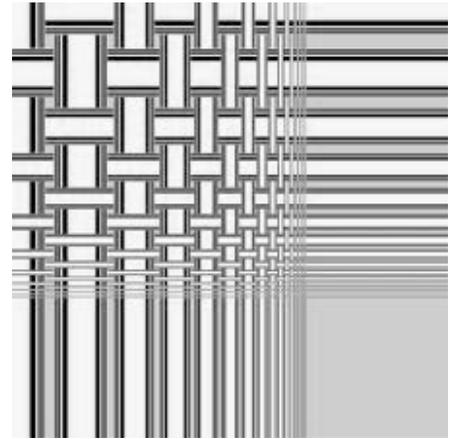


The Dialectic Loom of Democracy

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Page references from *Healing the Heart of Democracy*
(by Parker Palmer, 2011, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco)

OPENING SONG:

“Building Bridges,” #1023 in *Singing the Journey*:

Building bridges between our divisions, I reach out to you, will you reach out to me?
With all of our voices, and all of our visions, friends, we could make such sweet harmony.

Certainly one of the most momentous times of division in our land was the Civil War between the States, which began its four-year swath of ruin in April 1861. Any “sweet harmony” in the still formative and supposedly *United States* seemed swept away by voices of dissention and warmongering. Would the Union and its ambitious democracy even survive? It is perhaps hard for us today to imagine the anxiety and discord that swirled so dangerously at that time.

In early March of 1861, just weeks ahead of the opening attack on Fort Sumter, newly elected President Abraham Lincoln made his first inaugural address, as sabers rattled. The closing paragraph of his speech, offered in the face of such deep-seated division, has resonated across the chambers of time and speaks to us still during yet another extremely divisive election season that has many of us dispirited and worried. Listen to Lincoln’s message, spoken as Civil War was imminent:

We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature (27).

“(T)he chorus of the Union” will again be “touched...by the better angels of our nature.” This could seem like overly idealistic, unrealistic talk, given what was unfolding. But Lincoln was on to something important, and stayed true to his notions throughout the bitterly destructive war, despite public opinion often against him.

Almost exactly four years later, in his *last* public address, two days *after* Lee surrendered to Grant and three days *before* the assassination, Lincoln reiterated his generous attitude, refusing to further separate the winning side from the losers of this conflict. Even as many in the North wanted to exact revenge on the wayward southerners, Lincoln again spoke in the reconciling voice of “the better angels of our nature” when he described the defeated Confederates thusly:

Finding themselves safely at home, it would be utterly immaterial whether they had ever been abroad (70).

Our collective esteem of Abe Lincoln has only deepened as history has judged his presidency to embody the epitome of our country's design and values. And he was not looking through rose-colored glasses when he offered a heartfelt generous spirit to adversaries; his was a leadership harshly tested and found noble during the fierce cauldron of civil war.

In articulations such as these, he was, quite simply, expressing the heart of democracy, which may sound like a foreign tongue to us today, given the fractious, polarized, unforgiving environment of more recent political scenarios.

It can be difficult for us to even realize or discern that democracy *has* a heart, and I know I descend at times into despair about the most visible aspects of our country's political climate. Buckle your seat belts, my friends, as we enter the concluding weeks of the latest campaign for our votes *and our hearts*.

For it is in our hearts that we feel *both* the pain of our frequent public dysfunction *and* the joy of possibility, such as many of us felt when Barack Obama was elected in 2008. It is our hearts that ache at the decline of productive collaboration, the demonization of good people on all sides. And we may apply our good intellect to the issues, but our hearts tell us what is right, what threatens or fulfills us, and what improves the common good, or not. It is our hearts that advertisers address with their cunning manipulations, for good reason.

And also in our hearts we know that our idealistic American aspirations are daunting, and that— with or without “the better angels of our nature”—we will fall short of reaching them, regularly, as we have since the beginning, to be sure. Our hearts reel at the news that this week, even, so many people in other parts of the world are expressing violent anger at a generalized America and what it stands for in their eyes and hearts.

But the vision this nation espouses is a noble aim, and we have been pursuing it, with both our good ole American know how and our all too real American imperfection, for lo these centuries. Take heart, my friends—which really means: have courage.

