

The Politics of the Brokenhearted

On Holding the Tensions of Democracy

PARKER J. PALMER



ESSAYS ON **DEEPENING THE AMERICAN DREAM**
A SERIES SPONSORED BY THE FETZER INSTITUTE

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Printed in the United States of America

Foreword

DURING THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES, many observers of our culture have suggested that faith in the American dream is dying, that a collective vision of hope for the future is fading from view. It has taken a series of national crises—placing us all in direct awareness of our own vulnerability and mortality—to awaken us to the truth that the American dream is not dying, but deepening. Recognition of this truth has never been more essential as we rise to meet the challenges of our time with compassion and wisdom.

The Fetzer Institute’s Deepening the American Dream essay series explores the relationship between the inner life of spirit and the outer life of service. These essays describe some of the ways in which tending to this relationship (in communities and nations as well as ourselves) can, invariably, lead to more compassionate and effective action in the world. What’s more, each essay—in its own way—illuminates essential qualities to help us live with the authenticity and grace demanded by our times.

In the 1930s, the poet Langston Hughes observed that the origin of a deeper American Dream is not to be found in some distant, abstract idea but very near, in the stories of our own lives. His insight rings true to this day:

*An ever-living seed,
Its dream
Lies deep in the heart of me.*

The deepening we seek can be found in our own hearts, if only we have the courage to uncover and engage what is there.

Robert F. Lehman
Fetzer Institute Board Chair

Gratitude

WRITING THIS ESSAY was as important to me personally as professionally, coinciding as it did with a time of heartbreak in my own life. So my gratitude to the people who helped both the essay and its author come through is especially deep and abiding.

Sharon Palmer lovingly sustained my living and my writing through several very difficult months. Sheryl Fullerton and Mark Nepo, my editors on this project, protected space for me to heal and, when I was able to work, knew the exact balance of affirmation and challenge I needed. Rick Jackson, with his compassionate political sensibilities, helped me keep reaching out toward the life of the world. Marcy Jackson, with her deep feel for the inner life, helped me keep reaching in toward the heart's imperatives. She also shared an early draft with several mutual friends—Robin Gaphni, John Morefield, and Kathy Morefield—whose responses were very helpful.

When the heart breaks, it takes only one soul-friend to help it break open instead of apart. I dedicate this essay to that kind of friendship, that kind of love.

The Politics of
the Brokenhearted

“The human heart is the first home of democracy.”

—Terry Tempest Williams¹

I WRITE AT A HEARTBREAKING MOMENT in American history. This “one nation, indivisible” is deeply divided along political, economic, racial, and religious lines. And despite our historic dream of being “a light unto the nations,” the gaps between us and our global neighbors continue to grow more deadly. The conflicts and contradictions of twenty-first-century life are breaking the American heart and threatening to compromise our democratic values.

We think of heartbreak as a personal, not a political, condition. But I believe that heartbreak offers a powerful lens through which to examine the well-being of the body politic. I want to use that lens to examine the way we hold tensions in politics as well as private life—a critical connection in a democracy that rises or falls on our individual and collective capacity to respond to conflict in a life-giving, not death-dealing way.

The conflicts and contradictions of twenty-first-century life are breaking the American heart and threatening to compromise our democratic values.

The image of a broken heart may seem too sentimental for politics, yet diagnosing, addressing, and sometimes manipulating heartbreak has long been implicit in realpolitik. The “values vote” that helped swing the 2004 presidential election seemed to take the media by surprise. But politicians have long understood that advocacy related to the issues that break people’s hearts—such as abortion, marriage and the family, patriotism, religion in public life, and fear of many sorts, not least of terrorism—always elicits votes. Indeed, railing against the sources of heartbreak, real or imaginary, keeps winning elections even when the rhetoric consistently outstrips legislative results. The word *heartbreak* may be infrequent in the literature of political science, but the human reality it points to is an engine of political life.

There are at least two ways to picture a broken heart, using heart in its original meaning not merely as the seat of the emotions but as the core of our sense of self. The conventional image, of course, is that of a heart broken by unbearable tension into a thousand shards—shards that sometimes become shrapnel aimed at the source of our pain. Every day, untold numbers of people

try to “pick up the pieces,” some of them taking grim satisfaction in the way the heart’s explosion has injured their enemies. Here the broken heart is an unresolved wound that we too often inflict on others.

But there is another way to visualize what a broken heart might mean. Imagine that small, clenched fist of a heart “broken open” into largeness of life, into greater capacity to hold one’s own and the world’s pain and joy. This, too, happens every day. Who among us has not seen evidence, in our own or other people’s lives, that compassion and grace can be the fruits of great suffering? Here heartbreak becomes a source of healing, enlarging our empathy and extending our ability to reach out.

Imagine that small, clenched fist of a heart “broken open” into largeness of life, into greater capacity to hold one’s own and the world’s pain and joy.

Broken-open hearts are in short supply these days, at least in politics. Formed—or deformed—by an impatient and control-obsessed culture, many of us do not hold social and political tensions in ways that open us to the world. Instead, we shut our hearts down, either withdrawing into fearful isolation or angrily lashing out at the alien “other:” the alien at home becomes unpatriotic, the alien abroad, an enemy. Heartbroken and heavily armed, we act in ways that diminish democracy and make the world an even more dangerous place.

The capacity to hold tensions creatively is the key to much that matters—from a life lived in love to a democracy worthy of the name to even the most modest movement toward peace between nations. So those of us who care about such things must work to root out the seeds of violence in our culture, including its impatience and its incessant drive toward control. And since culture is a human creation, whose deformations begin not “out there” but in our inner lives, we can transform our culture only as we are inwardly transformed.

