



LESSON PLAN

# Repairing the Fabric of Democracy



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**"Five Habits to Heal the Heart of Democracy"**

BY PARKER PALMER



## Repairing the Fabric of Democracy



**Class:** 60 minutes

### Key Idea

In the 21st century, the democratic principles of equality, freedom, and civic engagement could be more actively integrated into society. If Americans work together to strengthen these basic principles and attitudes and beliefs that support them, a healthier democracy and national community can be created.

### Background

The Continental Congress signed the United States Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. Since then, this document has been an important piece of the nation's history and continues to be a renowned statement about 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."

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-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.

Today, racism and the widening income gap are just two signs of a divided and fractured national community. Entire population groups refrain from participating in the formal electoral process. Research shows that minorities, the poor, and the young tend not to vote. According to *The Atlantic*, millennials—young people, ages 18-33—represent the country's biggest voting group and could wield great political power, but choose not to vote.\* As we head into the 2016 election year, these groups make a significant impact on the health of our democracy.

Parker Palmer's article, "Five Habits to Heal the Heart of Democracy," explores attitudes and efforts he thinks are needed within individuals and communities to strengthen American democracy. Palmer suggests that together we must value our differences, draw inspiration and greater

### SUBJECT AREAS

#### HIGH SCHOOL

- English Language Arts
- Government
- Modern World Studies

#### COLLEGE

- History
- Humanities
- Philosophy
- Literature
- Political Science

### THEMES

- Fear versus love
- Conflict resolution
- Understanding of the heart
- American politics

### MATERIALS

- Printed copies of the story
- One per student (or access to story online)

### PREPARATION

- Make copies of the story. Students will read the article as homework.



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understanding from contradictions, honor the voice and will of the individual, and celebrate the power of community building in order to restore our democratic society.

\*(Infographic) Matthew Hollister, "[Millennials Don't Vote But They Do Care.](#)" *The Atlantic*, 2015.

### Connections to National Standards

Common Core English Language Arts. 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.

Common Core English Language Arts. 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.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. 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.

College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards. D2.Civ.7.9-12. Apply civic virtues and democratic principles when working with others.

### Lesson

#### SETTING THE STAGE

Ask students to consider what "democracy" means to them. Explain that the word democracy literally means, "rule by the people." Abraham Lincoln reiterated this definition in his Gettysburg Address, by referring to the United States as a government "of the people, by the people, for the people..."



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What does it mean to live in a democratic society? Ask students to brainstorm and develop a list of activities or behaviors that reflect a government “of the people, by the people, for the people.” Write their responses on the board. Some ideas include:

- Voting for elected officials
- Volunteering or civic engagement
- Reading the newspaper
- Running for office
- Military service
- Protesting
- Writing a letter to the editor

Ask students how these activities enable citizens to appreciate and value others’ opinions and interests.

### ENGAGING WITH THE STORY

Explain that students will read an article “Five Habits to Heal the Heart of Democracy,” by Parker Palmer, an activist and educator who identifies ways that Americans can participate to strengthen the political system.

Explain that Palmer focuses on attitudes and beliefs that he thinks can encourage, inspire, and support a national democratic community. Palmer emphasizes simple, human experiences fundamental to a healthy democracy. Direct students to read the article, considering the positive attitudes Palmer believes will strengthen democracy, as well as the attitudes that create barriers to it.

## Delving Deeper

After students read the article, lead a discussion with questions such as:



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- According to Parker Palmer, what are the five “habits of the heart” that he claims will help heal American democracy? (Answers include: an understanding that we are all in this together, an appreciation of the value of “otherness,” an ability to hold tension in life-giving ways, a sense of personal voice and agency, and a capacity to create community.)
- Palmer writes that the “future of our democracy is threatened.” Name the three attitudes or behaviors, listed in the first paragraph, that are at the root of this threat. (Falling under the spell of money, faction, and fear.)
- What is the linguistic relationship between “heart” and “courage,” as described by Palmer? What does this mean? (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. Palmer explains that *chutzpah* would support his own self-expression, while *humility* would temper, or counterbalance, any sense that he knows better than others. Do you agree with Palmer? Why or why not? What two words would you choose?
- Palmer writes that the heart is “the first home of democracy.” Why do you think he says the heart is democracy’s “first home?” Do you agree with Palmer? Why or why not?

## Reflecting and Projecting

Give students one of the following reflective writing prompts to demonstrate their understanding of the story.

1. The opening quote from Terry Tempest Williams suggests that generosity is a foundation of democracy. She writes:



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*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?*

What do you think about this statement? Do you agree that generosity is a foundation of democracy? Why or why not? Using your own experience, write a paragraph to illustrate your point of view. Consider how generosity might bring people together, strengthen community, or support activities like volunteering or voting. (C3.D2.Civ.7.9-12)

2. In the article, Palmer supports the view that there are “local venues” in which the heart gets “formed” or “deformed.” These venues include families, neighborhoods, classrooms, congregations, voluntary associations, workplaces, and the various places of public life where ‘the company of strangers’ gathers.” Identify one “local venue” in your own life that has impacted your experience of civic participation. In a paragraph, describe how a particular place has either encouraged or discouraged the development of your own ideals, attitudes, values, and habits. (CCSS.ELA.W.9-10.2 and W.11-12.2)
3. In his article, Palmer refers to Rosa Parks as an example of democratic participation. Her simple refusal to give up her bus seat to a white passenger while riding home from work in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955 was a catalyst for the Montgomery County bus boycott, a major event in the U.S. civil rights movement. In an interview years later, Parks explained:

*I felt that I was not being treated right, that I had a right to retain the seat that I had taken on the bus. The time had just come when I had been pushed as far as I could be pushed, I suppose... I wasn't afraid. I had decided once and for all that I had to know what rights I had as a human being.\**

Write a short essay addressing the following questions: Do you agree that Rosa Parks is an example of democracy in action? Why or why not? 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 Rosa Parks. If you cannot



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recall an action from the past, consider an action that could take place today or in the future. What would it be?

(CCSS.ELA.W.9-10.2 and W.11-12.2)

4. *The New York Times* [interactive article, “Of the People,”](#) portrays the diversity of American citizens and their thoughts and feelings about the United States and the upcoming 2016 election. Read the quotes from the following citizens as examples: Shirley Hodgdon, 94, Ebbie Banks, 17, Angelica Ladd, 32, Sheila Bell, 54, and Austin Wadle, 19.

You have been asked by your local newspaper to share your own concerns and hopes about democracy today. Your short essay should identify at least one concern about the health of democracy on a local level (your school, neighborhood, city, or state), and at least one attitude or belief that might help support and sustain your sense of community engagement. Use examples from Palmer’s essay, the Times interactive article, and draw from your own experiences to help shape your essay. (C3.D2.His.3.9-12)

\*[“Rosa Parks 1913-2005: We Air a Rare 1956 Interview with Parks During the Montgomery Bus Boycott.”](#) Democracy Now, October 25, 2005.

## Resources

Parker Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* (California: Jossey-Boss, 2011).

Terry Tempest Williams 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.

(Infographic) Matthew Hollister, [“Millennials Don’t Vote But They Do Care.”](#) *The Atlantic*, 2015.

[“Election Central.”](#) PBS Learning Media, 2016.

(Organization founded by Parker Palmer) [“Center for Courage & Renewal.”](#)