangerous
For
That.

16 p. 18.

17 Quoted in Palmer, p. 47.