As long as we are mortal creatures who love other mortals, heartbreak will be a staple of our lives. And all heartbreak, personal and political, will confront us with the same choice. Will we hold our hearts open and keep trying to love, even as love makes us more vulnerable to the losses that break our hearts? Or will we shut down or lash out, refusing to risk love again and seeking refuge in withdrawal or hostility?

In personal life and politics, one thing is clear: when the heart breaks in ways that lead us to retreat or attack, we always give death dominion.

Habits of the Heart

The image of a heart “broken open” into largeness of life by contradiction and tension is not merely my private poetic fancy. It is a central strand of three wisdom traditions that are deep-woven into the fabric of American life: Judaism, Christianity, and secular humanism.

For Jews, learning to live openheartedly in the face of immense and devastating heartbreak is a historical and spiritual imperative. So it is no surprise that Jewish teaching includes frequent reminders of the importance of a broken-open heart.

Take, for example, this remarkable Hasidic tale. A disciple asks the rebbe, “Why does Torah tell us to ‘place these words *upon* your hearts’? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words *in* our hearts?”

The rebbe answers, “It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in.”²

In Christian tradition, the broken-open heart is virtually indistinguishable from the image of the cross. It was on the cross that God’s heart was broken for the sake of humankind, broken open into a love that Christ’s followers are called to emulate. In fact, the cross as a symbolic form embodies the notion that tension—“excruciating” tension—can pull the heart open. The arms of the cross stretch out four ways, pulling against each other left and right, up and down. But those arms converge in a center, a heart, that is pulled open by the tension of opposition so we can pass through it into the fullness of life.

Secular humanism does not speak explicitly of the broken-open heart, but the essence of the idea is laced through that ancient and honorable tradition. Humanism advocates that scholars and citizens alike develop a “habit of the heart” (to use de Tocqueville’s famous phrase) that allows them to hold the tension of opposites without falling apart. So a “liberal” education—that is, the education befitting a free person—emphasizes the ability to comprehend all sides of an issue, to be comfortable with complexity and ambiguity, to honor paradox in thought, speech, and action. Liberally educated people know how to let the tension of opposites open them to new insight, or so the theory goes.

Given the power of these three traditions in shaping the American dream, it is no wonder that division, conflict, and tension, far from being the enemies of democracy, are among its primary reasons for being. Democracy at its best is both a celebration and a demonstration of the benefits of creative conflict; democratic institutions are designed as looms strong enough to hold the political tensions that accompany our efforts to weave the fabric of a common life. The differences that emerge whenever two or three are gathered are the very stuff of our political system, in which the freedom to express diverse values and viewpoints is valued, encouraged, and protected. Only in a totalitarian state, where the “dangerous other” is silenced or driven underground, are differences regarded as intolerable.

But the litmus test for a democracy is not merely whether it allows our differences to be on display: we must be willing to engage each other around those differences. Democracy depends on the unwavering trust of its citizens and leaders that the free play of conflicting views will open us to a larger and truer view of the world—its needs, its resources, and its potentials—eventually issuing in political decisions that serve the common good.

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When we hold that trust and act on it by participating in the democratic process with commitment and goodwill, we not only live up to our own ideals but also model hope to the rest of the world. Today, too many American citizens, and some of our leaders, seem to have lost that trust—and with it our democratic capacity to debate real issues and envision new possibilities with tenacity, intelligence, and hope.

Later I will explore the national and global consequences of our failure to hold tension creatively. But because the concept of “tension holding” is elusive and “the nation” and “the world” are near-impossible abstractions, I want first to offer some small-scale examples from organizational life, personal relationships, and solitude. In the recognizable detail of everyday experience, I hope to show that the way we hold tension matters, drawing insights from our private lives that can illuminate our public life.

On Holding Tension

We need not wander far from home to examine the real-life consequences of different ways of holding tension. Talk, for example, with the mother or father of a teenager!

Parents often experience a tension between their hopes for a child and what is happening in that child's life. When they fail to hold the tension between those poles, they are tugged one way or the other, either clinging to an idealized fantasy of who "their baby" is or rejecting this "thorn in their side" with bitter cynicism. Both ways of responding reflect a fractured heart, and both are death-dealing for parent and child alike.

But many parents will testify that when they hold that tension in a way that opens their hearts, they serve their children well—and more: they themselves become adults who are more open, more knowing, and more compassionate. The child who grows up in the force field that lies between the paradoxical poles of hopeful vision and hard reality has a chance to thrive, and the parent who holds the paradox thrives along with the child.

E. F. Schumacher found words to describe this force field when he wrote about the "divergent problems" that are familiar to all who care for the young:

Through all our lives we are faced with the task of reconciling opposites which, in logical thought, cannot be reconciled. . . . How can one reconcile the demands of freedom and discipline in education? Countless mothers and teachers, in fact, do it, but no one can write down a solution. They do it by bringing into the situation a force that belongs to a higher level where opposites are transcended—the power of love. . . . Divergent problems, as it were, force us to strain ourselves to a level above ourselves; they demand, and thus provoke the supply of forces from a higher level, thus bringing love, beauty, goodness and truth into our lives.³

That the way we hold tension matters can be seen not only in one-on-one relationships but in the dynamics of groups and organizations as well. Take, for example, the process by which we make collective decisions.

We are at a meeting where a choice must be made between alternative paths of action, and it soon becomes clear that we cannot agree on what to do. As we listen to viewpoints that seem irreconcilable, we get fidgety and frustrated. Uncomfortable with holding the tension and wanting to "get on with it," we "call the question" and take a vote, letting raw numbers decide what course the group should take.

What I have just described is, of course, majority-rule decision making. The process appears to be straightforward, clean, and efficient, all of which appeals to an impatient, control-obsessed culture. But making decisions this way allows and even encourages us to resolve tensions prematurely, before they have had a chance to open us to something new, to possibilities that are excluded by or hidden within the positions of the contending parties.

