

WITH A NEW INTRODUCTION  
AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

Parker J. PALMER

*Healing*  
THE *Heart* OF  
Democracy

THE COURAGE TO  
CREATE A POLITICS WORTHY  
OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT

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## More Praise for *Healing the Heart of Democracy*

“In Selma, Alabama, on ‘Bloody Sunday’ in 1965, we were beaten at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. A few days later, we marched all the way to Montgomery. A few months after that, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act. When we set out to cross that bridge, we wanted to bridge the divide of racial discrimination. The burden of race was too heavy; we wanted our country to lay it down. We Americans have been trying to bridge the great divides in this great country for a long time. In this book, Parker J. Palmer urges us to ‘keep on walking, keep on talking’—just as we did in the civil rights movement—until we cross those bridges together.” —**Congressman John Lewis**, recipient of the Martin Luther King Jr. Nonviolent Peace Prize and the Presidential Medal of Freedom and coauthor of *Walking with the Wind*

“*Healing the Heart of Democracy* by Parker J. Palmer is a book born for this moment. Wise, evocative, and pragmatic at its core, this dream for a new politics is grounded in dignity and liberty for all. In this time of civic rupture and discord, I wish this book could be placed in the hands of every member of Congress, every governor, mayor, and state legislator in America. May these words spark a new conversation within our communities, focusing on what binds us together rather than what tears us apart. And may we see this challenge to engage fully within public life not only as a calling, but as a personal commitment to our own ethical stance toward life. This is a book that calls forth our highest selves in the name of a spiritual democracy.” —**Terry Tempest Williams**, author of *The Open Space of Democracy*

“It is hard to imagine a single moment in American history when this book's wisdom would not have been invaluable, but it is even harder to imagine a time when such wisdom is more desperately needed than right now. Parker J. Palmer's unblinking gaze into the habits of the human heart, beginning with his own deeply personal introspection, yields the most important manifesto in generations for breaking through the divisiveness that has paralyzed our democracy to the point of making it almost unrecognizable. Palmer manages to share the most profound insights about our history, culture, and current developments, yet in the refreshingly readable tone of a caring neighbor who has kept a watchful eye on your house when you were away longer than expected. In its compassion, tolerance, prescription, and urgency, this book stands alone as a beacon showing what may well be the only tenable path forward for our nation in a perilous time.” —**Bill Shore**, founder of Share Our Strength and author of *The Cathedral Within* and *The Imaginations of Unreasonable Men*

“Parker J. Palmer's newest book is his most ambitious. Personal and prophetic, it blends heartache and hope, encouraging us to bring ‘chutzpah and humility’ to our public lives. The book awakens the open mind and open heart Palmer sees as essential to a flourishing democracy. No matter what our political leanings, all who harbor concerns about the quality of public discourse and decision making in twenty-first-century America will find here a wise and kindred spirit who reminds us of choices we can be making now to help ‘reweave the tattered fabric of our civic life.’ At stake is our common future and the vitality of the fragile democracy we inherited and neglect at our peril. If you find yourself feeling at times that nothing you do will matter, you will close this book appreciating how much you

can do, and how much depends on you.” —**Diana Chapman Walsh**, President Emerita of Wellesley College

“This book is a gracefully written anthem to democracy. Not just the democracy of the vote, but a larger conception of the democracy of how we live together across all that divides us. *Healing the Heart of Democracy* breaks new ground in marrying the individual capacity of the human heart, broken though it must become, with the irresolvable tensions inherent in the institutions, politics, and aspirations of a nation. Democracy here is as much the will to welcome a stranger across the tracks as it is to reconcile very different ideas about what is good for a people. It makes democracy personal as well as political. Palmer also breathes new life into what it means to be a citizen—accountable, compassionate, fiercely realistic. The book is a political and personal imperative, reminding us of our covenant with the larger community of souls. The author has been the prophet to many for decades and *Healing the Heart of Democracy* will only deepen that gift and bring it out into new corners of this troubled world.” —**Peter Block** and **John McKnight**, coauthors of *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighborhoods*

“In this book, Parker J. Palmer brings together the wisdom of a lifetime. There is no one better suited than Palmer to illuminate that place where ‘all of the ways of our knowing’ converge, and to bring it to our common attention at this exquisitely heartbreaking and promising moment. This is the manual we need for refashioning our life together—for recovering the heart, the very core, of our selves and our democracy.” —**Krista Tippett**, journalist, host of American Public Media's *Being*, and author of *Speaking of Faith* and *Einstein's God*