What I think is our single most evocative and courageous national phrase, “E pluribus unum”—out of many, one—was adopted by the new Congress in 1782, and while still not an abiding reality, per se, it shines nonetheless like an essential beacon, drawing us forward from the heart of democracy, inviting out the better angels of our nature. “E pluribus unum” was first put on the Seal of the new country, but it might as well be a seal on our hearts, as the guiding vision of our courageous collective American endeavor.

The word “courage,” interestingly, derives from the Latin root word “cor,” meaning heart, which is where we blend our intellect with emotion, imagination, and intuition. “Heart” means even more to us than our pulsing lifeblood. In our hearts we find the courage to act on what we know and feel.

That astute observer of the early America, French intellectual [Alexis deToqueville](#), suggested that for this new land of liberty to survive and thrive, more important than laws on the books would be the habits that grow in the hearts of the American people (36). Then, in 1985, sociologist [Robert Bellah](#) and others put forth their still-influential work called “Habits of the Heart,” which established that memorable title phrase and showed how American inclinations toward individualism and/or community were centered in our hearts.

Even more recently, author and conservationist Terry Tempest Williams located it directly when she declared, “The human heart is the first home of democracy.” [152, [context](#)] And indeed, our country’s founders, no strangers to dispute and political struggle themselves, did design our ingenious system to resonate fairly in the hearts of a diverse population—now, of course, way more diverse than they could have imagined.

I don’t know about you, but my heart is often heavy these days, so I look for inspiration that can buoy my spirit, lift my heart, encourage some optimism and call me to “the better angels” of my nature. And I am here to illuminate a perspective that I find most uplifting and worthy of attention.

Much of the Founders’ creative design of these United States was based not on specific issues but on the process, the “how” of democracy, and the primary and demanding principle they used for this purpose, which they installed throughout the system, is an dynamic one: *balance*. In the complex structures of the ambitious new country they installed a balance among the mechanisms by which naturally opposing forces would engage each other.

It’s important to note that the Founders assumed there would always *be* tension; in fact, they knew that, in any system, the absence of tension brings death, so tension, per se, is actually an ally of life (76). What we do with it—how we manage it in community—is what matters, then and still. I trust I needn’t provide a civics lesson here about the essential balance between the three branches of this design: executive, legislative and judicial—although one [survey](#) (2006 Zogby) suggested that almost half of Americans can’t name these as easily as they can name the Three Stooges.

But remember that this balance of governmental branches is just one of five greater systems that maintain overall equilibrium (75). Add in the balances found in federal-state relationships; the legal dynamics of prosecution and defense; room for continual adjustment thru Amendments, especially seen in the Bill of Rights; and finally a perhaps cumbersome but peaceful electoral process and you get a deep dynamic of creatively holding and managing the tensions that come, quite naturally, from large numbers of people trying to live together.

A stunning accomplishment, really, our American system of liberty, which courageously makes disagreement and strife a source of stability (192)! We should never take this interconnected civic synthesis for granted. In my recent explorations, I have been reminded how the architecture of our country’s political system was created to hold tension creatively, *faithfully*, so that gradually the best path would emerge, in a process fair to all.

It's like what happens on a weaving loom, as multiple directions of threads merge to create a product that is greater, more beautiful than any strand by itself. It also echoes the rhythm of dialectics, promoted earliest perhaps by [Plato](#), whereby emerging truth is sought through collaborative dialogue rather than competitive debate that ensures only a winning and losing position.

Similarly, the early 19th Century German philosopher [Hegel](#) described a three-stage process by which apparent contradictions—thesis and antithesis—can, if they back off a bit from polemic confrontation, merge and lead to a broader truth, called synthesis. And the real threats to our American system are whatever undermines that productive and intentional dialectic (79).

Such as, say, "[Bowling Alone](#)" (43, footnote #20), the evocative title of another compelling analysis of rampant American isolation caused by undue individualism that weakens the common fabric and, ironically, makes us *more* vulnerable to despotic behavior (42). Other perhaps more obvious threats could include throttling techniques like filibuster abuse; or unilateral military actions by the executive and presidential "signing statements" that both bypass the legislative branch; or well-funded lobbies that hire lots of homeless people to come early and take up all the seats at a hearing, thus preventing any opposing voices from even getting in the discussion. And let's not forget the huge threat embodied by Big Money now at play in numerous ways to create a powerful shadow government of influence peddling.