This might not be the case if we were willing to let the debate “drag on”—the telling image we use for any disagreement that persists for more than five or ten minutes! But in our culture, time is always deemed scarce, and debate itself can make time feel even scarcer, especially when things get acrimonious. The soon-to-be-losers, feeling wounded, look around for a quick escape, while the winners are eager to secure their victory as swiftly as they can. Unable or unwilling to hold the tension, we “resolve” it with a vote.

Majority-rule decision making may appear to be straightforward, clean, and efficient, but appearances can be deceptive. We persistently ignore the radical inefficiency of creating an alienated minority of losers who sometimes leave the meeting determined to conduct a long-term guerrilla war to undermine the decision we thought we had made. Majority rule may not resolve the tension but merely drive it underground.

The democratic alternative to majority rule is consensus, a process often misunderstood even by people who claim to use it.⁴ Consensus does not mean that we can make a decision only when everyone involved is equally enthusiastic about a course of action; if it did, very few decisions would have been made this way! Consensus means that we can make a decision only when no one in the group feels a deep need to oppose it, usually on the grounds of conscience.

Of course, that definition does not reassure the skeptics! Their minds immediately turn to the many times they have suffered the professional naysayers, people who seem to object to the group’s direction no matter what it is. “How in heaven’s name can consensus work,” ask the critics, “when it is a virtual law of group life that someone will insist on saying no?”

My answer comes from decades of watching consensus at work: naysayers are, for the most part, made and not born that way. (I make an exception for the handful of people who have been sent here by Beelzebub to destroy Western civilization as we know and love it. And we all know who they are . . .) Typically, naysayers are people who have been deformed by a lifetime of “being on the wrong side” in situations where the majority always has its way. As members of a

disempowered minority, they have learned to seize the only power they possess, the power of being a hair shirt.

But give the naysayers legitimate power, as they have in consensual decision making, and—not instantly, but soon enough—they are likely to become more open in their listening and in their speaking. The simple fact that now they cannot be overpowered but have the power to stop the group in its tracks creates a new consciousness in them about the right uses of power.

The most important difference between consensual decision making and majority rule lies in the different “habits of the heart” the two processes engender in us, habits of listening and speaking that reflect different ways of dealing with tension.

When we make decisions by majority rule, I listen to you first to determine whether we are on the same side. If I sense that we are not, I start listening for everything that is misguided, weak, or incorrect in what you have to say. Then I rise to call attention to your wrongheadedness while proposing my “superior” solution. Majority rule often makes us into adversarial listeners and speakers, thus ratcheting up the tension and making it less bearable.

But in consensual decision making, we cannot proceed as long as anyone in the room feels a deep need to object. Now I listen more openly to what you have to say—listen for what I can make common cause with and for what I might learn from—our differences—because I know there is no way forward unless we move together. Now, when I rise to speak, I am much more likely to seek shared understanding that might bridge our positions than to try to strike your viewpoint down. Consensus teaches us to be collaborative listeners and speakers who hold tension in a generative way.

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When we make decisions by consensus, we are not allowed to “resolve” the tension of conflicting viewpoints prematurely. Instead, we are required to hold it until it has a chance to break us open to a synthesis that embraces the thesis and antithesis. Doing so requires patience, of course, but the rewards of patience are considerable. Not only are we more likely to be drawn toward a resolution superior to anything anyone had envisioned at the outset, but in the process we

have deepened our sense of community instead of breaking into the warring fragments that majority rule can breed.

Of course, results come more slowly when we are compelled to hold the tension, and the critics of consensus often claim that there are issues of such practical or moral urgency that holding the tension before we act is not only inefficient but irresponsible. That may be true on occasion, but not always.

Consider the story of John Woolman (1720–1772), a Quaker who lived in colonial New Jersey. His story is of special interest because Quakers—who believe that majority rule is a form of violence—have always made decisions by consensus, and the decision at stake in Woolman’s story was one of immense moral urgency.⁵

A tailor by trade, Woolman lived among Quaker farmers and merchants whose religious beliefs held all human beings equal in the eyes of God but whose affluence depended heavily on slave labor. Woolman received “a revelation from God” that slavery was a moral abomination and that Quakers should set their slaves free. For twenty years, at great personal cost, Woolman devoted himself to sharing this revelation with members of his religious community, “walking his talk” with every step. When he visited a remote farmhouse to speak of his conviction, he would fast rather than eat a meal prepared or served by slaves. When he discovered that he had inadvertently benefited from a slave’s labor, he would insist on paying that person.

Woolman’s message was not always well received by his fellow Quakers, who were, and are, as adept as anyone at contradicting their own beliefs. In the words of a self-satirizing Quaker quip, “We came to this country to do good and ended up doing well.” Woolman’s message, if embraced, would require the comfortable Quaker gentry to make a considerable financial sacrifice.

John Woolman held a terrible tension as he traveled from town to town, farm to farm, meeting to meeting, speaking his truth and standing in the gap between the Quaker vision of “that of God in every person” and the reality of Quaker slaveholding. But hold the tension he did, for two decades, until the Quaker community reached consensus that it was called to free all of its slaves.

On one level, this is the story of a Christian community that embraced evil and clung to it far too long. Yet the Quakers were the first religious community in this country to free their slaves, fully eighty years before the Civil War. In 1783, the Quaker community petitioned the Congress of the United States to correct the “complicated evils” and “unrighteous commerce” created by the

enslavement of human beings. And from 1827 onward, Quakers played a key role in developing the Underground Railroad.

Quakers took a stand against slavery early in American history partly because one man, John Woolman, was willing and able to hold the tension between belief and practice. But it is important to note that the entire Quaker community was willing and able to hold that tension until its members were opened to a way of life congruent with their deepest convictions. They refused to resolve the tension prematurely either by throwing Woolman out or by taking a vote and allowing the slavery-approving majority to have its way. Instead, they allowed the tension between vision and reality to break their individual and collective hearts open to justice, truth, and love.