“This book could not be more timely and needed in our country today. Parker J. Palmer gives voice to the yearning for democracy and a politics that honors the human spirit. As one who has been guided through a time of personal reflection with Parker, I invite you to join in a journey through these chapters. He examines the courage required to hold life's tensions consciously and faithfully—and perhaps, as our hearts break open, find ourselves standing and acting creatively ‘in the gap.’” —**Congresswoman Lois Capps**, grandmother, mother, nurse, and seeker after democracy

“*Healing the Heart of Democracy* is a courageous work that is honest and true, human and humble, glitteringly intelligent and unabashedly hopeful. Parker J. Palmer has beautifully articulated our collective longing for constructive political conversation that holds the tensions of the democratic process creatively and respectfully. Here is a clear-eyed assessment of the pressing needs we face in our country and our world, framed by a conviction that we have the means within us and within our communities to meet the challenge. Palmer gives us constructive language, historical context, and a practical vision for how we as individuals and communities can get to the real heart of the matter.” —**Carrie Newcomer**, activist and singer-songwriter, *The Geography of Light* and *Before and After*

“In *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, Parker J. Palmer brings his extraordinary vision and experience to bear on the widening divisions in our culture. Regardless of your political persuasion, this book is a sorely needed medicine in how we meet each other, listen to each other, and care for each other. This is a master work by a master: a clear and uplifting resource that keeps shining light in all the dark places. Chapter IV alone would help anyone rebuild a city. Like Socrates and Thoreau, Palmer is that rare, deep seer who is at home in the streets; an inner everyman who

keeps speaking from a mind descended into the heart; a teacher by example who has the courage to stand openly and honestly in the public square.” —**Mark Nepo**, author of *The Book of Awakening* and *As Far as the Heart Can See*

“Parker J. Palmer writes, ‘The heart of the world itself has an unwritten history.’ That was true until now. In this brave and visionary book, Palmer re-imagines our political lives, not as partisan shouting matches among a homogenous and disconnected elite, but as a deeply personal process within which all Americans—especially those of us inheriting this broken polity—have a chance to be heard, heal, and get on with the eternal work of perfecting this nation. As he recasts ‘the political,’ even the most frustrated and cynical among us are moved to ‘stand in the tragic gap’ with a renewed sense of our own quiet power.” —**Courtney E. Martin**, author of *Do It Anyway: The New Generation of Activists*

“This book is a ‘must read’ for everyone who is concerned about the state of our democracy and has ever despaired about what can be done. As you take in Parker J. Palmer's stories and plainspoken analysis, you will look at yourself and others in a different light; his penetrating insights will inspire you to claim your full human capacities and to take part in healing democracy ‘from the inside out.’” —**Martha L. McCoy**, executive director of Everyday Democracy

“Reflecting on the words of Parker J. Palmer in *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, I am convinced that all of us—as citizens and as elected officials—can learn to bridge the divides that keep us from genuinely respecting one another. In my own reflections on the meaning of democracy, I find encouragement in this inspirational book. Becoming good stewards of our democracy means having a commitment to our collective well-being, rather than each struggling to get his or her own. We must care about the common good,

which means working for the many, not just the privileged few. Parker, through sharing his own life's struggles, reveals the common struggles we all endure in life. He also provides us with a way forward—a way forward with hope.”

—**Congresswoman Tammy Baldwin**

“Parker J. Palmer has been our mentor as we've weathered the rough and tumble of political life. His work guides us again and again to seek grounding in the courage to embrace our own deepest questions. Now, in this compelling new book, he turns his unsparing insights to our wounded democracy. Palmer reminds us that democracy depends on citizens who not only engage with the political process but also engage with each other. He challenges us to recognize that a more vital democracy begins within each of us, as we learn to hold the tensions inherent in community life and no longer fear to tread that most difficult terrain—the broken places in our own hearts.” —**Kathy Gille** served for twenty years as a senior congressional aide. **Doug Tanner**, her husband, is a founder and former president of The Faith and Politics Institute.