Such narrowing behaviors go against the principled heart of democracy, and separate people unduly, turning compatriots into combatants, active citizens into passive spectators. No, the heart of democracy wants all parties to be able to participate equally in the creative process of synthesizing our best way forward, all voices feeling heard and doing the slow dance of democracy together, so that the results, even when not to everyone's liking, will be accepted and most likely benefit the common good, the *United States*. Yes, this is idealistic; and if you're inclined toward cynicism, please don't give up on the experiment of America.

I give great credit to a recent and surprisingly inspirational book, by Quaker sociologist and teacher, [Parker Palmer](#), who tackles a very pertinent problem of our time, as expressed in his title: [Healing the Heart of Democracy](#) with a subtitle "The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit." I say this book is surprisingly inspirational because it's so easy to read, not jargony or radical or even trendy; just brilliantly assembled wisdom about what we already know in *our* hearts about our politics at its best, with practical suggestions that feel realistic.

Despite the painful cynicism and dispirited apathy of our time, which beckons me all too often, I now feel we *can* heal "the heart of democracy," which is very much in such need. There are numerous examples of what Palmer calls our country's "heart disease" (62), manifesting in false remedies such as consumerist materialism and scapegoating. He doesn't pull any punches in his fierce analysis of our situation, but it isn't a screed or foaming at the mouth; he makes sense, clarifies and empowers.

For instance, amid his unflinching and accurate cultural assessments he explores the heart of Democracy, which is largely about that dialectic, tension-holding capacity—and one of his chapters is called “The Loom of Democracy” (69). But he also makes it personal and notes how normal living breaks *our own* hearts on a regular basis: things happen that aren’t at all what we had hoped for or would like and our hearts get “broken.” We really shouldn’t expect it to be otherwise, but Palmer contrasts two possible, very human responses to those hopefully only occasional moments.

When your heart breaks, does it break *apart* or break *open*? I urge you to reflect on this in your own meditations. When your heart breaks, does it break apart or break open? Here’s the difference, according to Palmer (18):

*If [your heart] 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 existence, the result may be new life.*

Furthermore, and to the larger point, he explains why this distinction matters:

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.

Even more to the point, Palmer notes that Americans *are* suffering these days, on many levels (19). But what are we doing with our suffering? Does it break our hearts apart or open? Shattered hearts, broken *apart*, often lead to one form of brittle violence or another. Hearts that break *open* to a new synthesis, can generate vitality. *Leaders* with one or the other will make a difference, one way or the other.

Palmer uses a Jewish story to illustrate this somewhat odd distinction (149). A student asks a rabbi, “Why does Torah tell us to ‘place these words upon your hearts’? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words *in* our hearts?” And the rabbi replies, “It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them *on top of* our hearts. And there they stay—until, one day the heart breaks open, and the words fall in.”

When faced with heart-breaking reality, anyone among us can improve the odds that our heart will break open instead of apart. What makes a difference is the degree of suppleness (72). A brittle heart will more likely shatter, but a supple one can expand, even as it breaks. And what makes for a supple heart is simply what helps anything be supple: regular exercise and practice.

The best practices for this purpose, advises Palmer, would be accomplished *both* alone *and* together. Alone, personally, this means cultivating whatever disciplined ways one can utilize to go within and flex one’s heart muscles. Such activities as mindfulness, meditation, prayer, and

compassion; absorbing great books about the human journey; solitude and silence; conversation with a spiritual guide or counselor; etc., will increase a heart's suppleness (73).

These individual pursuits will complement well what we endeavor together, *interpersonally*, in concert with all the others with whom we tend to be associated. Let me describe briefly the broader practices Palmer suggests to both keep one's heart supple and contribute to the greater common good. He calls them five interlocking "Habits of the Heart" (43-46), five qualities that he says help bring a good balance of humility and chutzpah to one's life and times.