I recognize the irony of praising consensus as a path of creative tension holding in this meditation on democratic politics. All democracies decide critical questions by majority rule, and I entertain no fantasy that we could, for example, choose a president by consensus, as desirable as that might be!

But irony can yield to insight in at least two ways. First, if more of us had experience with consensual decision making in small-scale organizations where the process is practicable—in the places that Edmund Burke called the “little platoons” that ready us for a life-giving relationship to the larger society—more of us would have the habit of the heart necessary to hold tensions creatively in the public sphere.

Second, majority-rule decision making would move toward consensus if we took the idea of *deliberative* democracy more seriously and cultivated the patience required for an ongoing and authentic public debate about our real problems. When voting in a democracy is preceded by extended and intelligent public discourse, we approximate the tension-holding virtues of consensus.

Surely Abraham Lincoln had these virtues in mind when he delivered his first inaugural address in 1861, saying, in reference to the pending issues of slavery and secession, “My countrymen, . . . think calmly and well upon this whole subject. Nothing valuable can be lost by taking time. If there be an object to hurry any of you, in hot haste, to a step which you would never take deliberately, that object will be frustrated by taking time; but no good object can be frustrated by it.”⁶

America's Heartbreak

On September 11, 2001, America received a huge blow to its collective heart. I do not mean the heart of our economy, as symbolized by the World Trade Center towers. I do not mean the heart of our military might, as symbolized by the Pentagon. I mean the heart of our heart, the core of our national identity, our deepest sensibilities about who we are and who we aspire to be as a nation among others.

Because heartbreak knows no national boundaries—and because many nations know heartbreak more intimately than we do—there were days and weeks after September 11 when much of the rest of the world responded to us not as a “nation at war” but as friends and neighbors of a family that had suffered a great loss. People in far-off lands, most of them poorer than we and some of them victims of American greed, revealed their deep empathy by offering the equivalent of flowers or food or a friendly visit, all those small but meaningful acts of kindness that can help a grieving family make it through.

As the brokenness of the American heart cracked open our facade of wealth and power and brought down our often arrogant, unfeeling, and self-serving way of standing like a Colossus above the world's pain, many of us were deeply touched to hear people around the world saying, “Today, I too am an American.” It was a moment of national vulnerability that offered a historic opportunity to keep the heart open, to ask how to return the gifts of love we had received, even as we explored ways to bring our attackers to justice.

Had we held the tension of our heartbreak longer, we might have begun to understand that the terror Americans felt on September 11, 2001, is the daily fare of many people in many places, including some here at home. That insight might have deepened our capacity for global empathy, empathy for the alien “other.” That empathy, in turn, might have helped us become a more compassionate member of the international community, altering some American policies and practices that contribute to the terror felt daily by people in distant lands. And those actions might have made the world a safer place for everyone, including us.

Had we held the tension longer, we might have been opened to the kinds of actions proposed by William Sloane Coffin, whose proposal does not ignore the evil of September 11 but recognizes that the way we respond to evil helps

determine how far evil will spread. It is a proposal that holds the tension between love and justice in a life-giving way:

We will respond, but not in kind. We will not seek to avenge the death of innocent Americans by the death of innocent victims elsewhere, lest we become what we abhor. We refuse to ratchet up the cycle of violence that brings only ever more death, destruction and deprivation. What we will do is build coalitions with other nations. We will share intelligence, freeze assets, and engage in forceful extradition of terrorists if internationally sanctioned. [We will] do all in [our] power to see justice done, but by the force of law only, never the law of force.⁷

But as a people and as a nation-state, we were unable to hold the tensions of September 11 for long. Instead of being opened to the possibilities Coffin names, the American heart soon closed down like a fist and struck back. We succumbed to that ancient animal instinct called “fight or flight,” unable to let the tension created by the September 11 attacks open us to a more life-giving response. And our historic opportunity was lost.

Driven by biological and political “imperatives,” we did what nation-states always do when their hearts are broken: we declared war on those who injured us—or, more precisely, on whoever could be made to represent them. And we did so unilaterally, rejecting the international voices that were saying, “Let us take counsel together and find the most life-giving response.” We shut down and lashed out, with predictable results: our fears have deepened, and the dangers we face have multiplied.

The shrapnel of the broken American heart has done great damage around the world, a world where one no longer hears people saying, “Today, I too am an American.” Now more than ever in my lifetime, the world’s view of America is one of unfettered greed, cruelty, and the arrogance of power, fueled by a studied ignorance of other people’s realities, to say nothing of our own. Now more than ever in my lifetime, some of our key democratic values are threatened. Our actions since September 11 have, arguably, increased the pool of potential terrorists ready to bring their barbarism to our shores and strengthened the climate of support abroad for such heinous acts.

The shrapnel of the broken American heart has done great damage around the world . . .

Could we have chosen differently? Could we have held the tension created by September 11 in a way that might have broken the American heart open to greater capacity rather than creating such widespread devastation? If you buy the notion that biological and political imperatives are irresistible and immutable, the answer is no: we did what nation-states always do and always will do, given the power to do it. But if you cannot abandon the possibility that human beings, who created cultures and nation-states, are moral agents and spiritual beings who have freedom and the power of choice, then the answer has to be yes.

Could we have held the tension created by September 11 in a way that might have broken the American heart open to greater capacity rather than creating such widespread devastation?

I believe that we could have held the tensions of a post-September 11 world more creatively, not ignoring the crimes committed against us but responding to them in a more life-giving way. If we are willing and able to understand the dynamics of the broken-open heart, we might yet learn to be in the world that way.