“This is an inspiring book, one that should be read and talked about in every family, book club, classroom, boardroom, congregation, and hall of government in our country. Parker J. Palmer writes with clarity, good sense, balance, honesty, humor, and humility, focusing on the essence of what is needed from each of us for the survival of our democracy.” —**Thomas F. Beech**, president emeritus, The Fetzer Institute

## **Other Books by Parker J. Palmer**

*A Hidden Wholeness*

*Let Your Life Speak*

*The Courage to Teach*

*The Active Life*

*To Know as We Are Known*

*The Company of Strangers*

*The Promise of Paradox*

*The Heart of Higher Education*

(with Arthur Zajonc and Megan Scribner)

# ***Healing the Heart of Democracy***

**THE COURAGE TO CREATE A POLITICS  
WORTHY OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT**



**Parker J. PALMER**

**JOSSEY-BASS™**

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## Chapter II: Democracy's Ecosystem

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## Chapter VI: Classrooms and Congregations

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## Chapter VII: Safe Space for Deep Democracy

“Stories and Numbers—a Closer Look at Camp Obama” by Zack Exley in *The Huffington Post*, August 29, 2007.

“Why Stories Matter: The Art and Craft of Social Change” by Marshall Ganz is reprinted with permission from *Sojourners*, March 2009. (800) 714-7474, [www.sojo.net](http://www.sojo.net).

“Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted” by Malcolm Gladwell in *The New Yorker*, October 4, 2010. Reprinted by permission of the author.

#### Chapter VIII: The Unwritten History of the Heart

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*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 elderly, our mentally ill, our poor, and our homeless. 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.

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?

—Terry Tempest Williams, “Engagement”<sup>[1](#)</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>[1](#)</sup> Terry Tempest Williams, “Engagement,” *Orion*, July-Aug. 2004, <http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/143/>. See also Williams, *The Open Space of Democracy* (Eugene, Ore.: Wip and Stock, 2004), pp. 83–84.

# INTRODUCTION TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

*[Our] basic problem is not political, it is apolitical and human. One of the most important things to do is to keep cutting deliberately through political lines and barriers and emphasizing the fact that these are largely fabrications and that there is another dimension, a genuine reality, totally opposed to the fictions of politics: the human dimension which politics pretend to arrogate entirely to themselves. This is the necessary first step along the long way toward the perhaps impossible task of purifying, humanizing and somehow illuminating politics themselves.*

—Thomas Merton<sup>[1](#)</sup>

*Healing the Heart of Democracy*<sup>[a](#)</sup> was first published as a hardbound book in September 2011. Writing this introduction to the 2014 paperback edition allows me to share a few things I've learned over the past three years as I've been drawn deeper into American politics. It also gives me a chance to tell some stories about people I've met whose commitment to “a politics worthy of the human spirit” has both informed and inspired me.

As Thomas Merton says in the epigraph to this new Introduction, the task of “purifying, humanizing and somehow illuminating politics” may be impossible. But the hopeful experiences I've had in the wake of this book have reinforced the guidance a wise mentor gave me years ago: “Just because something is impossible doesn't mean you shouldn't do it!”

# Let's Talk About Us

As I listen in on private and public conversations about the problems of American democracy, I'm struck time and again by how often our political talk is about people who aren't in the room. We almost always talk about *them*—"those people" in Washington, D.C., or in our state capitols—the people we hold responsible for all our political pathologies. Rarely to do we talk about *us*, the people who *are* in the room, about our nation's problems and how *we* can help solve them.

I was aware of this fact when I wrote the book, which is why I included this paragraph in a list of things this book is not about:

I will say little about "them," the people in Washington, D.C., on whom we like to blame our ills. My focus is on "We the People," whose will is key to democracy. If we cannot come together with enough trust to discern the general will—and support leaders who are responsive to it while resisting the rest—we will forfeit the "Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity."<sup>2</sup>

Given what I've seen and heard over the past three years, I wish I had said more about the problems that come with our obsession with "them," so I will correct that lapse here. Talking *about* "those people" instead of talking *with* each other is a poor excuse for genuine political discourse. It is also a path to political disempowerment, a way to make sure that "We the People" will have little or no leverage on the social and economic problems that concern us, and no way to discern and give voice to the common good.

There's a simple way to test those claims. Think about everyday experiences outside of politics—in your family, neighborhood, workplace, or the voluntary associations to which you belong. In settings of that sort, when was the



last time you solved a problem by talking about people who weren't in the room? Almost certainly, the answer is “Never.” That kind of talk is little more than venting and kvetching, a cheap excuse for honest engagement with whatever is troubling us. It may create the illusion that we have spoken up and done what we can, but it never rises to the level of responsible problem-oriented discourse.

