

Nurturing the Heart of Democracy

Grade Level: 9-12

Subjects

Civics, English language arts, Government, History, Philosophy, World studies

Themes

Civic participation, Community, Conflict resolution, Courage

What Students Will Uncover

The values and behaviors that are important when considering how to support a healthy democracy

Essential Questions

- What are the values that nurture a healthy democracy?
- Why might it be important to listen to others' perspectives and worldviews?
- In what ways can we hold tension creatively in our lives?
- How might dialogue which supports multiple viewpoints support the common good?
- How does an engaged citizenry contribute to a healthy democracy?



COMPANION ESSAY

Five Habits to Heal the Heart of Democracy

by Parker Palmer

Materials

- Online access to the article "[Five Habits to Heal the Heart of Democracy](#)"
- [Note-taking sheet](#) (Included)

SDGs



Standards & Frameworks

- [SEL Competencies](#)
- [C3 Framework](#)
- [CCSS ELA Standards](#)

Lesson Overview

Students will read an essay by educator and activist Parker Palmer who identifies universal values that have the potential to nurture a healthy democracy. Students will engage in activities that prompt them to consider and envision a healthy democracy in their lives and in the communities in which they live.

Key Issue

In the twenty-first century, the democratic principles of equality, freedom, and civic engagement could be more actively integrated into society. If Americans work together to embody these basic principles and the attitudes and beliefs that support them, we might foster unity and a healthier democracy.

Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Identify habits and behaviors that contribute to a healthy democracy.
- Understand that a healthy democracy requires civic responsibility, open discourse, and valuing differences.
- Discover ways to participate in society with agency using one's personal voice.

Background

Putting the Essay in Context

Intended for the educator, this section provides information about the essay, the author Parker Palmer, as well as an overview of the American political system and democratic values.

The Continental Congress adopted the United States Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. This document has since been an important piece of the nation's history and continues to be a renowned statement documenting the rights of U.S. citizens. One often-cited quotation is most revered: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."^[1] The democratic ideals of freedom and equality expressed through the Declaration of Independence have inspired a number of political and social movements, ranging from the French Revolution in the 18th century to the American Civil Rights

¹ U.S. Declaration of Independence, 1776.

Movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Despite the impact that these democratic ideals have made on key historical events, many have questioned the practical power of these ideals, often pointing to the abhorrent institution of slavery as a historical example.

Parker Palmer’s essay, “[Five Habits to Heal the Heart of Democracy](#),” explores attitudes and practices he believes are essential within both individuals and communities to strengthen American democracy and the ideals upon which it was founded. His ideas, which he articulates in his book, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*, are applicable to current challenges and issues to creating a healthier democracy. Palmer suggests examining “five habits of the heart.” These habits express that together, we must value our differences, draw inspiration and greater understanding from contradictions, honor the voice and will of the individual, and celebrate the power of community building to restore our democratic society.

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–U.S. Declaration of Independence

The phrase “habits of the heart” was originally coined by a young French political scientist and historian Alexis de Tocqueville. After he visited America in the 1830s, he returned home to write *Democracy in America*; he proposed that the habits of mind and heart of people would play a significant role in the protection of freedom.^[2] Palmer, in his essay, “Five Habits to Heal the Heart of Democracy,” states that democracy’s future would depend on “habits of the heart” as well as the local venues that support community, including families, neighborhoods, classrooms, and congregations. These would, in turn, shape an “invisible infrastructure of American democracy on which the quality of our political life depends.”^[3]

2 “[An Introduction to the Work of Tocqueville](#).” Great Thinkers an initiative of The Foundation for Constitutional Government.

3 “[Five Habits to Heal the Heart of Democracy](#).” Parker Palmer for The Global Oneness Project. (Essay)

Lesson

Setting the Stage: Lesson Introduction

Before students read the essay, explore this exercise with them.

