

Practicing Democracy in Your Neighborhood



Democracy begins locally — not only within the city or county government nearest you but even closer, within your neighborhood. Philosopher and activist Grace Lee Boggs observed: “We can begin by doing small things at the local level ... That is how change takes place in living systems, not from above but from within, from many local actions occurring simultaneously.” That process is how we can strengthen our democracy. Here are some starting points.

1

Practice Kindness

Perhaps the foremost value that Americans cite as central to democracy is equality — that we’re all created equal. Americans also value placing the good of the country and its collective citizenry above individual interests. A third core value of American democracy is expressed by the national motto *E Pluribus Unum*, “Out of many — one.” This motto was adopted by the U.S. Congress in 1782 and started appearing on coins in 1786. In its most literal sense, the motto means that a single nation emerged from the union of the thirteen colonies. Many Americans interpret it to mean “unity in diversity,” i.e., that out of the multitude of people with different backgrounds and beliefs comes the commonality and unity of being citizens of the United States.

These three core values of American democracy appear in the work of meditation teachers Ed and Deb Shapiro. In *Be the Change*, the Shapiros make the case for meditation in action, i.e., small acts of kindness:

“When we see beyond our own ego-needs and become aware of our connectedness with all beings, reaching out beyond ourselves becomes a natural and spontaneous expression of who we are. Rather than grasping at what we can get for ourselves, our first response is the care of others.”

We can set the intention to cultivate the democratic values of equality, common good, and unity in diversity, as well as the democratic virtues of inner peacefulness and generosity of spirit of which the Shapiros write, by performing kind actions every day. Here are some suggestions to get you started:

- Smile at everyone you cross paths with throughout your day.
- Let someone in a hurry go ahead of you in line at the coffee shop or the grocery store.
- Put quarters in parking meters on either side of your car.
- Hold a door open for someone.
- Buy the next person in line a treat or pay for their meal the next time you’re in a drive-through.

2

Make a Green Map of Your Community

While many Americans highly value individual and national independence, including self-reliance and individual achievement, seeing ourselves as independent from one another or the rest of the world can foment problems. When we put our individual needs above the needs of our fellow citizens and our country, the concomitant sense of isolation worsens our experience of fear, suspicion, division, anger, and polarization. The Shapiros assert the value of keeping in mind our connections to each other and to the land as an antidote to a sense of isolation and separation:

“If a butterfly becomes extinct in Australia, it affects the eco-system of the whole world, because a third of our food supply depends on insect pollination. If we pull on a single thread in nature, we will find that it is attached to the rest of the world. Caring for each other and the planet is, therefore, inseparable from caring for ourselves; we are both dependent on and a part of the earth and the woods and the children playing in the street, and they are a part of us.”

One way to reinforce our awareness of this interconnectedness is by creating what writer Penelope Franklin, in *Spirit of Service*, calls a green map of our community. It’s worth noting that not all green maps are the same. Some simply depict nature walks, parks, farmers’ markets, recycling centers, thrift stores, etc.; others note environmental problems in the area. Some are printed; some are published digitally. Some are painted on a wall; others are put online.

Here’s how to get started with green mapping your neighborhood:

- Log on to the Green Map Web site, greenmap.org.
- If there is an existing project in your area, volunteer to participate.
- If there isn’t a project in your area, determine the area your map should cover.
- Learn about community participation via the [Green Map FAQ page](#).
- Decide on your map’s audience and potential map makers. Meet with leaders at local schools, community centers, etc., for help setting up the project.
- Register your group with the Green Map System, and follow their guidance for team development, funding, research, design, and producing your map.

3

Go for a Neighborhood Walk

There are many ways of defining a neighborhood, but the simplest is that it is a collection of homes. In *The Listening Life*, spiritual director Adam S. McHugh recommends walking through your neighborhood in a spirit of inquiry, a practice he learned from Michael Mata, director of the Transformation Urban Leadership program at Azusa Pacific Seminary.

Ask questions like these about the homes in your immediate community, including your own:

- What kinds of houses do people live in?
- Is there a sense that people are welcome here?
- What political signs or billboards do you notice? What are their messages?

- What do you hear? What languages are people speaking?
- What are their ages? Ethnic backgrounds? Do you hear children?
- Who are authority figures? Are there police? Is their presence welcome?
- What is this neighborhood saying to you?

