

The Power of Courage: Civic Participation in Everyday Life

Grade Level: 3-5

Subjects

Civic engagement, English language arts, Social studies

Themes

Civic participation, Community, Courage, Empathy

What Students Will Uncover

The value and significance of courage

Essential Questions

- What does it mean to have courage?
- How do you see courage reflected in the stories you read? How do the characters in these stories embrace courage?
- How does your family and community help to develop your heart and mind?

Lesson Overview

In this lesson, students will explore the power of courage. By examining a quote from Parker Palmer’s essay “Five Habits to Heal the Heart of Democracy,” students will engage in learning activities that examine the value and origins of courage in their own lives and communities, throughout literature, and in the lives of leaders and visionaries who have helped to shape democracy.



COMPANION ESSAY

Five Habits to Heal the Heart of Democracy

by Parker Palmer

Materials

- [Quote from essay](#)
- [Rosa Parks](#) from *National Geographic Kids*

SDGs



Standards & Frameworks

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

Key Issue

By finding ways to embrace courage, students can develop tools for civic participation and actively engage in their own lives and in the communities in which they live.

Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Understand the meaning of courage.
- Identify leaders and visionaries who model moral and civic leadership.
- Identify habits and behaviors that contribute to a healthy democracy.

Background

Putting the Article in Context

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

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.

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

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

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

Explore this exercise with students before introducing the quote from Parker Palmer.

Ask students to consider what it means to be a citizen in their community with the following:

1. Read aloud the following quote from Congressman John Lewis to students.
2. Share with students that Lewis was a civil rights activist and leader who served in the United States House of Representatives. He believed in protecting human rights through nonviolence. (Note: Introduce students to John Lewis further by using [this resource](#).)
3. Ask students: What are some reasons for speaking up? How does speaking up help others? If you could name this trait (of speaking up), what word would you use?

“When you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have to speak up. You have to say something; you have to do something.”

–Congressman John Lewis

Engaging with the Story

Before sharing the quote, introduce students to educator and activist Parker Palmer and explore the meaning of the word courage.

1. Tell students they will learn about the work of Parker Palmer, an author, educator, and activist who focuses on issues in education, leadership, and social change. The quote from Palmer mentions Rosa Parks.
2. Introduce students to Rosa Parks by using this resource from [National Geographic Kids](#). Explain that Parks is considered a hero who stood up for her rights by refusing to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955. Explain that her action was one that helped spark the civil rights movement.
3. Ask students to define the word *courage* in their own words by writing down their definitions. (Note: collect all of these definitions and document them in one place, so they can be used later in the lesson.)
4. Share with students that one definition of the word *courage* is to make good choices when facing an obstacle or fear. What are some other words that are similar to the word *courage*? (Possible answers include *bravery*, *boldness*, and *daring*.)

5. Share with students that characters in many stories (in books, films, etc.) show or embrace courage. Some characters need courage when facing obstacles.
6. Ask students to think about their favorite stories whose characters embrace courage. What obstacles did the characters have to face? How did courage help them to overcome the obstacle?

Delving Deeper: Discussion Questions

Encourage students to examine the themes raised in the quote from Parker Palmer.

1. Share the following quote with students:

“Without a community, it is nearly impossible to achieve voice: it takes a village to raise a Rosa Parks.”

Use the following questions to help students unpack the quote:

- Ask students: What does community mean to you? Who are all the groups of people in your community (family members, neighbors, students, teachers, community members, etc.) who are important to your lives and to the place you live?
 - How does your family help you to develop your ideas, attitudes, values, and habits?
 - Share with students that Palmer writes about the power of community and working together. Palmer says that there are places where the heart gets “formed.” These “places” include families, neighborhoods, classrooms, and congregations. How do you think these places help to “form” your heart?
 - Ask students: If all of the members of a community work together, what might happen?
 - Ask students: What does the word *voice* mean to you? What might it mean for one person to have a voice? A community?
2. Explore the meaning of *courage* by using the following questions:
 - Explain to students that *cor* is the Latin root from which we get the word *courage*. *Cor* means “heart.” Other words from the Latin root include: *core* (a central part of something), *cordial* (cheerful or with heart), and *encouraged* (given hope or courage).
 - Ask students to revisit their definitions of the word *courage* by displaying them on the board or virtually (through Padlet, Google Docs or Google Slides, etc.) Would they make any additions to this list?
 - In what ways did Rosa Parks have courage? Students can select words and

phrases from the list.

- Ask students: Have you experienced courage? What does courage feel like? Do you think courage is important? Why?
- Ask students: What does it mean to make decisions from your heart?

Reflecting and Projecting

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

1. Ruth Bader Ginsberg was a Supreme Court Justice who dedicated a lifetime to justice and equality. Ginsberg said, "Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you." What does this quote mean to you?
2. Ask students if they can think of a leader who has stood up to fight for what he/she believes in and cares about. The leader could be someone students know personally (parent, teacher, community member) or someone they know about (Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example). Ask students to write down and describe the ways in which this leader has brought people together through their actions. Ask students to share their responses in a whole class discussion.

What's Happening Now

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

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."
2. As Lewis said, voting is one of the fundamental rights that represents the people. However, amid the current challenges we face in our democracy, voting rights are threatened. Explore this resource with students from Learning for Justice: [My Voice, My Voter's Guide](#).



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.

1. Visit [Rock the Vote](#) with students to learn more about how voting takes place in your state (in the United States).
2. Ask a local government official to talk to students about the voting process and the importance of local government.
3. Ask students to conduct a mini interview with their family members about voting. Students can use these questions: What do you think about the voting process? What do you care most about? What are some ways you help to advocate for, or support, change? Answers can be collected through written responses or with an audio recording. Students can share their interviews with the whole class.

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.

- *Ruth Bader Ginsburg: The Case of R.B.G. vs. Inequality* by Jonah Winter
- *I Dissent* by Ruth Bader Ginsburg
- *Every Voice Counts: Make Yourself Heard* by Dr. Seuss
- *What Can a Citizen Do?* by Dave Eggers and Shawn Harris
- *Maybe Something Beautiful: How Art Transformed a Neighborhood* by F. Isabel Campoy
- *Say Something* by Peter Reynolds

Resources

- Palmer, Parker, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* (California: Jossey-Bass, 2011).
- 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.
- “Center for Courage & Renewal.” (Organization founded by Parker Palmer)
- Pringle, Zorana Ivcevic. “Why Creativity Takes Courage.” *Psychology Today*, August 12, 2020.
- “My Voice, My Voter’s Guide” Student Task. Learning for Justice.
- “John Lewis.” Britannica Kids.

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

- **D2.Civ.6.3-5.** Describe ways in which people benefit from and are challenged by working together, including through government, workplaces, voluntary organizations, and families
- **D2.His.3.3-5.** Generate questions about individuals and groups who have shaped significant historical changes and continuities.

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.** What is civic participation? How do citizens become involved? What is the role of the citizen in the community and the nation, and as a member of the world community?

Common Core English Language Arts

- **CCSS.ELA-W.3.4.** With guidance and support from adults, produce writing in which the development and organization are appropriate to task and purpose.
- **CCSS.ELA-SL.5.1.** Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on [grades 3–5] topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

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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