

Habits for a Healthy Democracy

Grade Level: 6-8

Subjects

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

Themes

Civic participation, Community, Conflict resolution, Courage

What Students Will Uncover

The principles, habits, and behaviors that are important 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?
- How might discussions with people from multiple viewpoints support the common good?
- How does an engaged citizenry contribute to a healthy democracy?

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



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](#)

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 civil participation, open discourse, and the valuing of 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 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.

¹ [U.S. Declaration of Independence, 1776.](#)

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.

“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.”

–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. Share the following quote from author and activist Terry Tempest Williams, which begins the essay they will read from Parker Palmer. Invite a discussion with students about the meaning and message of this passage.
2. 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 Parker Palmer, the author of the essay they will read—“Five Habits to Heal the Heart of Democracy”—is an activist who focuses on education, leadership, and social change. The essay explores attitudes and values that have the potential to support and nurture a healthy democracy. (*Note: Introduce students to the work of Parker Palmer, which can be found in the Background section.*)
2. Organize students into five small groups. Assign each group one of the “five habits of the heart” described in the essay.
3. Ask students to read the essay “[Five Habits to Heal the Heart of Democracy](#).” Provide them with this [note-taking sheet](#) and ask them to write down their thoughts and observations about the one “habit of the heart” they are exploring in their assigned groups.

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 to summarize the habits of the heart?
2. As a class, explore the “five habits of the heart” using the following prompts. Tell students they will watch short two-minute videos from the Center of Courage and Renewal. Each video features Palmer describing one of the five habits. Throughout the classroom conversation, ask students to refer to the observations from their note-taking sheets and call upon students from their assigned groups.

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 or thought leaders does Palmer mention?
- In what ways do they support the theme *We are all in this together*?

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”?
- Describe a situation or moment you’ve witnessed that was full of tension or conflict either in the world or in your own life. (Examples could be a disagreement or witnessing something that makes you uncomfortable in the news.)
- How might it be possible to hold tension in creative ways? What benefits does creativity, such as music or art for example, offer as a way through challenging times?

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”? (Answers include: Palmer defines “voice” as “things I want to say to my community” and “agency” as “I have the power to do that” and “help bring some of those visions into reality.”)
- In the video, Palmer said that we need to switch from being an “audience in democracy to a participant in democracy.” What is the difference between an “audience” versus a “participant” in democracy?

Habit #5: “A Capacity to Create Community”

- Watch the video clip [A Capacity to Create Community](#).
 - In the video, in what ways does Palmer describe the benefits and impacts of creating community?
 - “We must all become gardeners of community if we want democracy to flourish,” writes Palmer. In his essay, Palmer supports the view that there are “local venues” in which the heart gets “formed.” What are these local venues? (Answers 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? Can you think of a leader or person in your life you think demonstrates each of the habits well?

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. 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. An advocate for equal rights for women during her lifetime, before she was on the Supreme Court, she lead groundbreaking cases including: women's right to have a mortgage, a bank account, and a job without being discriminated because of one's sex. 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 men and women today. How did she influence democracy and human rights? In what ways was she working to protect our democracy? Share your findings in a visual or oral presentation.
2. Freedom Riders were civil rights activists who participated in bus trips throughout the South to protest segregation during the Civil Rights Movement. They took Freedom Rides, or bus trips, throughout the American South, to call attention to segregated bus terminals, restaurants, and restrooms. Glenda Gaither Davis, a Freedom Rider, reflected on her experiences when she said, "Even though we came from many different places and we had many different cultures and many different home environments ... we were very much unified because we had a common cause and we were all moving in that direction, and we did believe in what we were doing. We knew that we had taken a stand." Watch this short video, *The Movement: A Short Film from Freedom Riders* (4 minutes). How did the Freedom Riders use their voice? In what ways did they take action for the greater good? Write two paragraphs to respond to these questions. Use a quote from the film and include one example that you have witnessed, either in your own life, in a story, or in the news in which a person or a group took action for the greater good.

What's Happening Now

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

1. Stacey Abrams, an American politician, has worked to help organize voters in the state of Georgia. She is an advocate for equal and fair voting rights, and she wants to ensure everyone has an equal chance to vote. Read about Abrams in the following article: [Stacey Abrams and Other Georgia Organizers Are Part of a Long—But Often Overlooked—Tradition of Black Women Working for the Vote.](#) How is Abrams working to continue to heal democracy? What “habit of the heart” do you think she exhibits most?
2. On January 6, 2021, an attack took place on the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. This attack interrupted the official count of the 2020 electoral college votes. Ultimately, by the morning of January 7, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris were confirmed as the next President and Vice President. Palmer writes, “It was we the people, calling this democracy into being, and it’s my sense that it is we the people that need to call it back to its purpose and most significant goals.” How are we responsible as citizens for nurturing our democracy? What do you think Palmer is asking citizens to do?



Take Action

with the UN Sustainable Development Goals

How will you become an advocate for a healthy democracy?

1. Congressman John 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.” Lewis spent most of his life working to make change and create a healthier democracy. How can we equate change with patience? Why was it important that John Lewis had patience when it came to advocating for a healthy democracy? How are peace and justice essential to Lewis’s work and efforts? Do you think Lewis would say that maintaining a healthy democracy is a lifetime’s work? Why or why not?
2. In Parker Palmer’s book *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity, and Getting Old*, he says, “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 could your elders support you to step into a more empowered role as a citizen and active participant in the democratic process?

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.

- *Who Was Ruth Bader Ginsburg?* by Patricia Brennan Demuth
- *Amina's Voice* by Hena Khan
- *The Lions of Little Rock* by Kristin Levine

Resources

- 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.
- Hollister, Matthew. "[Millennials Don't Vote But They Do Care](#) (Infographic)." *The Atlantic*, 2015.
- "[Election Central](#)." PBS Learning Media, 2016.
- "[Center for Courage & Renewal](#)." (Organization founded by Parker Palmer)
- Lewis, John, *Across That Bridge: Life Lessons and a Vision for Change* (New York: Hachette books, 2017).
- American Experience, "[Democracy in Action](#)." PBS Learning Media.
- 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.
- American Experience, *The Movement: A Short Film from Freedom Riders*. Clip: Season 23, Episode 11. PBS.

Connections to National Curriculum Standards and Framework

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.Civ.2.6-8.** Explain specific roles played by citizens (such as voters, jurors, taxpayers, members of the armed forces, petitioners, protesters, and office-holders).
- **C3.D2.Civ.10.6-8.** Explain the relevance of personal interests and perspectives, civic virtues, and democratic principles when people address issues and problems in government and civil society.
- **C3.D2.His.3.6-8.** Use questions generated about individuals and groups to analyze why they, and the developments they shaped, are seen as historically significant.

National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (NCSS) Themes

- **Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity.** Questions related to identity and development, which are important in psychology, sociology, and anthropology, are central to the understanding of who we are.
- **Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices.** Learning how to apply civic ideals as part of citizen action is essential to the exercise of democratic freedoms and the pursuit of the common good.

Common Core State Standards (CCSS)

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6.1.** Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.3.** Analyze the interactions between individuals, events, and ideas in a text (e.g., how ideas influence individuals or events, or how individuals influence ideas or events).
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.1.** Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

Note-taking Sheet | Habits for a Healthy 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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