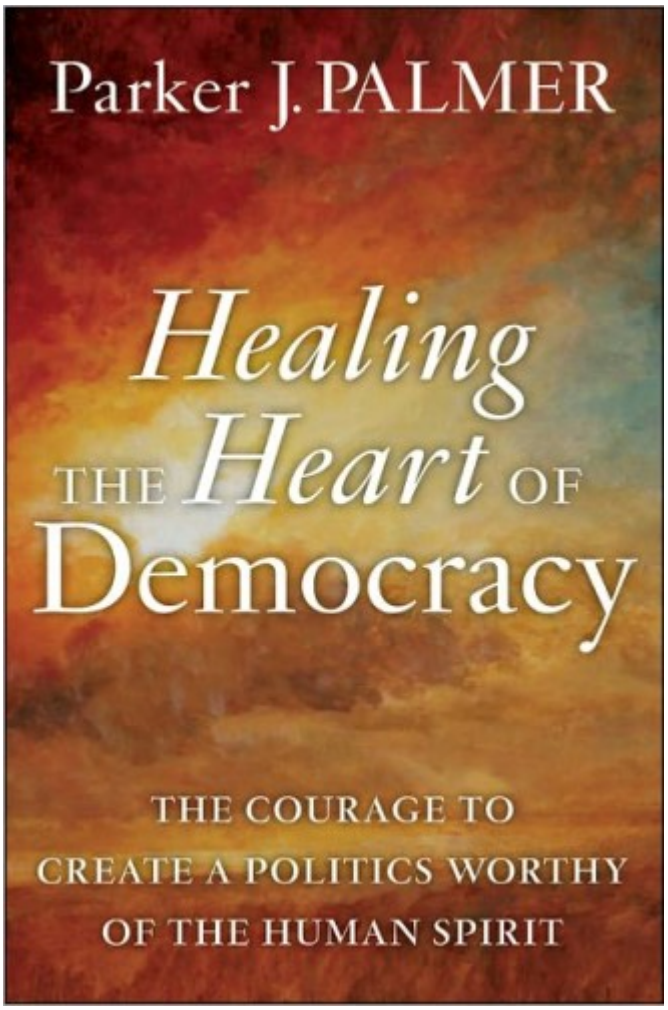
# Healing the Heart of Democracy, by Parker J. Palmer

reviewed by Robert N. Bellah in the October 18, 2011 issue

## In Review




### Healing the Heart of Democracy

by Parker J. Palmer
Jossey-Bass

The title of Parker Palmer's book suggests that when he uses the words *democracy* and *politics* he is concerned with something much more than everyday politics in a society that is formally democratic. The words *healing* and *human spirit* suggest that we will be getting a meditation on the deep meaning of democracy and politics, not a study of the nuts and bolts of political practice.

Palmer's project stands in a tradition that goes back at least as far as Plato, who thought that the individual soul and the soul of society were mutually related, each strengthening or undermining the other. Palmer does not refer to Plato, but he does refer throughout the book to two men who carried out Plato's tradition: Alexis de Tocqueville and Abraham Lincoln. Both were sensitive to the kind of person who makes democracy possible, the kind of person that democracy produces and the many problems that this relation gives rise to.

*Heart*, as Palmer uses it, is "a word that reaches far beyond our feelings." It includes the mind but "goes deeper than the mind alone can take us." His is a biblical use of the word, closely related to the idea of conscience, though in linking the emotional with the intellectual and both with the ethical, he reaches for a meaning that is deeper and more inclusive than that of any other English word. From the beginning, Palmer's concern with the term *heart* leads us into another idea that pervades the book: brokenheartedness. Here too the link between person and society is central.

Palmer explains that he has suffered several bouts of extreme depression, and he points out that much in our history, particularly our nearly continual wars, leads to a kind of public brokenheartedness. In discussing how the individual heart and the heart of democracy work together, he uses Tocqueville's phrase "habits of the heart," the practices of daily life that enable individuals to work effectively in a democratic society or that prevent them from doing so.