The first three relate to the humility part; the last two to chutzpah, or boldness. Habit of the Heart #1 is quite familiar to Unitarian Universalists: ***understand that we are all in this together.*** (Our 7th [UU Principle](#) is "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.") Despite illusions of individuality and self-sufficiency, we must embrace the truer condition of mutual accountability and interdependence.

Such interconnectedness impels us toward Habit of the Heart #2: ***develop an appreciation for the value of "otherness."*** Practicing hospitality means one is still teachable, willing to learn from the stranger, the "other," *and* able to judge when our ancient fight or flight reflex is appropriate and when we're simply a bit out of our comfort zone. When what looks different is automatically made an enemy, democracy is undone. "Us and them" need not mean "us *versus* them."

#3 is a statement of the main imperative mentioned earlier: ***cultivate the ability to hold tension in life-giving ways.*** This important skill, along with an appreciation for the "other" and a deeper awareness of how we're all in this together create a posture of benign humility that reveals a supple heart and can support the bold chutzpah of the last two Habits of the Heart.

Such as #4, which is about our own empowerment: ***generate a sense of personal voice and agency.*** We are conditioned to settle for and into a sheepish audience mentality, but when politics is merely a spectator sport, the often-cranky viewers often deserve what they often get. Instead, "with all of our voices and all of our visions," we can boldly encourage positive change. Your "agency" is however you authentically contribute to the common good. (Meditate on that as well: What is your "agency"?)

And finally, Habit of the Heart #5 puts us in context: ***strengthen the capacity to build community.*** It takes a village to do many things effectively, especially positive social and political change. But "community" can be large or small; our voices will resonate in chambers that suit us, and we can, without timidity, find such settings to generate agency and build community boldly, tempered by humility and grounded by strong but supple inner awareness. And the heart of democracy *can* be healed.

These "habits," you may have noticed, are not a linear recipe, or steps along a line toward some utopia. And the interpersonal practices blend constructively with the personal ones. In fact, late in his book, Palmer promotes "The Power of the Circle" (161), another reason why I appreciate his

angle. Safe places of mutual trust, large or small groups where people gather in actual or figurative circles are the engines of creative contribution to the shared enterprise of a fruitful and fair society.

Like the balanced design of democracy, we need *both* the human engagement found in active communal circles of trust *and* we need to be in our own spaces of solitude enough to, in Palmer's excellent expression, "get the news from within" (158). The chances of achieving a good balance of humility and chutzpah are increased when we balance productive solitude with "communities of congruence" (186) that help us move our inner resolve into embodiment in the world. These are healing practices we can deepen right now.

Democracy is a swirling, often messy process, by design, and really not made for weaklings. It takes some centered moxie and muscle tone to stay at the table when tension is on display and an emerging synthesis sought among competing voices. I don't feel like I'm very good at this myself, but Parker Palmer stirs me to practice and exercise the habits of my heart, to not just be a passive spectator as important matters are up for discussion and decision.

And so I have at least been part of an organizing effort in recent months, on behalf of Sustainable Bainbridge, to bring one of Palmer's closest associates (Rick Jackson, Senior Fellow at the nearby Center for Courage and Renewal) into leadership of a local event that will feature a lot of this book's juicy material in a workshop format, open to the public. It's this year's version of the Frog Rock Forum, at Islandwood in two weeks time, late on Sunday afternoon, Sept. 30.

We're calling it [*Citizenship: The Heart of a Resilient Community*](#) and I invite you to join me there, where, from 3 to 6 pm, including over a pizza dinner that is part of the program, we will be informed, inspired and strengthened in our own capacity to grow both skills and optimism, during an election season that seems to be more about fear than hope.

Palmer uses a short Rumi poem to open a chapter (89) and I will use it now to close my sermon:

There is *a community of the spirit*.
Join it, and feel the delight
of walking in the noisy street,
and being the noise.

Let our noisy voices join with the better angels of our nature to build more bridges that will further fulfill the American promise of democracy with heart, which is, still, a beacon for us and the world. On this path let our broken-hearted courage help us embody both humility and chutzpah.

Go in peace, my friends. BE peace. Return in **supple** love.

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