But the heart does not break into receptivity merely because one wishes it would. It opens only as we do the inner work necessary to learn how to hold life's tensions—in trust that the heart can be broken open into largeness—holding our tensions honestly, gently, patiently, and persistently, seeking always to give and receive the kind of love that alone makes this kind of “heartbreak” possible.

Learning to hold tensions in a life-giving way is a cultural, not a political, project; only a totalitarian state attempts to dictate people's inner lives, an attempt that always fails. The inner work we need to do is properly the purview of individuals, families, religious communities, voluntary associations, and educational institutions—and the best of them are constantly at work teaching openheartedness.

But this does not mean that the nation has no role. As Jacob Needleman has written, “One of the great purposes of the American nation is to shelter and guard the rights of all men and women to seek the conditions and the companions necessary for the inner search.”⁶ In the spirit of that observation, I want to keep weaving together the personal and political meanings of the broken-open heart.

Practices to Open the Heart

Rainer Maria Rilke has a poem that does more justice to the mystery of the heart broken open than any brief assemblage of words I know. Remarkably, it even suggests a path that can take us from destructive to creative heartbreak. I want to explore the first and the last of its four stanzas:

*As once the wingèd energy of delight
carried you over childhood's dark abysses,
now beyond your own life build the great
arch of unimagined bridges.*

...

*Take your practiced powers and stretch them out
until they span the chasm between two
contradictions. . . . For the god
wants to know himself in you.⁹*

Rilke begins in childhood, reminding us of our inborn capacity to hold tensions creatively. Look carefully at the very young, and you find evidence that human beings arrive on earth with great elasticity of heart. Young children often demonstrate astonishing resilience in the face of hardship, even horror, refusing to let those “dark abysses” frighten them away from life but persisting in living and loving. As children, we are so large with heart that we can deal with heartbreak without being destroyed, carried across life’s tragic gaps by “the wingèd energy of delight,” the energy of love itself.

... human beings arrive on earth with great elasticity
of heart ...

But as we move toward adulthood, we start losing the child’s capacity for transcendence. As the adult heart becomes tighter, more muscular, more fearful and self-defended, the experiences that break our hearts are more likely to damage us and may turn us into people who damage others. So Rilke, who begins by describing the child’s gift of an open heart, turns to his adult readers with a challenging exhortation: “now beyond your own life build the great / arch of unimagined bridges. . . . Take your practiced powers and stretch them out / until they span the chasm between two / contradictions.”

How better to describe a heart broken open, not apart, than to say that it spans “the chasm between two contradictions”—the contradiction, for example, between loving things that are mortal all the while knowing that we will lose the things we love? And how better to describe the result of doing so than to say that such love reaches “beyond your own life” to build “unimagined bridges” to the world? Here is Rilke’s affirmation that when we are willing and able to hold tension in a heart-opening way, we will have a great contribution to make to the common good.

Poems are not meant to serve as how-to-do-it manuals. And yet this poem includes a compelling clue about what is required of us if our hearts are to be broken open, not apart: “Take your practiced powers and stretch them out.” Here Rilke speaks, I think, of what all of the wisdom traditions call spiritual “disciplines,” a word that means discipling ourselves to the deepest truths of the human heart.

... when we are willing and able to hold tension in a heart-opening way, we will have a great contribution to make to the common good ...

In fact, the wisdom traditions advocate spiritual disciplines for the same reason Rilke does: “For the god wants to know himself in you.” If we want to bring the sacred within us into the world, allowing an even larger sacredness to flow through us, we cannot do it by becoming disciples of the ego, the intellect, the emotions, or the will. The holiest thing we have to offer the world is a broken-open heart, emptied of fear and vengeance, filled with forgiveness and a willingness to take the risks of love. And we can offer our hearts only by becoming disciples of the heart’s own imperatives.

What are the spiritual disciplines? Unfortunately, I am not someone who could credibly write a handbook of spiritual practices! My own spiritual path has been less about intentional practices than about falling down, getting up, and then doing it all over again. But along the way, I have learned three things about what it takes to get up again and perhaps about falling down a little less often. I offer them here as one person’s version of the “practiced powers” that Rilke exhorts us to call on.

First, when my heart breaks and I am filled with self-pity and hopeless longing that things might somehow be different, I must look at myself in the

clearest possible mirror, *trying to penetrate the illusions about myself and the world that have taken me into this pain*. Those illusions, however comforting they once were, have now become death-dealing. As long as I cling to them or try to revive them, my heartbreak will not give me, or anyone else, life.

While writing this essay, I have been dealing with some personal heartbreak. The details are commonplace, familiar to anyone who draws breath, especially to those of a certain age: the deaths of people I love, the transitory nature of the work to which I have devoted myself for forty years, and the impossibility of realizing some of my dreams for my life.

As I try to penetrate the illusions that lie behind my heartbreak, one has become clear: I have allowed myself to hold the unconscious conviction that the people I love, the work I care about, and I myself will not die and that I can therefore have life as I want it, on my own terms. Of course, I know this is not true, since it defies all the laws of nature and their spiritual equivalents. So my deeper illusion must be that God and nature will make an exception to their laws for me!

It is very hard to admit illusions; they are so embarrassing in the light of day. I have published many words about “penetrating illusions and touching reality,” and people have told me that they find my words helpful. But I have been counseling others away from a trap that I was in without knowing it. Perhaps this is an example of the work of the “wounded healer,” the kind of counsel that comes from someone who understands a wound well because he or she has it. As much as I appreciate that possibility, I still find my illusions embarrassing. And yet only by moving into and through them can I find life on the other side.

National illusions are also embarrassing. We deploy our military might in an effort to liberate a distant land from a dictator who committed unspeakable atrocities against his people. But our effort, as it turns out, was guided by a long list of illusions: that the dictator possessed weapons that he would unleash against us; that the people under his control would welcome us as liberators and collaborate fully in the rebuilding of their nation; that the best model for that rebuilding is democracy, American-style; that we are always good and our enemies are always bad, as defined, for example, by the fact that we would never torture or humiliate prisoners the way the dictator did.

