



EXPLORATION

Democracy

Readings



Healing the Heart of Democracy by Parker Palmer

Lincoln's Melancholy by Joshua Shenk is a probing examination of our sixteenth president's journey with depression.

...Lincoln's need to preserve his life by embracing and integrating his own darkness and light made him uniquely qualified to help America preserve the Union. Because he knew dark and light intimately — knew them as inseparable elements of everything human — he refused to split North and South into 'good guys' and 'bad guys,' a split that might have taken us closer to the national version of suicide.

Instead, in his second inaugural address, delivered on March 4, 1865, a month before the end of the Civil War, Lincoln appealed for 'malice toward none' and 'charity for all,' animated by what one writer calls an 'awe-inspiring sense of love for *all*' who bore the brunt of the battle. In his appeal to a deeply divided America, Lincoln points to an essential fact of our life together: if we are to survive and thrive, we must hold its divisions and contradictions with compassion, lest we lose our democracy.

Lincoln has much to teach us about embracing political tension in a way that opens our hearts to each other, no matter how deep our differences. That way begins 'in here' as we work on reconciling whatever divides us from ourselves — and then moves out with healing power into a world of many divides, drawing light out of darkness, community out of chaos, and life out of death.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/21526>

Treat People as Citizens

by Nicholas Tampio

...Democracy—the political regime in which the people collectively determine its common way of life—is better than epistocracy, or rule by experts [but] ... many social scientists today do not share the belief that democracy is better than epistocracy.

...Democracy ...requires treating people as citizens—that is, as adults capable of thoughtful decisions and moral actions, rather than as children who need to be manipulated. One way to treat people as citizens is to entrust them with meaningful opportunities to participate in the political process, rather than just as beings who might show up to vote for leaders every few years.

...The democratic faith is that participating in politics educates and ennobles people.

...It is misleading to say that most people are too ignorant or apathetic to participate in political affairs. In the right circumstances, many people perform civic functions well.

...Democracy means people exerting power, not choosing from a menu made by elites and their agents.

...In an epistocracy, a few people make all the crucial decisions, and everyone else might as well stay at home and watch television. In a participatory democracy, people exercise their civic muscles and become more thoughtful, involved in community affairs, and passionate about making the world a better place.

...The way to learn how to walk is to walk; the way to become a citizen is to exert some kind of power in the government or civil society. There is no technological quick fix to make our society more democratic.

Source: <https://aeon.co/essays/why-rule-by-the-people-is-better-than-rule-by-the-experts>

Time-outs from Democracy

by Robert Talisse

...The saturation of civic life by democratic politics crowds out the fundamental bases for community and social cooperation that the democratic ethos needs in order to flourish. If we are to work together as a self-governing polity, we must cultivate a kind of civic friendship that enables us to regard each other as fellow citizens and sharers in a common fate. When we interact only on the

battlefield of politics, our divisions erode civic friendship. Democracy is thus dismantled.

The tyranny of democracy undermines democracy.

As democracy rests on civic friendship, it is perhaps no surprise that in order to practice better democracy, we need to engage with each other on matters that are not political. Our civic lives must be structured around shared activities and common experiences that do not have politics at their core, arenas of social engagement that are not already structured and plagued by political categories. We must seek out activities that will involve us in cooperative endeavors with others who, for all we know, have opposing political views from our own. We must talk with strangers about matters of substance that are not at all political. We must create sites of social involvement in which party affiliation and platform allegiance are simply beside the point. We must 'tune out,' not from society as such but from society as it is constructed by democratic politics. In short, if we want to do democracy right, we need sometimes to do something else entirely.

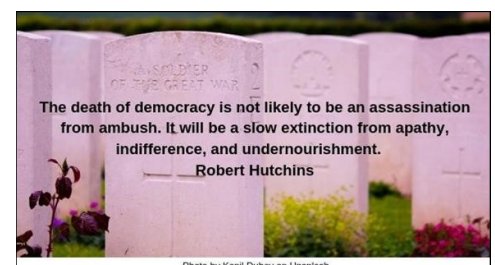
Source: <https://aeon.co/ideas/democracy-is-like-fun-you-cant-set-your-mind-to-having-it>

What Can Strengthen Our Democracy? by Matthew Fox

I want to focus on the following ... statement from ...Otto Rank. He warned that it is contradictory to attempt "strengthening a weakening democracy by more democracy."

Spirit is our capacity to live beyond just the reptilian brain.

...In contrast to the chaos, fear, and anger of the reptilian brain, Spirit is about our capacity for stillness and silence; contemplation and peace; forgiveness, generosity, and



**The human heart is the ...home of
democracy. It is where we embrace ...
questions. Can we be equitable?
Can we be generous?
Can we listen with our whole beings ...and
offer our attention rather than our
opinions? Terry Tempest Williams**

Photo by Alexandru Acea on Unsplash

creativity; and the application of our creativity toward justice and compassion.