Being grown-ups in our private and public lives means taking responsibility for whatever is within our reach. And politics is *always* within our reach—if we understand it first and foremost as the business of “We the People,” and only secondarily as the business of the people we elect to office. Every time we talk with family, friends, classmates, colleagues, or strangers—including those who see things differently than we do—about the state of the Union, we have a chance to assume our share of responsibility for a democracy founded on citizen convictions about the common good. In statistical terms, our individual shares are insignificant, to be sure. In moral terms, however, they are vital. History has always been made by individuals doing their small parts in ways that have the potential to add up to something big.

But these days, “We the People” have a great deal of trouble talking across our lines of difference about the common good—so much trouble that many of us doubt the very concept of a “common good.” Deformed by a divisive political culture, we're less inclined to differ with each other honestly than to demonize each other mercilessly. That's why it's so seductive to gather with folks who share our view of what's wrong and do little more than complain about all those “wrongdoers” who aren't in the room.

If we want to “create a politics worthy of the human spirit,” we must find ways to bridge our differences, whether they are defined by age, gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion,

sexual orientation, or political ideology. Then we must seek patches of common ground on the issues we care most about. This is more than a feel-good exercise. If we cannot reach a rough consensus on what most of us want, we have no way to hold our elected officials accountable to the will of the people.

Every time we fail to bridge our differences, we succumb to the divide-and-conquer tactics so skillfully deployed by individuals and institutions whose objective is to take us out of the political equation. Question: Why are billions of dollars spent annually on cable TV performances of political “infotainment” that are all heat and no light? On disseminating disinformation and agitprop online? On PACs that can produce and purchase air time for fact-free attack ads that offer no solutions? Answer: To make “We the People” so fearful and suspicious of each other that we will become even more divided and politically impotent.

Too many Americans have fallen for this systematic campaign of disempowerment. Without any evidence other than the screed they see on a TV screen or computer monitor, they've embraced the premise that holding the tension of our differences in a creative way—a way that opens our minds and hearts to each other, and to a rough consensus on the common good—is impossible or even undesirable. But they are wrong about that, and the proof is close at hand.

We engage in creative tension-holding every day in every dimension of our lives, seeking and finding patches of common ground. We do it with our partners, our children, and our friends as we work to keep our relationships healthy and whole. We do it in the workplace—in nonprofits and business and industry—as we come together to solve practical problems. We've been doing it for ages in every academic field from the humanities to the sciences. If that

were not so, knowledge would never have advanced, and scientists would still believe that earth, air, fire, and water are the elements of which everything is made!

Human beings have a well-demonstrated capacity to hold the tension of differences in ways that lead to creative outcomes and advances. It is not an impossible dream to believe we can apply that capacity to politics. In fact, our capacity for creative tension-holding is what made the American experiment possible in the first place. As I argue in this book, America's founders—despite the bigotry that limited their conception of who “We the People” were—had the genius to establish the first form of government in which differences, conflict, and tension were understood not as the enemies of a good social order but as the engines of a better social order.

## **Big Money and Little La Veta**

As “We the People” retreat from the public square and resort to private gripe sessions with those who think like us, we create a vacuum at the center of America's public life. Politics abhors a vacuum as much as nature does, so nondemocratic powers rush in to fill the void—especially the power called “big money.”

Of course, big money has been a threat to democracy for a long time. But the threat has grown more menacing in recent years, and its consequences have become more visible as the middle class has shrunk while wealth and income inequalities have expanded. So more and more Americans have become acutely aware of the power of big money.

Awareness is a good thing, but it can be a two-edged sword. On the one hand, we need to know what a loud voice big money has in political decision making, especially

in the wake of Citizens United. That, of course, is the name of the 2010 Supreme Court decision that lifted certain legal limitations on corporate political advocacy, on the grounds that corporations have the same Constitutional right to free speech as individual citizens.<sup>3</sup> Apparently it made no difference to the majority of justices that corporations, unlike individuals, can finance massive amplifications of their messages to make their voices heard.

We cannot be good citizens without knowing about all this, but for some people that knowledge inhibits rather than promotes active citizenship. When the Supreme Court gave big money even more power, it made many Americans feel even more strongly that their small voices do not count. “There's no way for ordinary people to beat big money,” they say, “so why not just throw in the towel?” Wrongly held, our knowledge of the power wielded by big money can accelerate our retreat from politics, discouraging us from being the participants that democracy demands and reducing us to mere spectators of a political game being played exclusively by “them.”

