

BOOK REVIEW: Healing the Heart of Democracy

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Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit

By Parker J. Palmer, 2011, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

*"In memory of
Christina Taylor Green (2001-2011)
Addie Mae Collins (1949-1963)
Denise McNair (1951-1963)
Carole Robertson (1949-1963)
Cynthia Wesley (1949-1963)*

"Christina died when an assassin in Tucson, Arizona, opened fire at a public event hosted by Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, who was seriously wounded. Addie Mae, Denise, Carole, and Cynthia died when violent racists bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

"When we forget that politics is about weaving a fabric of compassion and justice on which everyone can depend, the first to suffer are the most vulnerable among us – our children, our elders, our poor, homeless, and mentally ill brothers and sisters. As they suffer, so does the integrity of our democracy. May the heartbreaking deaths of these children – and the hope and promise that was in their young lives – help us find the courage to create a politics worthy of the human spirit."

I begin this review with Parker Palmer's dedication because it speaks volumes about the gift of light he brings to all of us in this country in the midst of what seems like an endless dark night of our democracy. ***Healing the Heart of Democracy*** is both a deeply personal account of Palmer's struggle out of a deep

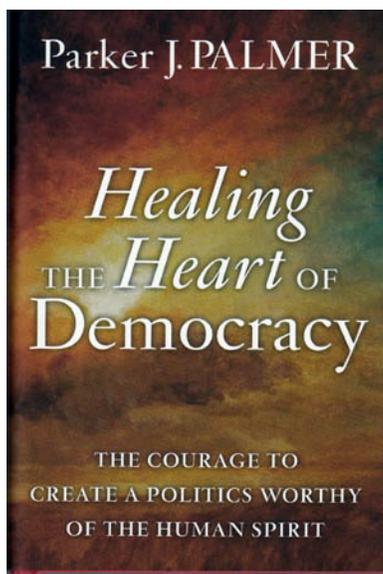
depression, and for those of us who are committed to democratically-run schools, a hopeful beacon forward.

Palmer recounts his history with the perils of American democracy:

"...precipitated by Democrats and Republican alike. I lived through McCarthy's communist witch hunts; the pushback to the civil rights movement; the political assassinations of the 1960s; the burning of our cities; Vietnam, the Pentagon Papers, Watergate; and the electoral debacle of 2000. I have witnessed the rapid erosion of the middle class and the growing power of big money, an oligarchy of wealth, to trump the will of the people. But with fear and fragmentation becoming staples of our national life, and with the haunting sense that our 'booming economy' was likely to implode, democracy felt even more imperiled to me in the America of 2004 [the year Palmer began this book]."

And in 2013, when our governmental officials seem incapable of finding common ground or compromising, and stagnation, stalemate, and dead-on-arrival greet all too many legislative proposals, Palmer's book is a welcome breath of fresh air, offering thoughtful approaches to re-discovering the true sense of "citizen." In a day when "Career and College Ready" is the mantra throughout our nation's schools, it is refreshing and reassuring to read about "the third C," citizenship. Palmer encourages readers to become "intentional citizens," fully active participants in our democracy, rather than "accidental citizens," who happen to have been born in the United States of America.

Living in a time when our politics is the “politics of the brokenhearted,” and by way of explaining the book’s title – Healing the Heart of Democracy – Palmer takes us to the very root of the word, heart:



“‘Heart’ comes from the Latin ‘cor’ and points not merely to our emotions but to the core of the self, that center place where all of our ways of knowing converge – intellectual, emotional, sensory, intuitive, imaginative, experiential, relational, and bodily, among others.... ‘Cor’ is also the Latin root from which we get the word ‘courage.’ When all that we understand of self and world comes together in the center place called the heart, we are more likely to find the courage to act humanely on what we know.”

“When all of our talk about politics is either technical or strategic, to say nothing of partisan and polarizing, we loosen or sever the human connections on which empathy, accountability, and democracy itself depend. If we cannot talk about politics in the language of the heart – if we cannot be publicly heartbroken, for example, that the wealthiest nation on earth is unable to summon the political will to end childhood hunger at home – how can we create a politics worthy of the human spirit, one that has a chance to serve the common good?”

“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.”

Palmer then discusses the tension between the individual and community—between independence and interdependence, individualism and communalism. He writes of striving for balance in each of these areas as essential to a fully functioning democracy. He then presents his “Five Habits of the Heart,” and first suggests two words which summarize these habits: “chutzpah” and “humility.”

“By ‘chutzpah’ I mean knowing that I have a voice that needs to be heard and the right to speak it. By ‘humility’ I mean accepting the fact that my



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truth is always partial and may not be true at all – so I need to listen with openness and respect, especially to ‘the other,’ as much as I need to speak my own voice with clarity and conviction. Humility and chutzpah equals the kind of citizens a democracy needs.”

The first three of these habits are about chutzpah, and the last two, humility:

“We must understand that we are all in this together.

We must develop an appreciation of the value of ‘otherness.’

We must cultivate the ability to hold tension in life-giving ways.

We must generate a sense of personal voice and agency.

We must strengthen our capacity to create community.”

Palmer then uses a series of four chapters to lay out ways in which these habits may be practiced and fully developed in our homes, in art, religion, and education. Specifically turning to education, Palmer notes, “The K-12 classrooms where we all spend much of our youth, and the college and university classrooms where about one-quarter of us earn postsecondary degrees, are the venues in which we are most likely to be formed or deformed as citizens.” It is in our schools that young people can exercise their learner’s permits to practice driving the democracy of their schools. Democracy is not a spectator sport. It requires citizens who have developed such essential qualities as: “the sense of curiosity, responsibility, and agency.” Palmer urges everyone in schools to engage actively in their classrooms and school communities, and in the greater political dynamics of their larger communities.

Here Palmer quotes Thomas Jefferson: “I know of no safe repository of the ultimate power of society but people. And if we think them not enlightened enough, the remedy is not to take the power from them, but to inform them by education.”

For those of us who are teachers, counselors, social workers, psychologists, coaches, teachers aides, custodians, secretaries, administrators, we spend so much of our lives in our workplaces—schools. Palmer believes we can develop his “Habits of the

Heart,” practicing such democratic skills as mutual respect and trust, open listening and courageous speaking, and individual and collective intention to work for the common good. Here Palmer quotes Terry Tempest Williams:

“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?”

With this in mind Palmer suggests that teachers, as some have already begun to do, could mount an effective challenge to high-stakes testing which distorts serving the real needs of the young. Good democratic citizenship is not limited to institutional politics, but requires active practice in every area of our lives. It is within a caring community of learners that the “Habits of the Heart” may come to heal this country’s ailing democracy.

In this vein, I’ll close this review with a poem, “A Great Need,” by the thirteenth-century Persian poet Hafiz. Parker Palmer uses this poem to emphasize the importance of us staying the course, being called to hang on and hang together:

*Out
Of a great need
We are all holding hands
And climbing.
Not loving is a letting go.
Listen,
The terrain around here
Is
Far too
Dangerous
For
That*