...Spirit is about “launching out into the deep”....

...Our institutions—religion included—are too timid to sail “into the deep” and away from the safe shores of the modern era which is, after all, behind us. Religion, education, politics, economics, media—all have failed us and are continuing to fail us, and are failing democracy clearly.

Spirit offers an alternative to fear and challenges fear (Lakota teacher Buck Ghosthorse used to say: “fear is the door in the heart that lets evil spirits in”).

Spirit addresses resentment and scapegoating because it insists we look inside and not just settle for projecting onto others whether they be aligned with the political right or left.

...Spirit births new forms of economics and politics and religion ...and education.... And they are all needed today.

...Spirit is the breath of the Sacred, the breath of life, the breath of a gentle breeze and also a raging fire. It is water; it is fire; it is yin and it is yang. It is quiet and it is forceful.

Source: <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/a-spiritual-revolution-on-b-12991444>

Voting as a Spiritual Practice

by Mary Ann Brussat

The truth is we don't ever really know what is going to happen. We don't know what will happen in a particular election or as a result of it.

...What we can know is the value of the act of voting itself. Voting asks you to get in touch with your authentic self and identify what is important to you. Voting connects you with your neighbors as you consider the programs and policies that affect all of you. And voting encourages you to consider the larger whole of which you are a part.

...Voting does what spiritual practices

do: connect you with your true self, your community, and the One.

...Doing justice is a central imperative....

This ...applies to the whole range of human interactions.... It means that we deal fairly with others, recognizing the equality and dignity of all. ...It assumes that none of us is free until all of us are.

That sounds to me like a definition of democracy. Certainly, when we say we have a government by the people and for the people, we have to keep what is just in focus. Voting is one way to do that.

Another practice integral to democracy is vision. ...Voting for vision encourages more vision.

Finally, hope belongs in the voting booth. ...Hope will help you make choices that align with the concerns of your deepest self.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/features/view/28674/voting-as-a-spiritual-practice>

3 Lessons of Revolutionary Love in a Time of Rage by Valerie Kaur

We love ourselves when we breathe through the fire of pain and refuse to let it harden into hate. That's why I believe that love must be practiced in three directions to be revolutionary. Loving just ourselves feels good, but its narcissism. Loving only our opponents is self-loathing. Loving only others is ineffective. We need to practice all three forms of love. And so, how do we practice it? Ready? Number one: in order to love others see no stranger. We can train our eyes to look upon strangers on the street on the subway, on the screen and say in our minds, “Brother, sister, aunt, uncle.” And when we say this, what we are saying is “You are a part of me I do not yet know. I choose to wonder about you. I will listen for your stories and pick up a sword when you are in harm's way.” And so, number two: in

order to love our opponents, tend the wound. Can you see the wound in the ones who hurt you? Can you wonder even about them? And if this question sends panic through your body then your most revolutionary act is to wonder, listen and respond to your own needs.

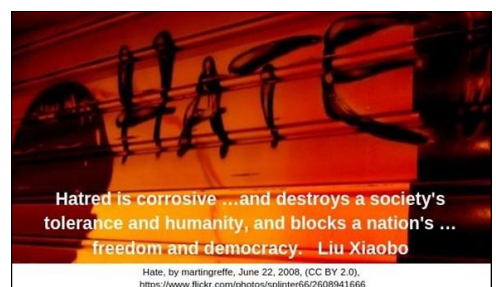
Number three: in order to love ourselves, breathe and push. When we are pushing into the fires in our bodies or the fires in the world, we need to be breathing together, in order to be pushing together. How are you breathing each day? Who are you breathing with? Because when executive orders and news of violence hits our bodies hard, sometimes less than a minute apart, it feels like dying. In those moments my son places his hand on my cheek and say “Dance time, mommy?” And we dance. In the darkness, we breathe and we dance. Our family becomes a pocket of revolutionary love. Our joy is an act of moral resistance. How are you protecting your joy each day? Because in joy we see even darkness with new eyes. And so the mother in me asks, what if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb but the darkness of the womb? What if our future is not dead but still waiting to be born? What if this is our great transition?

Source: https://www.ted.com/talks/valerie-kaur_3_lessons_of_revolutionary_love_in_a_time_of_rage?language=en

Democracy and Faith

by Rev. Evan Keely

Politics is not often conducive to reconciliation, respect, and mutual understanding. We get the message again and again, loud and clear, that there is no middle ground. On any issue at any given time, there are winners and there are losers. You're for capital punishment or you're against it. You're pro-choice or you're pro-life. Your state is red or it's blue. Well, we know that the reality is far more complex. And we know that democracy is messy and inefficient and imperfect; it's an unending series of processes, and we'd just better learn to live with it, because Winston Churchill was quite right when he supposedly quipped that “democracy is the worst form of government except for all the others.” As a reli-



Snippets

“Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason.”