1. Explain to students that Parker Palmer, the author of the essay they will read, is an educator and activist who focuses on issues in education, leadership, and social change.
2. Share the following quote from author and activist Terry Tempest Williams, which begins Palmer’s essay. Invite a discussion with students about the meaning and message of this quote. Ask students: What do you think Tempest means by “The human heart is the first home of democracy”?

“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

Engaging with the Story

Introduce students to the essay and provide specific tasks of observation before reading the text.

1. Tell students that they will read an essay called “Five Habits to Heal the Heart of Democracy” by Parker Palmer. The essay explores attitudes and values that Palmer thinks have the power to support and nurture a healthy democracy.
2. Ask students to pay attention to the “five habits of the heart” described in the essay. How does Palmer describe each one?
3. Ask students to read the essay, “[Five Habits to Heal the Heart of Democracy](#).” Provide them with the [note-taking sheet](#), and ask them to write down their thoughts and observations about each “habit of the heart.”

Delving Deeper: Discussion Questions

Encourage students to examine the themes and issues raised in the essay.

1. Use the following questions to help students unpack the essay:
 - In the first paragraph, Palmer writes that the “future of our democracy is threatened.” Name the three attitudes or behaviors that Palmer describes are at the root of this threat. (Answers include: Falling under the spell of money, faction, and fear.)
 - How does Palmer describe the linguistic relationship between *heart* and *courage*? (Both words share the Latin root, *cor*, which means “heart.” Therefore, courage refers to speaking or acting from the heart.)
 - Palmer writes, “If I were asked for two words to summarize the habits of the heart American citizens need in response to twenty-first-century conditions, I would choose *chutzpah* and *humility*.” The word *chutzpah* can be defined as “having audacity, or the willingness to take bold risks,” while *humility* can be defined as “living with humbleness.” Do you agree with Palmer? Why or why not? What two words would you choose?
2. Explore the “five habits of the heart” that Parker defines in the essay, using the following prompts. Tell students they will watch short videos, under 2 minutes each, from the Center of Courage and Renewal. Each video features Palmer describing one of the five habits. Ask students to use the comments on the note-taking sheets and what they learned in each video to answer the questions.

Habit #1: “We’re All in This Together”

- Watch the video clip [We’re All in This Together](#).
- In the essay and in the video, what kinds of thinkers does Palmer mention to support this theme?
- In what ways are we an “interconnected species”?

Habit #2: “An Appreciation of Otherness”

- Watch the video clip [An Appreciation of Otherness](#).
- What is “otherness”? Define “otherness” in your own words.
- “I have more to learn from those who are different from me than I do from those who are like me,” said Palmer. In what ways do we learn more from others who are different from us?

Habit #3: “An Ability to Hold Tension in Life-Giving Ways”

- Watch the video clip [A Capacity to Hold Tension Creatively](#).

- How does Palmer describe “tension”? Name a contradiction or “tension” that you have witnessed, either in the world or in your own life.
- How might it be possible to hold tension in creative ways? What benefits does creativity offer as a way through challenging times and moments?

Habit #4: “A Sense of Voice and Agency”

- Watch the video clip [A Sense of Voice and Agency](#).
- How does Palmer define “voice” and “agency”?
- In the video, Palmer said that we need to switch from being an “audience in democracy to a participant in democracy.” What does this statement mean to you?

Habit #5: “A Capacity to Create Community”

- Watch the video clip [A Capacity to Create Community](#).
 - In the video, how does Palmer describe the impacts of creating community?
 - “We must all become gardeners of community if we want democracy to flourish,” writes Palmer. In the essay, he supports the view that there are “local venues” in which the heart gets “formed” or “deformed.” Make a list of the venues that Palmer mentions. (Venues include families, neighborhoods, classrooms, congregations, voluntary associations, workplaces, and the various places of public life where “the company of strangers” gather.) Identify one “local venue” in your own life that has impacted your experience of civic participation. How might a particular place encourage the development of your own ideals, attitudes, values, and habits?
3. Ask students: Are there any values or habits that you would add to Palmer’s list? If so, what are they? How might they contribute to a healthy democracy?
 4. Palmer writes, “What does it mean, in the words of May Sarton, to ‘at last act for love?’ For me, it means at least this: I want to redouble my efforts to help us renew our capacity for civic community and civic discourse. I want to harness the energy of anger and ride it into action that helps bring citizens together in life-giving encounters. If the reality of We the People continues to fade into mist and myth, we’ll lose our democracy.” What do you think Palmer means by helping to “bring citizens together in life-giving encounters”? What might be some examples of these encounters? How might they renew civic life and community?