The book has a formal structure that seems to reflect more conventional treatments of democracy, dealing as it does with the nature of our formal democracy, the kind of civil society that gives life to those democratic formalities, the voluntary associations that mobilize social and political participation, the classrooms and congregations that are engaged in the formation of democratic persons, and the deep cultural resources from which all these activities draw. Yet even as Palmer touches base with almost every aspect of democratic life, his seemingly lineal structure constantly returns to Tocqueville and Lincoln and to terms such as *heart*,

the *brokenhearted* and most often *habits of the heart* (though he never mentions a well-known book with that title). This ever deeper circling back on these key figures and terms gives the book an almost poetic quality that is appropriate and moving, making it more a spiritual meditation than a political handbook.

Palmer's life is a close reflection of what he teaches. He is a committed Quaker who relates a concern for inner spiritual development to activism in support of ethical causes. He has spoken at many universities and colleges but has not pursued an academic career. He has been connected with a variety of groups, some of them deeply communal, and has moved freely among these groups, teaching and encouraging along the way. His books, such as *The Courage to Teach* and *A Hidden Wholeness,* have been well received and his thoughtful lectures widely attended. He has been constantly on the move intellectually and spiritually, a kind of Socratic gadfly in American life. With all this in mind, what is he trying to say to us in this latest book?

He is saying something that political activists badly need to hear: make sure that your own life embodies the things you are fighting for. The struggle is inner as well as outer. To the more naturally contemplative he says: think about how what you have found within relates to the society around you and how you could make your inner world better in small ways or large. He is not preaching the prosperity gospel or even the ordinary American gospel of happiness. With Freud, he says that it will be a victory to achieve even ordinary unhappiness, because our lives are always on the edge of brokenheartedness and despair, things Americans are too prone to deny.

I think Palmer would say that though optimism is often illusory, hope can carry us beyond the inevitable setbacks so we can find joy in working for a better world. What his book does best is to help us as deeply troubled but constantly changing individuals to find places in a deeply troubled and constantly moving society where we can encounter others committed to the search for the common good and join them in a project that we can never complete but that we can sometimes move for the better.

Perhaps at the core of Palmer's message is the way he uses the image of brokenheartedness to show two alternatives: our heart can break in pieces, sometimes with explosive violence and inevitably with chaotic results, or our heart can break open, leading us to renewal and reconciliation. He beautifully uses

Lincoln, who himself suffered throughout his life from bouts of severe depression. According to Palmer, Lincoln's heart broke open, and this led to life-giving possibilities, so magnificently expressed in his seminal writings, such as the Gettysburg Address and his Second Inaugural. Palmer's politics is not the politics of despair or the politics of inevitable progress, but the politics of people trying to live better lives as they attempt to work together for a better society—knowing that they will have many setbacks and only partial successes, but still finding the struggle of ordinary life for ordinary goods to be fulfilling in itself.

Palmer is at his best in his treatment of individual spiritual development and the circles of trust that can extend that development into group life. Early on he uses the example of the 18th-century Quaker John Woolman, who opened his heart, out of compassion for slaves, and preached emancipation to his fellow Quakers. Woolman was so successful in a life filled with preaching journeys up and down the eastern seaboard that he finally, in 1783, persuaded the Society of Friends to petition Congress to free the slaves. Palmer takes pride in noting that Woolman's efforts brought the Quakers to a point not reached by the United States until 80 years later.

What he leaves out is any discussion of what had to happen in those 80 years before Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. He briefly refers to large issues of history, culture and social change, but they are never the focus of his attention. This leads him perilously close to the idea that good causes win by changing one heart at a time, a common belief in this country. Changing hearts one at a time is always important, but one book, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* changed the hearts of millions of white Americans who were unsympathetic to slavery but not yet seriously engaged in ending it. That book moved public opinion strongly in the direction of abolitionism and Lincoln's Republican Party. Of course, one book didn't do it alone, but some historians believe that it was the match that lit the fire of the abolitionist cause.

My point is that historical, cultural and social forces that do not work primarily at the level of individuals and small groups are also essential to an understanding of democracy, including the heart of democracy. Palmer does a lot for us, and it may be unfair to blame him for not doing everything. But it is not unfair to point out that concentrating on individuals and face-to-face groups while largely ignoring the larger historical currents of culture and society can encourage the kind of individualistic approach to social problems that is all too evident in American

society—the kind of approach that  can actually inhibit change rather than move us in a better direction.