But those who want to throw in the towel may be textbook examples of how a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. In the 2011 edition of this book, I quoted Bill Moyers: “The antidote, the only antidote to the power of organized money is the power of organized people.”<sup>4</sup> Today, in 2014, I can point to a real-world manifestation of Moyers's words. Via legislation or referendum, sixteen states have now called for a Constitutional Amendment to nullify the impact of Citizens United, and at least fifteen more states have such calls in the pipeline. That's happened only because people from left, center, and right on the political spectrum have learned how to hold their differences creatively, find common ground, and make common cause on an issue that effects the common good as they all understand it.

As I travel the country talking about “healing the heart of democracy,” I ask audiences how many are aware of this grassroots movement to amend the Constitution.<sup>5</sup> At best, a few hands go up, and often none do. The media—including those that are not wholly owned by the left or the right—have done a poor job of covering this important emerging story. So “We the People” need to tell the story to each other. As Pete Seeger said, “The key to the future of the world is finding the optimistic stories and letting them be known.”<sup>6</sup>

Here's a story that Seeger would have loved. In November 2011, two months after this book came out, I saw a column titled “One Man Makes Occupy Stand” by reporter Anthony Mestas in a Colorado newspaper called *The Pueblo Chieftain*.<sup>7</sup> That's how I learned what was happening in La Veta, Colorado, a town of about 800 people:

As thousands of protesters continue in nationwide Occupy Wall Street demonstrations, one man is leading his own show of solidarity in the shadows of the picturesque Spanish Peaks.

Roderick “Rod” House, 71, of La Veta on Friday pitched a tent on a patch of green next to the town's library and said he plans to camp out until Thursday at noon in an effort to encourage conversation.

“We need to have a conversation about the problems our country is in. I am not here to tell you what to do. I am here to encourage us how to learn how to communicate,” House said Monday, still cold under an overcast sky with a calm wind blowing.

One line later, these words caught my attention: “[House] said that after reading *Healing the Heart of Democracy* by Parker J. Palmer, he was inspired to create Occupy La Veta.” House described the book to another reporter as one

that is, "Passionate about democracy and speaks about the heart of the occupy protests."<sup>8</sup>

House served as a radar technician in the U.S. Air Force for four years. "I used to be a patriot back when I was a Republican conservative and I kind of lost my patriotism and I am getting it back because this is my country and I served it when I was 19 to 23 years old," House said, adjusting a hat bearing the inscription "question authority." "I love my country and I want to help fix it," he added.

"Our ...democracy is broken. Our politics are corrupted by money and that takes away the representation of the people. That is what they are protesting, I think." House said his goal is not to get everything to happen all at once, but to get the people in the country to talk to each other.

He has worked since he was 12 years old and has paid taxes since then. "I don't want anything. I have everything I need. I have a happy marriage, a paid-for house, a paid-for truck, a paid-for motorcycle, everything is perfectly fine," House said. "I am not here to say, 'Give me.' I am here to say, 'Stop fraud, stealing, buying politicians' ...I have 10 grandchildren and I care about their future and that is why I am here."

Of course, opinions differ on the importance and impact of the Occupy movement.<sup>9</sup> In my mind, Occupy accomplished something remarkable, even if the movement disappears. It etched the slogan "We are the 99%" into the popular consciousness, and launched a national conversation about income and wealth inequality that goes on to this day. Through a few months of direct action, Occupy took Americans to a level of economic awareness that some economists and columnists had been trying to achieve for years, without success.



But arguing about the efficacy of the Occupy movement misses the point of the Rod House story. The point is that none of us—no matter how small the scope of our action may be, or how far off the beaten track we live—is without ways to make our voice heard and invite others to speak their voices as well. As House said of his one-man movement, “My country is broken. I can't do anything about it. I'm an old man. I don't have a voice, but by doing THIS ...I do.”<sup>10</sup> By speaking his voice, House helped a number of people in his hometown become more thoughtful not only about some critical problems in this country, but also about the critical role “We the People” play in finding solutions.