Reflecting and Projecting

Challenge students to consider the story's broader implications and to integrate their knowledge and ideas from various points of view.

1. Ask students to create an original illustration, drawing, or collage in response to the following question: What might a "living democracy" look like to you? Ask students to share their artwork in small groups. What is one of Palmer's "habits of the heart" that is reflected in each one?
2. Watch former Congressman John Lewis describe his experience fighting for Civil Rights during the Selma to Montgomery marches in the video, [John Lewis: The Selma To Montgomery Marches](#) (6 minutes). After watching the video, choose one of the following prompts and write a short essay (2–3 paragraphs):
 - How are Lewis, and those who marched from Selma to Montgomery, models of democracy in action? List a single action or event that you have either engaged in or witnessed (in person or through the media) that reflects the same seed of democratic participation expressed by Lewis. If you cannot recall an action from the past, consider an action that could take place today or in the future. What would it be?
 - The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was put in place to ensure each citizen had the right to a fair opportunity to vote and participate in our democratic process of electing our leaders. Congressman Lewis was arrested countless times in defense of his right to vote as a black man in the United States. He said in his memoir *Across That Bridge: Life Lessons and a Vision for Change*, "Freedom is the continuous action we all must take, and each generation must do its part to create an even more fair, more just society." In what ways did Lewis fight for the freedom of others?
3. Palmer writes, "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." Think about a time you were conflicted within yourself. What did you do? What would it look like if you led from your heart? What qualities would be included or excluded?

What's Happening Now

Provide students with follow-up activities and resources to explore current events.

1. Parker Palmer wrote in his book *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity, and Getting Old*, "It's unfair to lay all responsibility for the future on the younger generation. After all, the problems they face are partly due to the fact that we, their elders, screwed up. Worse still, it's not true that the young alone are in charge of what comes next. We—young and old together—hold the future in our hands. If our common life is to become more compassionate, creative, and just, it will take an intergenerational effort." Describe what an intergenerational collaboration looks like to you. How might elders and youth work together to support active citizenship and participation in the democratic process? What are some examples at the community level?
2. Reports estimate that the 2020 election had the largest voter turnout in history. Activists, including many Black women in the state of Georgia, helped register more than 800,000 new voters. Research the following activists to learn more about their work with voter registration: Stacey Abrams, Nsé Ufot, Helen Butler, Deborah Scott, and Tamioka Atkins. Present your findings with the class.



Take Action

with the UN Sustainable Development Goals

How will you become an advocate for a healthy democracy?

Parker Palmer is an advocate for a healthy and just democracy. He, like many other leaders and visionaries, has been working to help restore peace, work towards justice, and create strong institutions.