Barack Obama

“Majority rule rests on numbers; democracy rests on the well-grounded assumption that society is neither a collection of units nor an organism but a network of human relations.” *Mary Parker Follett*

“When people put their ballots in the boxes, they are, by that act, inoculated against the feeling that the government is not theirs. They then accept, in some measure, that its errors are their errors, its aberrations their aberrations, that any revolt will be against them. It's a remarkably shrewd and rather conservative arrangement when one thinks of it.” *John Kenneth Galbraith*

“Democracy is not a spectator sport.”

Marian Wright Edelman

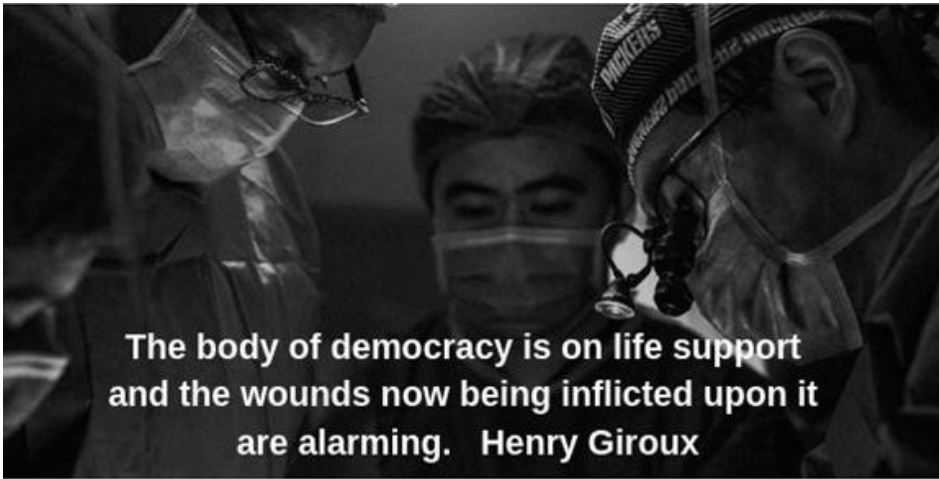
“Democracy is based upon the conviction that there are extraordinary possibilities in ordinary people” *Harry Emerson Fosdick*

“Courts are an aristocratic institution in a democracy. That's the dilemma for an institution that has the function of reviewing the will of the people. We're bound to be 'anti-majoritarian.'” *Rose Bird*

“Democracy is never a thing done. Democracy is always something that a nation must be doing.” *Archibald MacLeish*

“Nor is the people's judgment always true: the most may err as grossly as the few.”

John Dryden



**The body of democracy is on life support
and the wounds now being inflicted upon it
are alarming. Henry Giroux**

Photo by JC Gellidon on Unsplash

gious people committed to love and forgiveness and reconciliation, committed to mutual understanding and respect and being enriched rather than threatened by difference, and yes, as a religious people committed to democracy, the question for us is how we are to participate authentically in the often divisive processes of democracy while still maintaining our religious commitments.

We have a vision for our nation and our world. It is a vision of a world in which different people can come together and learn from one another rather than fearing and hating each other. Our religion calls us to practice that among ourselves, and to bring that healing, saving message to the world. We can only do so if we encounter our own differences with respect and honesty and love.

Source: <https://www.questformeaning.org/quest-blog/democracy-and-faith/>


Wisdom Story

Activism: A Time of Sweet Labor
by Rev. Jill Cowie

...Fifteen-year-old Tessa ...walked 140 miles [in a] march from the liberty Bell in Philadelphia to the Capital ...as part of the Democracy Spring movement. Before her mother agreed to let her go, Tessa had to promise she wouldn't get arrested, but as she walked and got to know her coworkers, something changed. She felt solidarity. After a sizable amount of parental convincing, Tessa found herself walking to the Capitol steps with her mother and almost five hundred others. She sat down and waited for the police to arrive, chanting and singing with her new friends. As she was lined up with the other protesters to be handcuffed and arrested, she stood next to her mother. Tessa recalls “The capital police guy in charge tried really hard to convince my mom not to let me go through with it. He

told my mom that if she let me go to jail she would be an awful mother.” Tessa refused to take the officer's offer. As a juvenile, she was placed in a separate van and taken to a processing unit separate from the adults, including her mother. There she sat, alone in a transition cell, until being transferred to a holding cell, where she sat alone until 2 cellmates joined her. They were younger than her and close friends. She listened. They had been jumped by a small group of people whom they knew. At least one of the attackers had a knife. After an hour, they left the cell. After that things looked different to Tessa. Just learning that twelve-year-olds have to worry about being attacked with knives was shocking. She realized how kids grow up in different worlds and how some are victims of poverty and violence. A mere 24 hours in Jail stoked Tessa's commitment to lifelong political activism. But what really changed her was community, relationships, and a time of sweet labor. Fierce. Imperfect. Life-giving. Change making.