4

Take Contemplative Walks

This spiritual practice takes walking from an experience of observation and listening, as in the Neighborhood Walk above, and turns it into a contemplative experience to increase your self-awareness and your feelings of deep connection to the neighborhood. It is designed to encourage such democratic values and virtues as caring, generosity, service, and consideration.

First, grow your awareness of yourself by walking in your neighborhood. In *The Four Virtues: Presence, Heart, Wisdom, Creation*, professor of psychology Tobin Hart recommends simply observing your surroundings as you walk. Afterwards, reflect on what you noticed about your surroundings as well as what you noticed about how you typically move through the world: Are you usually in a hurry, rushing too much to notice much? Or do you tend to walk around with an open heart and often feel hurt when others don't respond in kind? Or do you operate with a level of protection and defensiveness as you go through your day?

Once you've identified your habitual way of moving through the world, consider how Hart's reflective questions might open you to new ways of caring for yourself:

- What is it like for you [to move through the world in this way]?
- What has this done for you in the past?
- Where did you learn this?
- Is there a change you would like to make to your style?
- What would it look and feel like?
- How might you make it happen?
- Do you have concerns or doubts about a change like this?
- How might you address them?
- What will you do?

With your new self-awareness and thoughts on self-care, extend that awareness and caring to those around you by taking another walk — this time as if you're taking a tour of the neighborhood. Consider your awareness of and consideration for others in your neighborhood with these reflective questions:

- What do you observe? Is there trash in the street? Are there signs of water problems — like dying grass and shrubs? Signs of someone having trouble “keeping up” — like a visible need for house repairs? Or signs of someone doing well — like a new car or improvement project? Are people sitting together outside or is there no sign of anyone around?

- Are your observations of your surroundings on this walk different than they were on your first walk?
- What might your observations indicate?
- Does what you see in any way impact your conclusions from your self-reflective walk?
- Keeping in mind the democratic virtues from the back of this guide, how do you want to respond to your neighborhood observations? Share your answer with someone in your household and at least one neighbor.

5

Discover the Indigenous Story of Your Neighborhood

The Pledge of Allegiance asserts that the United States is one nation with liberty and justice for all. The U.S. history of settler colonialism illustrates that from its beginning days, our country has fallen far short of living up to these ideals, especially in relation to the indigenous peoples of North America. For democracy to flourish today, we must face the crimes of our past, such as the destruction of the native peoples and their culture, and we must each commit to do what we can to right past wrongs and to uphold democratic values for all. We can demonstrate our commitment to democratic values and virtues by honoring the lives, the experience, and the culture of those who came before us.

Many organizations, schools, and conferences now open their meetings by acknowledging and thanking the indigenous people who first lived on the land where they are gathered. At the least, this familiarizes those in attendance with the names of the ancestors of their neighborhood places.

To learn the indigenous story of your neighborhood, visit the [*Native Land website and app*](#). Native Land strives to map indigenous languages, treaties, and territories. Go to the website or the app and enter your address or city. The interactive map will zoom in and pull up information on your area's indigenous history, original language, and tribal ties. For example, you might type in "Hattiesburg, Mississippi," and learn that this area was traditional Chahta (Choctaw) territory. Further research on this tribe would reveal that as a result of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the Choctaw Indians were removed from their homeland in 1831 along what they named the Trail of Tears — the 1,000-mile route that the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole tribes were forced to travel from their homelands to reservations in present day Oklahoma. Between 5,000 and 6,000 Choctaws and nearly 4,000 Cherokees died during the journey.

In *Spirit of Service*, Penelope Franklin suggests some specific ways to honor and help preserve Native American culture in your neighborhood:

- Visit the online interactive museum of indigenous civilization of America at [*lostworlds.org*](#).
- Participate in traditions and customs (by making crafts, trying recipes, etc.) through [*snowwowl.com*](#).
- Find a powwow in your area via [*powwows.com*](#) and read the article on Powwow Etiquette so that you can respectfully participate.

- Get involved with nonprofit organizations like the *Native American Heritage Association*, *Pathways to Spirit*, or the *Adopt-an-Elder program* to support employment, education, infrastructure, and cultural preservation of indigenous communities.

As you learn the indigenous story of your neighborhood and as you take action to honor and preserve indigenous culture and connection to the land, do your best to consider an indigenous perspective of our democratic values and virtues.

6

Host a Soup Night with Neighbors

What better way to honor American democratic rights, like freedom of speech and religion, than to exercise civility and hospitality toward our fellow citizens and their right to the same freedoms? You can build community and friendships by hosting a soup night. It's a great way to start the important democratic work of transcending our individual identities and ideologies. The host provides two or three pots of soup and sends out invitations to her/his neighbors. Some hosts ask their guests to bring their own dishes and silverware; other hosts make it clear that guests do not need to bring anything. Either way, guests often show up with side dishes, like bread, crackers, or salad. A quick Internet search will give soup-night hosts everything from invitations to recipes, so it's easy to get started making connections and building relationships with your neighbors.

7

Research Local Social Action Organizations

As technology has advanced in the United States and abroad, things that seemed unimaginable in the not-too-distant past have become commonplace. Just consider how travel has changed in the history of our country or the functions that smart phones provide. These technological advances have created a world in which individuals, businesses, countries, and continents are now connected constantly. Why not use those connections for good? Specifically, you can uphold the democratic value of popular sovereignty by cultivating the democratic virtue of responsibility, especially for civic engagement.

In *Building a Global Civic Culture*, sociologist Elise Boulding recommends using networks for social action. She specifically mentions using sister city projects as a starting point. She recommends using the Geographic volume of the current Yearbook of International Organizations (available at community libraries) to identify the International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) represented in your sister city's country. Making a list of the INGOs will enable you to identify occupational and special-interest INGOs to which members of your community belong. Next, find out which of these have a local branch in your sister city to increase contact between residents of the sister cities.

Sister-city projects aren't the only way to build your network for social action. You could start simply by researching what nonprofit organizations and social action organizations operate in your area. Identify what these organizations are trying to do in your community, the nation, and the world. Once you've done so, begin exploring whether anyone you know belongs to or works with these organizations. You may even find organizations that you want to join to be a part of caring for others, tackling important problems, or remedying injustices in American society.

8

Ask Local Police, Fire Fighters, and EMTs to Host Teens

We don't all express our patriotism in the same way. Some of us revere symbols of the country, like the American flag. Others express their love for country in their yearning for it to do better and its citizens to be better. Often those who offer criticisms do so from a place of deep reverence for the country and respect for their fellow citizens. Whether you are concerned about the problems erupting in American society today, or you find yourself admiring how the common good is being protected, you will acknowledge that a first step is service to others. What better way to learn this democratic virtue than from those who have committed themselves "to protect and to serve"? In *The Difference a Day Makes*, author Karen M. Jones suggests asking local police, fire, and emergency medical teams to host teens for a day as a way of demonstrating to the teens how their energy can be used to help others. After their day on the job, talk to the teens about what they learned about social conscience and service.

9

Support Local Arts and Culture

A good way to connect with our neighbors is to get involved, either as participants or audience, with the arts. Contacts made in these settings often carry over into decision-making forums. In *The Better World Handbook: From Good Intentions to Everyday Actions*, authors Brett Johnson, Brian Klocke, Ellis Jones, and Ross Haenfler write, "supporting local arts is often an inexpensive yet meaningful way to connect with members of your community and learn something new." They suggest the following:

- Go to museums and visit galleries featuring local arts.
- Go to concerts in the park.
- Give money to street musicians.
- Buy artwork from a local artist.
- Attend dance performances, local plays, and school productions.

10

Volunteer in New Ways

Volunteering in your neighborhood can have great rewards, like making your neighborhood safer; giving you access to support, resources and information; and engendering the good feelings that come with a sense of belonging to a community. Here are simple ways to get involved:

- Be a crossing guard.
- Participate in after-school activities.
- Coach a team.
- Serve on the school board (or board of another organization).
- Tutor kids.

- Be a mentor.
- Do a presentation about your career.
- Advise a student group.

11

Extend Dignity to the Corner

While Americans greatly value equality and equal opportunity, we are often confronted with disturbing inequalities: segregation, income disparities, differences in the quality of education, uneven availability of family and social support networks. Responding to these differences with democratic virtues — like embrace of diversity, empathy, fairness, and respect — is crucial to our efforts to see American democracy flourish.

Take a few minutes to think about people you don't know whom you encounter in your neighborhood. Is there ever a person holding a sign asking for financial help at the end of the exit ramp or at an intersection in or near your area? How do you respond to someone who appears to be homeless? Consider what you might say to each person you encounter. What might do if you were your best self? Resolve to do that the next time you see a someone new to you.

You might buy drinks and snack/granola bars for delivery persons during their busiest times of the year. You may resolve to introduce yourself to the person who cleans your office and find out where they're from and if they have family in the area. You might bake something and write a nice thank you note for the waste collectors in your neighborhood. Or you might decide that the next time someone asks you for money, you will stop what you're doing, turn and face them fully, ask how they're doing, and ask exactly how much money they're asking you for. You might then take a minute to decide what amount feels right for you while standing and facing them and seeing as much of them and their story as you can.

We don't all have the same sense of personal safety, so we won't all respond to similar situations in the same way. Even so, we recommend remembering that every person you encounter is, first and foremost, another person entitled to the same freedoms and liberties as we enjoy. We recommend responding to each person in a way that embodies your awareness of their inherent dignity, no matter their outward appearance. And if the first interactions don't go as you planned, keep experimenting until these interactions with strangers become a bright spot in your day.

12

Depolarize

The polarization of American politics has become a frequent topic in our news. Many researchers assert that this polarization is not only increasing but is often accompanied by antipathy and sometimes violence. And it is not just happening "somewhere else;" the effects of these divisions are being felt in many neighborhoods.

At the same time, organizations are emerging with the specific aim of bringing Americans together. One such organization is *Better Angels*, a volunteer-led, nationwide movement bringing Americans together across political divides to talk and work together. They use workshops, debates, and skills training in a variety of settings to help Americans with opposing views

DEMOCRATIC VALUES, VIRTUES, AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

America's democracy is founded on powerful ideas: We are all created equal. We have the right to life, freedom, and the opportunity to pursue our own happiness. At the same time, we are people in *united* states, trying to form a more perfect union and promote the welfare of all. American democracy can flourish only when citizens are united, at a deep level that transcends ideology, race, and class, with a shared spiritual and moral vision of what America should be.

Democracy is more than a form of government. It is a way of life that can be strengthened through spiritual practices — both those traditionally considered to be “inner work” and those that encourage active engagement with our neighbors and communities. The Practicing Democracy Guides give you specific ways to practice democracy at home, at work, on the Internet, and in other settings. The chart below is designed to show how the spiritual practices we've suggested, as well as others from your own experience, uphold democratic values and cultivate democratic virtues.

To uphold the democratic values of:				
Common good	Freedom Independence Liberty	<i>E Pluribus Unum</i> , “Out of many — one”	Equality Justice for all Rule of law	Patriotism Popular sovereignty
And to cultivate the democratic virtues of:				
Appreciation	Courage	Adaptability	Accountability	Assertiveness
Caring	Determination	Cooperation	Awareness	Consideration
Commitment	Honesty	Embracing diversity	Dignity	Cultivating wisdom
Creativity	Humility	Integrity	Fairness	Discernment
Empathy	Nobility	Mercy	Honor	Idealism
Generosity	Open- mindedness	Optimism	Initiative	Loyalty
Moderation	Purposefulness	Peacefulness	Love of learning	Responsibility, especially for civic engagement
Pursuit of excellence	Sacrifice	Searching for transcendence	Perseverance	Social conscience
Service	Self-discipline	Sincerity	Resilience	
Simplicity	Self-reliance		Respect	
Thankfulness	Trustworthiness		Steadfastness	
	Truthfulness		Strength	
We need spiritual practices of:				
Compassion	Joy	Connections	Forgiveness	Devotion
Gratitude	Openness	Love	Justice	Faith
Hope	Questing	Peace	Reverence	Listening
Hospitality	Transformation	Teachers	You	Meaning
Imagination	Yearning	Unity	Vision	Shadow
Kindness				

For more on American democratic values, virtues, and the language of democracy, visit PracticingDemocracy.net.



Additional Resources

1. For more resources related to the **Practicing Democracy Project**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/projects/practicing-democracy-project/overview
2. To download additional **Practicing Democracy Guides**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/projects/practicing-democracy-project
3. For more on **kindness**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/19/kindness
4. For more on **connections**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/7/connections
5. For more resources on **openness**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/24/openness
6. For more on **hospitality**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/15/hospitality
7. For more on **conversations**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/explorations/topics/view/28/conversations



A collaboration between Spirituality & Practice and the Fetzer Institute, The Practicing Democracy Project offers resources to strengthen and deepen the way we live out democracy. These spiritual practices help us do the work both in ourselves and in relationship with our neighbors and communities.

Some practices enhance or support the essential civic virtues and qualities of American democracy, such as respect and service. Others help us deal with problems and obstacles that depress democracy, such as anger and rigid thinking.

The Project offers spiritual practices and resources for all of us — from advocacy and civic organizations to congregations and companies.

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For more information on the Project, visit PracticingDemocracy.net.