Then we commit war crimes against some of the people we jail in the course of our occupation. This is so embarrassing that we try to justify it as the actions of a few “bad apples,” ignoring the fact that their actions were supported

not only by the worship of violence inherent in the spirit of war but also by specific directives (or indirectives) that originated in high places. Our national heartbreak will start turning from destructive to creative only as we are able to face into our illusions about ourselves and the world, as painful as that will be, rejecting the political strategy that tars those who do so as “unpatriotic.”

Our national heartbreak will start turning from destructive to creative only as we are able to face into our illusions about ourselves and the world . . .

There is a second “practiced power” that we, or at least I, need to keep working on. When I touch the painful truth behind my illusions, I must abandon all my clever ways of trying to ignore, flee from, or numb myself against my suffering. *Instead, I must allow myself to go to the center of my pain and stay there until I have felt it as fully as I can.* In personal life, this might mean letting myself cry and cry again—a “practiced power” well known to people who have lost a spouse or a lover or a friend whose presence defined their lives.

Not long ago, my own heartbreak took me into a time when the tears came in great washes. When I felt the grief rising, I tried to go with it, resisting the temptation to seek out distractions. One night, the floodgates opened again, and the rush of grief seemed greater than the sum of what had gone before. As it began to subside, I was exhausted and went to bed. When I awoke the next morning, I felt a peace that surpasses all understanding. Somehow, I had turned a corner toward healing, toward a place where my heartbreak was more likely to serve life. What happened in and through my tears cannot be put into words, at least not by me. Tears are a language of their own: we need to let them speak.

There are many tears to be shed in America today, for reasons ranging from loved ones lost to war and terrorism to dark forebodings about the future facing our children. Many tears have been shed in private, and some have been shed in public, but many more are being suppressed, or so it seems to me.

The public equivalent of private grieving is a challenge for American leaders, who tend to be past masters of the “power of positive thinking”—partly because the public demands that they be forever strong and partly because they need to keep trying to convince themselves that they are. But American history is not without exemplars of public grief expressed in ways that serve national

unity as well as personal therapy: elected officials could do worse than reread Lincoln's second inaugural address every few weeks.

If the leadership rhetoric around our national heartbreak is all "cheerleading" and "rallying the troops," we will continue fill a great aquifer of hidden lamentation that will sooner or later overflow and threaten to drown us. Have we not learned in the last few years that our national grief over Vietnam never really disappeared but was driven underground? We need leaders who can let us know that they are capable of "weeping over the city" (Luke 19:41), that they understand the capacity to grieve as a sign not of weakness but of strength.

There is a third "practiced power" that I am learning more and more about, perhaps because it is one of the gifts of age. If our hearts are to be broken open rather than apart, we must claim periods of what Taoists call *wu-wei*—literally "purposeless wandering," or creative nonaction, *making space within and around ourselves so that conflict and confusion can settle and a deeper wisdom emerge*.¹⁰

We need leaders who can let us know that they are capable of "weeping over the city" (Luke 19:41), that they understand the capacity to grieve as a sign not of weakness but of strength.

Wu-wei is hard enough for born and bred Taoists, I am sure, but for Americans it is difficult in the extreme. Our can-do culture and our eager-to-impress egos want to show the world that we are in charge. We cannot abide the thought that when challenged, we might respond in a way that makes us look like witless, weightless wimps. So we do not wait; we act, even if our action simply triggers the next step in an endless and predictable chain reaction that ultimately brings more calamity down on us as well as others.

But deep down, we know that when we step back, breathe, allow our agitation to settle, and simply start paying attention, we often see new possibilities in situations that once seemed intractable. The wisdom traditions, religious and secular, have always claimed that only in this contemplative state are we able to touch the truth, whether truth be understood as the fruit of mental acuity or of mystical experience.

When we stifle our knee-jerk reaction to conflict, we are simply bathed in pain or fear or anger for a while—and that is exactly what we must allow ourselves to be. Our challenge is to absorb these terrible feelings so that they can be transformed in the alchemy of the heart rather than allowing them to bind us reactively to the logic of violence. On the other side of pain, fear, and anger, there is almost always a love that feels threatened; when we give ourselves space and time to follow our suffering to its source, we also give ourselves a chance to rediscover and reassert that love.

Are there public counterparts to the private practice of *wu-wei*? In our fast-paced, high-tech age, they will be hard to find. But because holding conflict creatively is essential to a democracy, we need to invest energy in creating trustworthy “containers,” private and public, where the tension engendered by conflict can reveal its creative potentials before “fight or flight” sets in.

In our private lives, we need safe relationships in which we can explore our inner turmoil, small-scale communities where we can get help from others in naming our illusions and absorbing and transforming our suffering. In such relationships, we must learn to resist the gravitational force of conventional culture, to resist especially the constant temptation to “fix” or “save” the other person. Instead, we must learn to listen deeply and ask honest, open questions, cultivating the trust that meaningful responses to suffering can come only from within the one who suffers.¹¹

In our public lives, we need to reclaim or reinvent the fast-disappearing public spaces of our increasingly privatized world. In settings such as cafés, museums, city parks, markets, festivals, and fairs—settings that Ray Oldenburg has called the “great good places” of any society—strangers gather naturally in the course of their daily lives.¹² We come to these places with *private* agendas, but as we relax and sip coffee or just enjoy the sights, we find ourselves becoming part of a *public*, experiencing the heart-opening potentials of pluralism. And as our public experience grows, we find the differences among us turning from a frightening and explosive brew into a renewing and resilient ecological diversity.

In our public lives, we need to reclaim or reinvent the fast-disappearing public spaces of our increasingly privatized world.

