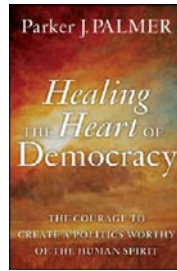


A Review of *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*

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OVER THE PAST 30 YEARS, PARKER J. PALMER'S writings and teachings have been fundamental to our evolving understanding of the relationships between teaching and learning, heart and mind, courage and action, and personal and professional. His willingness to ask profound, even troubling, questions that get at the core of who we are as humans has informed and inspired countless classroom teachers, university professors, counselors, spiritual leaders, and professionals from all walks of life. As one who has read much of that literature and been gently prodded to search my own soul in one of Palmer's intensive retreats, I cannot offer an objective, dispassionate review of his latest contribution, *Healing the Heart of Democracy* (2011, Jossey-Bass). With that caveat, I assert that this is one of the most important books of the early 21st century for those who think and worry about the state of American democracy and the place of educational institutions in renewing our political and public lives. Those of us who see ourselves as part of the deliberative democracy movement, who work with young people who aspire to be effective and active citizens, and who sometimes feel the darkest despair at the tenor of contemporary politics will find Palmer's book to be a clear, honest framework for looking toward the light.

The conception of this particular book has its origins in 9/11. Palmer has always acknowledged his infrequent but deep depressions and their effect on his worldview. The events of 9/11 happened during one of those dark cycles. His sensitivities, as a Quaker and a believer in what Abraham Lincoln called in his first inaugural address the "better angels" of the human spirit, were shaken to the *cor*, in the true Latin sense. Palmer often invokes the spirit, words, and challenges of Lincoln, whom he seems to revere both because Lincoln faced the most grievous challenge of our democracy and because Lincoln, too, suffered and learned from lifelong severe depression. Palmer's 2005 essay on "The Politics of the Brokenhearted," published by the Fetzer Institute, was an explicit effort to reconcile the events of 9/11 with their aftermath, when a national moment of grief focused on consolation and reflection morphed into years of ill-considered wars, Islamophobia, and a general circling of the wagons in American political culture. In this essay he offered the metaphor of the broken apart (shattered and angry) and the broken open (loving and redemptive) hearts that may follow such national and personal tragedies. In his current



book, Palmer elaborates on that metaphor in depth. Drawing on the writings of Terry Tempest Williams, Lincoln, Walt Whitman, Rainer Maria Rilke, Joseph Ellis and, most especially Alexis de Toqueville, Palmer asks us to start first with an examination of the capacities of the human heart. Following Williams, he sees the heart as the "first home of democracy" (p. TK), and he uses Toqueville's observations of early American culture and its "habits of the heart" to create a framework for a psychological, moral, and political analysis of American democracy now. For Palmer, "the heart is as responsible for fascism and genocide as it is for generosity and justice" (p. 50). That is, the heart is where Lincoln's better angels dwell *and* where the seeds of fascism and genocide can germinate. In the kind of democratic society that Palmer envisions, the conditions of public and political life create the conditions in which only the former is expressed, where our hearts are broken open to a collective compassion rather than broken apart into splintered shards of xenophobia and revenge.

Throughout his analysis, Palmer's early Protestant and later Quaker convictions inform his understanding of human error and redemption. Concepts of sacrifice (see his retelling of the John Woolman story), suffering, compassion, and communalism are touchstones for creating a pluralistic democracy in which ideological differences become the starting point for problem solving rather than the seeds of wedge politics that dominate national discourse today. Thus, he writes, "No matter how jaw-dropping or morally offensive I find some people's convictions, I must learn how to speak up in the civic community without denying my opponents their humanity and further poisoning the political ecosystem on which democracy depends" (pp. 31–32). Further, he claims:

Despite our sharp disagreements on the nature of the American dream, many of us on the left, on the right, and in the center have at

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least this much in common: a shared experience of heartbreak about the condition of our culture, our society, our body politic. That shared heartbreak can build a footbridge of mutual understanding on which we can walk toward each other. (p. 59)

This is the essence of his argument, where his sober recognition of our many divides and challenges is balanced by his unwavering faith that we are capable of building such bridges and holding such tensions in a way that is generative rather than destructive. The path to generativity begins with the inner self, where Palmer's definition of our habits of the heart must first be cultivated, and includes understanding that we are all in this together, developing an appreciation of "otherness," holding tension in life-giving ways, generating a sense of personal voice and agency, and strengthening our capacity to create community. Palmer writes that our inability to know ourselves—our innermost feelings, insecurities, hopes, and fears—makes us more susceptible to false promises, self-serving decisions, and disregard for other humans. He is especially concerned with our escape from our selves through consumerism and scapegoating (two forms of what he calls "heart disease" [p. TK]).

A central organizing concept in *Healing the Heart of Democracy* is the importance of understanding the necessary tensions among and capacities created by the private domain (our inner selves and most intimate relationships), political institutions (with their formal rules for adjudicating power and resolving differences), and the public arena (with all its messy, unpredictable, and creative features). Palmer believes fervently that we are capable of bringing the best of our selves into relationship with a political process that helps us address our greatest challenges in public contexts designed to work with, not around, the inevitable conflicts of a pluralistic society. He cites America's ongoing work to acknowledge and combat racism as a prime example of how the private, political, and public can, over time, help us make progress.

An entire chapter devoted to Classrooms and Congregations illustrates the ways in which mediating structures can foster participation in public life, even as Palmer's skepticism for the limiting nature of some schools and religions also comes through. Palmer is concerned about the generally passive pedagogies found in American classrooms, a characteristic that impedes the "sense of curiosity, responsibility, and agency that citizenship requires" (p. 129). For Palmer, classrooms are places where students can both

learn about and interrogate the functions of the private, political, and public spheres in American life. Invoking the First Amendment, he cautiously distinguishes between the examining of questions of meaning and the teaching of particular religious beliefs. The former has an important role in the development of the mind and the spirit, both of which should be concerns of public education. Connecting students' personal stories with universal narratives helps them to transcend their own egos. As important, educational contexts that themselves offer opportunities to participate in democratic processes are necessary. Both pedagogies and organizational structures must be democratic if students are to acquire critical knowledge and dispositions necessary for "curiosity, responsibility, and agency" (p. TK). One avenue for achieving this goal is community engagement by students, beyond mere service into authentic, reflective experiences that benefit both learners and communities.

Palmer wrote the concluding section of this book during the days immediately following the shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords. He views this violent act as an example of the "tragic gap" (p. TK) between the possibilities we desire and the reality of everyday life, which includes the "political climate of vitriol, contempt, and lies" (p. 191) we have come to know too well in the current election season. We all live in that tragic gap—"an eternal and inescapable feature of the human condition" (p. 191), yet for Palmer and others of us who share his beliefs, we embrace what Marshall Ganz (2009) calls "the fierce urgency of now" (p. TK) as we seek ways to heal our own hearts and that of the beloved community. In the end, Palmer is convinced, our better angels will prevail, but the road to get there will be arduous and provisional.

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