Source: <https://uuharvard.org/services/the-democracy-principle/>



...Democracy
breaks down
when ...their voice
doesn't matter;
[when] the system
is rigged in
favor of the rich
or the powerful....
Barack Obama

Photo by Lubo Minar on Unsplash

“When women are pessimistic about their political strength and feel hopeless about changing the conditions of their lives, it is almost as if they do not believe that democracy means the country belongs to them.”
Naomi Wolf

“...democracy must first be safe for America before it can be safe for the world.”
Emma Goldman

Questions

1. Parker Palmer quotes Lincoln’s appeal for “malice toward none” and “charity for all” as a call for compassion despite profoundly deep divisions and animosity borne of war. Is this possible today? Why or why not? If yes, then how?
2. Per Nicholas Tampio, do you think that the elites believe in democracy or epistocracy? Why? What are the shortcomings and strengths of each? Which do you prefer? Why?
3. Do you agree with Robert Talisse that, “The tyranny of democracy undermines democracy?” Why or why not? What might “timed-outs” from democracy look like? How might such interactions cultivate civic friendship?
4. Matthew Fox quotes Otto Rank that “strengthening a weakening democracy by more democracy” cannot work. This is similar to Albert Einstein’s concern that, “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.” What has weakened democracy? How can it be strengthened?
5. Why do people choose not to vote? How can we encourage these people to vote? What are some of the things that can be done to increase voting partici-



6. pation? Should voting be mandatory as it is in some countries, like Australia? Do you agree with those who say that many people are simply not qualified to vote? Why or why not? Do you agree with Mary Ann Brussat that voting is a spiritual practice? Why or why not?
6. Per Valerie Kaur, how can we practice revolutionary love? Which one of her three suggestions do you feel could have the most impact? Why?
7. Based on the words of Rev. Monica Jacobson-Tennessen, what do you think the beating heart of our faith is?
8. Rev. Jill Cowie shares the story of 15 year-old Tessa, of her activism, her arrest, and her transformation. What experiences have you had that awakened your citizen activism?
9. Mary Parker Follett wrote that democracy depends on a society supported by a network of human relations. How does a growing tribalism undermine such relationships? What can be done to break down the walls that result?
10. Rose Bird laments that courts are anti-democratic institutions. This becomes

especially true when courts are packed by judges with one political persuasion, rather than a balance. How can courts be made more democratic?

11. Emma Goldman wrote that, “... democracy must first be safe for America before it can be safe for the world.” Is democracy in America unsafe? How? Can it be made safe? If yes, how? If no, why not?
12. Rev. Evan Keely suggests that our faith tradition has a worthy vision for the world. What is included in that vision? How can it be more widely shared? What is the role of your congregation in that work?

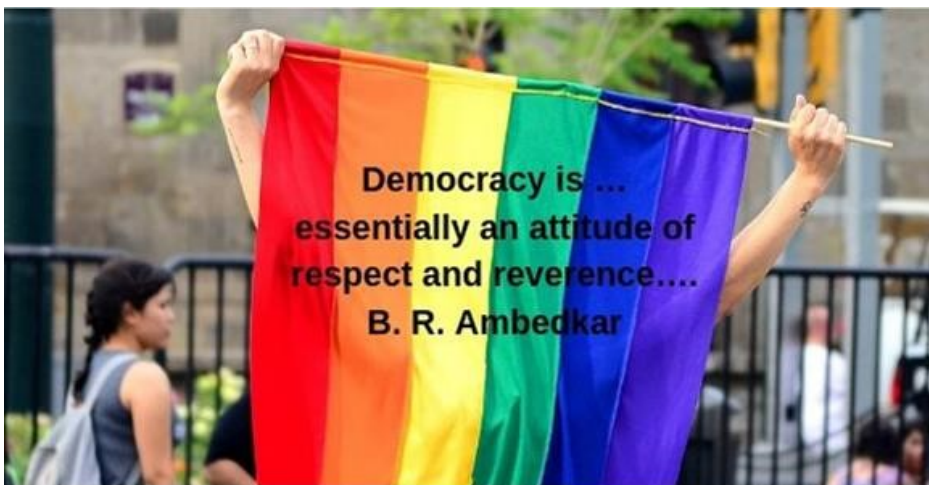


Photo by Max Böhme on Unsplash