In these great good places, we do not interact directly with strangers but spend time in each other's company in a way that reduces fear and enhances our sense of community: we start feeling at home with one another. Public spaces that are well designed (and well protected against other, more lucrative kinds of development) allow the heart to be slowly opened into greater capacity by the gift that more than any other can take us toward larger truth—the gift of “otherness” that has become, sadly, a source of fear for many Americans these days.¹³

The Fundamentalist as “Other”

In the texts of my own religious tradition, there are frequent reminders that encounters with “otherness” are neither accidents nor misfortunes but instead play a vital role in determining whether the faith journey will take us closer to or farther from God.

In biblical tales ranging from the Genesis account of Abraham and Sarah encountering God's angels in the desert (Genesis 18) to Luke's story of the disciples encountering the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24), the message is simple: if we fail to offer hospitality to the stranger, we will never have a chance to learn God's surprising, unsettling, and liberating truth, a truth that can never be domesticated. If we fail to offer hospitality to the stranger, these stories tell us, our spiritual journey will come to a sudden halt.

But hospitality to the stranger, which is a political as well as a spiritual virtue, is in short supply these days. And the “otherness” that most deeply challenges democracy today is neither racial nor economic but religious. Fundamentalists—who spent much of the twentieth century feeling marginal to, and marginalized by, contemporary culture—are now at the center of the action. Fueled by deeply held religious convictions, Islamic fundamentalists around the world have mounted far-flung campaigns of violence against groups they perceive as their enemies. And Christian fundamentalists in the United States have had remarkable success in shaping our government's domestic and foreign policy, which some citizens, myself included, fault for its reliance on economic and military violence.

Fundamentalists, like all religious believers, embrace what Rudolf Otto called “the idea of the holy,” a sacred center of creation in which life originates, on which life depends, and to which life returns, a center that lies beyond the vagaries of personal viewpoint and social construction.¹⁴ But they differ from

other believers within their own traditions in the conviction that *their* idea of the holy can be equated with the holy itself. As Bruce Lawrence has written, fundamentalism is “the affirmation of [a particular] religious authority as holistic and absolute, admitting of neither criticism nor reduction.”¹⁵

In a “postmodernist” culture where truth itself is a discredited concept, fundamentalists have frequently found their hearts broken as the convictions at the core of their identities are denied or denigrated. At the same time, such a culture makes fundamentalisms of many sorts—intellectual and political as well as religious—more appealing for the way they promise to rectify life. In the words of Jeffery Hadden and Anson Shupe, fundamentalism is “a proclamation of reclaimed authority over a sacred tradition which is to be reinstated as an antidote for a society that has strayed from its cultural moorings.”¹⁶

Assuming that people like me have much to learn from the otherness of fundamentalism—or that at very least we must learn to coexist with it—how can we who are not fundamentalists hold a creative tension with a view that is “holistic and absolute”? How do we allow our hearts to be broken open instead of apart by people who have closed their hearts against anyone not in their fold? I have three responses to that question, none of them easy, all of them deeply challenging to me and my way of being in the world.

First, as fundamentalism continues its cultural ascendancy, we who are liberals have a chance to understand what it feels like to be marginalized, an exercise in empathy that can help break the heart open. I have experienced this cultural sea change in the course of my own seven decades on earth, and rehearsing it from time to time gives me some much needed perspective.

During the 1960s, liberal Christianity was in a renaissance, and its representatives—people like myself who relished our place in the catbird seat and were often guilty of arrogance—had some success at working the political process on issues ranging from poverty to race to war. Fundamentalist leaders decried this involvement in “Caesar’s realm,” arguing that religion’s rightful place was in private life, while we liberals berated them for preaching an “irrelevant” and “irresponsible” religion and urged them to get involved. And so they did, with a vengeance! Today, fundamentalists are in the catbird seat, and liberals have been driven to the margins.

It is an exercise in humility simply to acknowledge that historic reversal, and humility is one of the virtues required for the heart to be broken open rather than apart. But more important still, we brokenhearted liberals now have a chance to identify with the experience of brokenheartedness that still characterizes critical segments of the fundamentalist community.

... humility is one of the virtues required for the heart to be broken open rather than apart ...

Arrogance may have replaced brokenheartedness among the triumphal leaders of Christian fundamentalism in this country—the same arrogance of power that liberals fell prey to forty years ago. But anyone who doubts that the violence practiced by some Islamic fundamentalists is fueled by broken hearts lacks a capacity for empathizing with those who feel marginal, devalued, and disempowered. Marginalization is in itself a form of violence against the human heart—a reality that liberal Christians should now be in a position to understand.

How do we allow our hearts to be broken open instead of apart by people who have closed their hearts against anyone not in their fold? My second answer is that we need to become discerning and doubtful about stereotypes. As I take in the news of the day and hear Muslim fundamentalists characterized as evil murderers, my mind turns to the caricatures of the Japanese that were commonplace during World War II. Posters and media portrayals in that era portrayed the Japanese as rats and worse, hammering home the message that “Japs” were evil, subhuman creatures who have only one goal on earth: to kill Americans.

Today, with our image of the Japanese as a creative, intelligent, and industrious people, it is hard to remember that we once believed otherwise. But remembering is a moral imperative, because our image of the Japanese as evil—fueled by the memory of December 7, 1941—helped lead America, not Islamic fundamentalists, to create the first “Ground Zero,” dropping “weapons of mass destruction” on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and killing at least a quarter of a million civilians.

I do not doubt the presence on earth of people who have lost their hearts, people who are so full of anger and so numb to the suffering of others that they will gladly take innocent lives on behalf of a belief system. But such people can be found in the United States as well as elsewhere in the world, and they are

always in a very small minority. Refusing to accept gross stereotypes of “the enemy” and recognizing our own shadow, the enemy within, is a second way to open the heart. And that, of course, applies as much to the way people like me stereotype Christian fundamentalists as it does to the way the media stereotype Muslim fundamentalists.