As soon as I learned about Occupy La Veta, I got in touch with Anthony Mestas, the reporter who wrote the original story. He put me in touch with Rod and his wife, Loanne Shackelford, people I am now glad to count among my friends. Their Occupy experience has led them even deeper into citizen engagement: they convened a “general assembly” at the La Veta Library, attended by thirty-six citizens of Huerfano County, and led a book study of *Healing the Heart of Democracy*.<sup>11</sup> Their invitation to the book study, published as a letter to the editor in *The Pueblo Chieftain*, included these words:

Democracy is weakened when we only speak with those who share our views.... To be effective, we need the participation of folks from across the political spectrum—left, right, somewhere in the middle, and politically disengaged—and all walks of life—ranchers, teachers, business owners, the financially secure and those struggling to make ends meet, new comers and old-timers. In other words, we need you—yes, you!<sup>12</sup>

As I told Phil Haslanger, who wrote an op-ed column about this story in the Madison, Wisconsin, *Capital Times*, what

Rod House did constitutes a review of my book that means more to me than any kind of academic praise: “He reviewed the book with his life.”[13](#)

## Our Deepest Political Divide

Some people take heart when they hear the Rod House story. Stories like this encourage them to take small but meaningful citizen actions that, multiplied many times over, can help renew our democracy. When I shared the story with a gathering of K-12 teachers suffering from the way local politicians were using them as scapegoats for problems over which teachers have no control, one of them said, “If Rod can do something like this in La Veta, Colorado, we can do it in Madison, Wisconsin. We need an open conversation about what's really happening in public education in our state.”

But other people are unmoved. They dismiss the Rod House story as “just another feel-good anecdote.” Silently or aloud they say, “What difference does it make that a seventy-one-year-old man pitched a tent on the library grounds in a tiny town in the Colorado mountains and spent a week out there as winter settled in? That's a lot of effort and discomfort for no visible result. He didn't even get major media coverage.”

As I've traveled the country with *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, I've begun to think that for those of us who want to mobilize “We the People” across our lines of difference, the great divide is not between the left and the right. It is between people who hear stories like that of Rod House as sources of inspiration for citizen action and those who dismiss them as sentimental and politically irrelevant.

This divide reaches much deeper than the simplistic “hope vs. cynicism” frame in which it is often presented. Instead,

it reflects three fundamental differences in the way people understand power—differences that must be addressed if we want to activate more “people power” in response to the current crisis in American democracy.

First, there is the divide between (a) people who believe in the power of ideas, values, commitments, and visions—aka the power of the human heart—and (b) those who believe that power comes only from possessing or having access to social status, wealth, positional leadership, and the capacity to command institutional resources. This is the divide between those who believe that power is found within us as well as outside us, and those for whom all power is external to the self.

Second, there is the divide between (a) people who believe in “the power of one” to act on the heart's imperatives, especially when such an act calls a community of shared concern into being, and (b) those who believe that ordinary people, alone or together, are fundamentally powerless in a society dominated by mass institutions. This is a variant on the first divide, of course. But here, those who disbelieve in the power of the human heart have doubled down on their disbelief. Not only do they regard the heart as inherently powerless—they believe it remains powerless even when we follow the heart's imperatives with personal and communal actions. To the argument that community has the capacity to multiply personal power many times over, they respond, “A thousand times zero is zero.”

Third, there is the divide between (a) those who believe in the power of small, slow, invisible, underground processes, and (b) those who believe that only processes that yield large-scale visible results in the short term qualify as powerful. The former understand the importance of political infrastructure, and have the patience to work away at strengthening it, even when their work is slow to yield

measurable outcomes and never generates headlines. The latter seek quick fixes that look like solutions, whether or not they solve anything—and, if they fail to achieve them, either jump to the next quick fix or quit the field.

As I began to reject the traditional left-right notion of our great political divide in favor of a schema built on different assumptions about the nature of power, I began to see something hopeful. Redefined this way, the “great divide” does not parallel the left-right divide: it is nonpartisan. To cite but two examples, both the Occupy Movement and the Tea Party are made up of people who believe in the power of ideas and values, the power of one multiplied in community, and the power of invisible, long-term, infrastructure work. On these counts, at least, there is no fundamental difference between groups that are poles apart ideologically.

Here, it seems to me, is an important area of common ground between the left and the right that deserves exploration: a deeply shared belief in the pivotal role that “We the People” play in American democracy. If I am right about this alternative way of seeing the “great divide” among us, it gives me more hope that left and right can come together around the conception of the common good I wrote about in the hardbound edition of this book: