

Practicing Democracy at Home



“The human heart is the first home of democracy,” observes American author Terry Tempest Williams. “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?” In our actual homes, these questions can serve as guidelines for our relationships with our family and housemates. Here are some suggestions for household activities that promote democratic values.

1

Listen with Respect

The idea that all of us are created equal, as expressed in the Declaration of Independence, means that everyone deserves respect. We can practice being respectful at home first by listening to our own wisdom and the ideas of others and then by staying informed and expressing our opinions.

Listening to Yourself

The best place to start with respectful listening is with yourself. When you have a decision to make, take the time to sit in stillness and hold your questions about this decision in your heart, seeking guidance. As Jamal Rahman writes in *Sacred Laughter of the Sufis* (spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/view/26370/sacred-laughter-of-the-sufis), “With practice, you will learn to discern between the voice of your ego and the voice of your higher self.” Trust your own inner wisdom.

Listening to Others

When someone else is talking, cultivate an inner alignment with the sacred. Allow your heart to connect to the person who is talking. Try to maintain a sense of holding yourself and the speaker in a container of nonjudgment and peace. Set the intention to listen from your heart rather than from your mind. Hold the question in your heart, “What’s behind this statement?” throughout the conversation. As you hold this question, pay attention to what feelings, needs, and values are expressed. Listen for the speaker’s longings for herself, her loved ones, and the larger community.

2

Interview Family Members about Connections

The national motto of the United States is *E Pluribus Unum*, “Out of many — one.” A great way to experience what we as “many” have in common is to broaden your perspective. Start at home by interviewing your immediate and extended family members. As a way of listening to what is important to them, ask what organizations they belong to — clubs, religious organizations, sports associations, professional groups, etc. Then research each organization — what it does and where it operates — and come up with a way to note your family’s connections to different places across the nation and around the world through their organizational memberships. Also ask your family members what languages they studied and speak, where they have traveled nationally and internationally, and what their favorite foods are; this increases your awareness of your family’s connections to other cultures domestically and abroad. You can further increase your awareness

by going through your home and identifying who made each item, where it was made, and how it got from there to your home. These cultural connections can inform your social conscience, as well as how you interpret our national motto.

3

Don't Waste Food

A core value of American democracy is prioritizing the common good. This means caring about what is happening to those around us. About one in five American children go hungry at some point during the year, while as much as 40 percent of America's food supply gets thrown away every day.

The following ideas for meal prep and handling leftovers cultivate the democratic virtues of awareness, caring, and consideration of others:

- Before you begin preparing your meal, consider what use you can make of any food that isn't eaten. Ask yourself, "What good use can I make of any leftovers?"
- Watch the Jeremy Seifert documentary *Dive! Living Off American's Waste* (spiritualityandpractice.com/films/reviews/view/21359/dive-living-off-americas-waste) and/or Grant Baldwin's *Just Eat It: A Food Waste Story* (spiritualityandpractice.com/films/reviews/view/28337/just-eat-it-a-food-waste-story), and resolve to implement at least one tip from foodwastemovie.com/food-waste-tips/ or epa.gov/recycle/reducing-wasted-food-home.
- Offer the following prayer: O Bread of Life, give us the patience, grace, and reverence to stop wasting so much food. Help us to buy less, eat modest portions at meals, and savor all our food as we consume it. May we be always grateful for the blessings of strength and flourishing that come from our food. And may we recommit ourselves to finding ways to get food to those who are hungry.

4

Devote Hobbies to the Common Good

Many of us spend time at home doing hobbies. Consider how you can use your favorite hobbies to contribute to the common good. Research what charities do work related to your hobby. In *Spirit of Service: Your Daily Stimulus for Making a Difference* (spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/view/19444/spirit-of-service), Penelope Franklin suggests knitting for a cause by connecting with other knitters, meeting regularly, and donating your creations to the charities of your choice. Or you could make and sell puzzles to benefit the Special Olympics or teach chess to senior citizens. If your hobby is gardening or pet care, how can you apply what you know to a cause?

5

Pray the News

A free press fosters the open exchange of information, ideas, and opinions, thereby enabling citizens to make informed decisions. Still, many find that disturbing headlines or troubling events get them down, stifling both hope and commitment. Without denying difficult information, use its availability as both a reminder of the importance of American freedoms and a call to action.

Read, listen, and watch the news for people, situations, and events that call for prayers. Pray for them, asking for divine help and healing. Pray especially that people and places in crisis may experience compassion and peace and love. Pray also for knowledge of ways to help that are within your power.

6

Watch Your Favorite Shows Attentively

Entertainment shows often reveal admirable qualities in the actions of the characters. Before you watch a favorite comedy or drama, review the democratic values and virtues chart on the next-to-last page of this guide. Set the intention to watch attentively for those values and virtues. Try to connect them to the shows' characters. Pay attention to who causes you to react and why. If you can, involve the whole household in this activity. Take a few minutes afterwards to discuss your observations and to articulate insights you discover about how you can develop your democratic values and virtues with input from the popular culture.

7

Model Equality in Gender Roles

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," begins the Declaration of Independence. Today, it is generally agreed that "men" means all people, though that has not been a reality for many citizens in the history of our United States. Clearly the indigenous peoples of the Americas have not been treated equally. Nor have African Americans: slavery was not abolished until the 13th amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified in 1865. Women did not have the right to vote until the 19th amendment was ratified in 1920.

Practice democratic equality at home by modeling equality in gender roles. In *The Better World Handbook: From Good Intentions to Everyday Actions*, authors Ellis Jones, Ross Henfler, and Brian Klocke point out that dividing up household work and decision-making based on gender can prevent children from "becoming whole people who can express a broad range of emotions and succeed at a broad range of tasks." Accordingly, they recommend that parents:

- demonstrate that it's okay for everyone to show emotions;
- trade off on household tasks;
- show that everyone can make big decisions;
- teach all children how to cook, clean, do laundry, make basic, home repairs, mow the lawn, etc.;
- encourage children to value and engage in a variety of activities rather than gender-specific play.

8

Have Check-ins at Dinner

Free speech is valued in a democracy, and it can be learned at your own dinner table. Celeste Headlee, radio host and author of *We Need to Talk* (spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/view/28437/we-need-to-talk), recommends truly considering each other in our conversations. She cites research recommendations from the Greater Good Science Center at UC-Berkeley that could be put to good use during dinner time. First, listen actively to who's

speaking. It helps to be fully present and pay attention to the speaker's face. Listen without interrupting, especially to dissenting opinions, and make sure each person has a chance to fully express themselves. Acknowledge the speaker's emotional experience, especially when you can share joy. Look for commonalities. And when you don't understand why the speaker is acting and feeling a certain way, ask for more information by saying something like, "Tell me more about what happened," or "Tell me more about why you think/feel that." Listen and respond with compassion, especially when you disagree.

When you find yourself on different sides of an issue from another person at the table, Kay Lindahl, author of *The Sacred Art of Listening* (spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/view/3913/the-sacred-art-of-listening), suggests listening without defending your position, and responding with something like, "I'll consider what you said," or "That's an interesting way to think about it," or "I can see how much this means to you." Practicing democratic conversations at the dinner table is good preparation for difficult conversations outside of your home.

9

Hold Family Councils

The U.S. Constitution's first sentence begins with "We the people" and stipulates that an important part of its purpose is to promote "the general welfare" of the people of the United States. The signers of the Declaration of Independence demonstrated the strength of their commitment to the general welfare of the people by mutually pledging to each other their lives, fortunes, and honor.

As activist Roberto Vargas asserts in *Family Activism: Empowering Your Community Beginning with Family and Friends* (spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/view/18396/family-activism), promoting the general welfare often begins with family, specifically with family councils. Vargas defines family councils as "special meetings organized to address family needs and advance the tradition of being familia [family], caring for each other and our community." A family council should be a time for all household members to come together for genuine dialogue, open and candid conversation where everyone speaks and is heard. Family councils can be held to hear how everything is going, to share what's important, to solve individual and family problems, to define a family mission, to set personal and family goals, and to make important decisions.

To get started holding your Family Councils:

- Set a schedule for holding family councils consistently — at least weekly, if possible.
- For each meeting, designate a facilitator and a recorder/note taker, define the purpose of the meeting, and be clear about the process for holding the meeting. Rotate roles among family members and be open to different ways of holding the meeting.
- Begin and end each meeting with a loving affirmation and prayer or a moment of meditative silence.
- Give every family member the chance to speak and to feel heard.
- Take time to assess how well things are working for family members in general. Also, evaluate the effectiveness of how the family council meetings are going.
- Write down the results of the council meeting, noting the decisions, commitments, etc.

10

Reflect on Your Day

Whether you are concerned for your personal problems or for the problems of American society, the Examen prayer practice will help you develop your personal and social conscience. Take 5–20 minutes for this end-of-day reflection.

Here are the steps:

- Consider how, where, and when you sensed the presence of the Divine during the day.
- Identify what you are grateful for, and express that gratitude.
- Review your habits, patterns, and behavior for consistency with your values (both your personal values and American democratic values), beliefs, and understanding of Divine will;
- Respond to the day and your reflection on it by seeking forgiveness, affirming actions you want to continue, and deciding to change other behavior.

11

Create an Ethical Will

It's likely that how you define patriotism differs from how your grandparents did. Take a moment to consider what democratic values your grandparents or other elders conveyed to you, even if you didn't agree with all their views. Passing on your values is important to the democratic virtue of cultivating wisdom.

In *One Good Work at a Time* (spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/view/15582/one-good-work-at-a-time), author Frances Sheridan Goulart suggests we follow the example from the story of Jacob in Genesis 49. Jacob gathers his sons around him to bless them and to share the wisdom of his life. We can do likewise by creating an ethical will (via writing, audio recording, or video recording) to pass on our beliefs, hopes, wishes, and life lessons to our children and their children (with a copy for each). You may also share copies with nieces and nephews, godchildren, or the children of special friends. Tips for creating your ethical will are available online or in books like *Ethical Wills: Putting Your Values on Paper* (spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/view/3886/ethical-wills) by Barry K. Baines.

12

Open to Others

The freedoms and rights stipulated in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution necessitate that we listen to points of view that differ from ours. In *The Zen of Listening: Mindful Communication in the Age of Distraction* (spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/view/2558/the-zen-of-listening), Rebecca Shafir offers practices for opening to others with whom we may differ:

- Two or three times a week, purposely open your mind to one of your not-so-favorite things, like your least favorite sport or not-so-favorite people. Be fully present with that thing or person, watching, experiencing, and listening from the standpoint that you have something to learn.

- For every activity or person you dislike, identify one thing you like or respect. Then when you are engaged in that activity or are interacting with that person, acknowledge to yourself your negative thoughts or feelings while focusing on that one thing you like or respect.
- Find a friend who disagrees with you about a topic. Take turns developing her argument and defending her viewpoint. Then notice if your position has changed and whether you're more open to others' views.

13

Attend an American Citizenship Ceremony

A great way to acknowledge our love for and appreciation of our country, as well as the freedoms and liberties we enjoy as its citizens, is to attend an American citizenship ceremony. In *Spirit of Service: Your Daily Stimulus for Making a Difference* (spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/view/19444/spirit-of-service), author Christian Millman suggests attending a citizenship ceremony to build a feeling of connection with your fellow citizens, especially those who differ from you in their first language, ethnicity, and culture.

Find upcoming dates of American citizenship ceremonies in your local paper or county courthouse. Attend the ceremony. If there is an opportunity to do so, stay to meet some of your new fellow Americans. Ask them about their stories — what made them leave their birth country? How did they decide to become citizens?

14

Travel with a Purpose

In *Faithful Citizenship*, writer Greg Garrett posits that when our Founding Fathers, as neo-classical thinkers, talked about the pursuit of happiness, they were talking about virtue and service to others. Accordingly, we suggest that when it comes time for you, your family, or your housemates to go in pursuit of happiness with a vacation, you plan one that is meaningful and purposeful rather than simply seeking pleasure or material goods. Here are some ideas that will help your household connect to America and its citizens while traveling.

Want to immerse yourself in a local experience? Find out what the area is known for and see if there are tours that give you a taste of what it's like to live there. In New York City, you might go on walking tours of famous neighborhoods. A fishing boat excursion would be fun in a coastal town. When visiting a bar or a popular café, talk with the locals about what they like best about where they live, locally and nationally.

Want a greater understanding of an area's history? Want to learn about art, architecture, and civics? Try visiting city halls. Did you know that Philadelphia's City Hall was begun in 1871 and is the largest municipal building in the U.S., containing 14.5 acres of floor space, and offers a panoramic view of the city? Or that New York's City Hall is one of the oldest in the U.S.? Or that until recent years, Los Angeles City Hall was the tallest building in L.A.?

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/program-plans
3. For more on **listening**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/listening/spiritual-practices
4. For a fuller version of an **examen practice**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/search/?q=examen
Follow along to a **guided audio** examen on sites like pray-as-you-go.org/index.php?id=131
5. For a current **praying-the-news blog**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/blogs/posts/praying-the-news
6. For more on **conversations**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/explorations/topics/view/28/conversations
7. For more on **hospitality**, visit: spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/15/hospitality



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.

This Practicing Democracy Guide is copyright ©2019 by Spirituality & Practice ([SpiritualityandPractice.com](https://spiritualityandpractice.com)), a multifaith website presenting resources for spiritual journeys as part of the Practicing Democracy Project. The guide was researched and written by Habib Todd Boerger, a 2018–2019 Practicing Democracy Fellow. Democratic values, virtues, and spiritual practices chart researched and created by Habib Todd Boerger.

Cover photo credits: iStockPhoto.com

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