1. Visionaries and leaders including John Lewis, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Howard Thurman, among many others, have worked to restore peace and justice in our nation through nonviolence. Lewis said, "The vote is the most powerful nonviolent tool we have to make all the change that is necessary. Change requires patient, persistent action." Conduct research to learn about a former or current leader who has advocated for moral change and a just democracy. In what ways do the actions and words of the individual illustrate advocacy for the work of the common good? How are peace and justice essential to their work and efforts? Create a visual or written timeline of this person's work detailing his/her life and the choices he/she made.
2. Ruth Bader Ginsburg was the second woman to serve as a Supreme Court Justice, and she served from 1993 until her death in 2020. She was committed not to winning or losing based on her own beliefs, but to advocating for a healthier democracy. She used her right to disagree or dissent when the court was not voting in favor of protection of basic humans rights. She was a lifelong advocate of equal rights for women, and prior to becoming a Supreme Court Justice, she led groundbreaking cases including: women's right to have a mortgage, a bank account, and a job without being discriminated against because of one's gender. As a result of her advocacy work for fair rights for women, she has become an iconic figure for democracy. When asked, "What do you think is the biggest threat to our democracy?," she responded, "A public that doesn't care about the rights we have." Conduct research to learn more about Ginsburg's life and how her history on the Supreme Court has shaped the rights of women today. How did she influence democracy and human rights? Share your findings with others in a visual or oral presentation.

SDG 16: Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies.

Companion Texts

These texts are recommended by teachers who are currently using "Five Habits to Heal the Heart of Democracy" in their classrooms.

- *Healing the Heart of Democracy: Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* by Parker Palmer
- *Across That Bridge: Life Lessons and a Vision for Change* by John Lewis
- *My Own Words* by Ruth Bader Ginsberg

Resources

- Lewis, John, *Across That Bridge: Life Lessons and a Vision for Change* (New York: Hachette books, 2017).
- Palmer, Parker, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* (California: Jossey-Bass, 2011).
- Williams, Terry Tempest and Mary Frank, *The Open Space of Democracy* (Great Barrington, MA: Orion Society, 2004).
- [U.S. Declaration of Independence](#), 1776.
- "The Concepts and Fundamental Principles of Democracy," in *Elements of Democracy* (Center for Civic Education, 2007), 11–13.
- "[Center for Courage & Renewal](#)" (Organization founded by Parker Palmer)
- [U.S. Census Bureau](#), US government, 2020.
- "[VOTE411](#)" League of Education Women's Voters Fund, 2020.
- [Facing History | Books on Democracy & Citizenship](#)
- Bloomberg Quicktake: Now. "[Ruth Bader Ginsburg on the Greatest Threat to Our Democracy](#)." YouTube video, 1:05. September 18, 2020.
- Waxman, Olivia B. "[Stacey Abrams and Other Georgia Organizers Are Part of a Long—But Often Overlooked—Tradition of Black Women Working for the Vote](#)." Time, November 10, 2020.
- TIME. "[John Lewis: The Selma To Montgomery Marches | MLK | TIME](#)." YouTube video, 5:57. January 15, 2017.

Connections to National Curriculum Standards and Frameworks

SEL Competencies (CASEL)

- **Self-awareness.** The ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior.
- **Social awareness.** The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior.
- **Relationship skills.** The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework

- **C3.D2.His.3.9-12.** Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.
- **C3.D2.Civ.10.9-12.** Analyze the impact and the appropriate roles of personal interests and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.
- **C3.D2.Civ.14.9-12.** Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.

Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

- **CCSS.ELA-SL.9-10.1 and SL.11-12.1.** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 [or 11-12] topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- **CCSS.ELA-SL.9-10.5 and SL.11-12.5.** Make use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understandings of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.
- **CCSS.ELA-SL.11-12.1.c.** Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that probe reasoning and evidence; ensure a hearing for a full range of positions on a topic or issue; clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions; and promote divergent and creative perspectives.
- **CCSS.ELA-W.9-10.2 and W.11-12.2.** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

Note-taking Sheet | Nurturing the Heart of Democracy

Use this note-taking sheet to write down your observations, insights, and evidence from Parker Palmer's essay, "Five Habits to Heal the Heart of Democracy."

Habit of the Heart	Notes
Understanding that we are all in this together	
Appreciation of the value of "otherness"	
Ability to hold tension in life-giving ways	
Sense of personal voice and agency	
Capacity to create community	

We Want to Hear From You

We'd love to hear how you integrate (or plan to integrate) this lesson into your classroom. What were your favorite takeaways and student responses?

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Stories and lessons for growing minds.

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