Refusing to accept gross stereotypes of “the enemy” and recognizing our own shadow, the enemy within, is a second way to open the heart.

How, I ask again, do we allow our hearts to be broken open instead of apart by people who have closed their hearts against anyone not in their fold? A third answer is to consider the possibility that fundamentalists can be correct in their critique of contemporary culture even when people like me find their proposed remedy unacceptable. For example, when fundamentalists protest the crudeness of the mass media, I find it hard to argue with them—if I pause long enough to get past my knee-jerk reaction to their protest. Then candor compels me to ask how I became so desensitized that I barely notice the blatant sexuality and pornography of violence that are the media’s stock in trade?

I know at least one answer to that question: I tend to screen such things out because I do not want to be allied with the fundamentalists, even when they are right. Since I cannot assent to their remedy—“that specific creedal and ethical dictates derived from scripture be publicly recognized and legally enforced”—I do not want to assent to their critique.¹⁷ Here is a true closure of my heart, taken to the extreme of closing against my own sense of what is true. When I have the wit to recognize that my reaction to extremism is itself extreme, I need to hold that tension long enough to allow it to open my heart.

Of course, if it turns out that we share some of fundamentalism’s concerns about contemporary culture, it may also turn out that we have an obligation to work for cultural change. We must be clear, of course, that the work we need to do is cultural, not political; we will respond to the crudeness of the mass media, for example, not through legislation that restricts free speech but in the marketplaces of commerce and ideas. The latter seems especially important to me: we need more and more “public intellectuals” who are willing to engage in risk-taking forms of advocacy that do not polarize people but make common cause with even the strangest bedfellows.

Those of us who embrace nonfundamentalist religious beliefs have, ostensibly, one advantage that fundamentalists lack in the context of the postmodern world: we do not equate our idea of the holy with the holy itself. We hold our religious concepts as tentative and penultimate, believing that our ideas can never grasp the mystery of the numinous but can only point in the general direction of a truth that will always elude capture by concepts or creeds.

In theory, this conviction should allow us to be openhearted in all kinds of relationships, to engage in dialogue with many forms of otherness, and to grow from what we learn. So it would be a great irony if it turned out—as it too often does—that the one form of otherness we refuse to be in dialogue with is fundamentalism. And the charge that “we cannot be in dialogue with them because they refuse to be in dialogue with us” cannot be taken seriously until we have made steady and earnest efforts to transcend our own biases and reach out to the alien other. Until then, our closure of the heart is a self-fulfilling prophecy that fails to serve the ends of community, democracy, and peace.

... our closure of the heart is a self-fulfilling prophecy that fails to serve the ends of community, democracy, and peace.

The Third Way

Though I have not yet used the word, I have been making a case for nonviolence from the opening lines of this essay. It is a case not easily made in America, in part because our culture contains a strong stream of violence and in part because our concept of nonviolence is diminished and distorted: we reduce it to a single-focus protest against war or twist it into an irresponsible passivity in the face of evil. But nonviolence, rightly understood, is a mode of deep engagement with every aspect of everyday life—and it rises or falls on our ability to hold tension in a way that opens the heart.

We misunderstand nonviolence because we misunderstand violence, which goes well beyond the physical savagery that gets all the press. More common by far are those assaults on the human spirit so endemic to our time that we may not recognize them for the violent acts that they are. Violence is done when parents demean children; when teachers humiliate students; when supervisors treat employees as disposable means to economic ends; when physicians treat

patients as objects; when people denounce homosexuality “in the name of God”; when racists regard people of a different skin color as less than human; and when religious believers of any stripe condemn those outside the fold. These forms of violence, like their physical counterparts, result from holding tension in ways that cause our hearts to explode.

By violence I mean *any way we have of violating the identity and integrity of the other*. I find that definition helpful because it reveals the critical connection between violent acts small and large, from humiliating a child in a classroom to dropping bombs on civilians halfway around the world.

Most of us live out our lives in the home, the neighborhood, the classroom, the workplace; we do not make decisions of global consequence. And yet for better or for worse, the choices we make in the small arenas of our lives contribute to what happens in the world at large. If we do no more than acquiesce to daily minidoses of violence, we become desensitized to it. By embracing the popular madness that violence is “only normal” and assenting to its dominance in human affairs, we exacerbate its evils.

... the choices we make in the small arenas of our lives contribute to what happens in the world at large.

But as we learn to hold tension in ways that open our hearts, we begin to see how abnormal violence is. Now—as openheartedness looses what Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature”—we experience our innate capacity to honor, not violate, the identity and integrity of others. We witness the remarkable things that can happen within us, between us, and beyond us when we relate to one another in a nonviolent way. We learn a “third way” to respond to the violence that is always around us and within us, so called because it offers an alternative to the “fight or flight” response.

To fight is to meet violence with violence, generating more of the same. To flee is to yield to violence, putting private sanctuary ahead of the common good. The third way is nonviolence, by which I mean *a commitment to act in every situation in ways that honor the soul*. Defined this way, nonviolence is not a path of high heroism reserved for the likes of Gandhi and King. It is a path that can, and must, be walked by mortals like you and me.

In fact, walking the third way is much like literal walking: it involves taking simple steps, one at a time, doing the best we can to make sure that each step

honors the soul. Here are three brief examples of what I mean, important because they involve small actions that any individual or organization could take. They come from the workplace, one of those micro-arenas of our lives where people too often find their souls violated.

- I know people who practice nonviolence by finding a new way to participate in organizational decision making. Where once they were quick to create tension by opposing any hint of “wrongheadedness” among their colleagues, now they are more likely to ask honest, open questions about things their colleagues say, questions that invite dialogue, generate insight, and sometimes reveal more unity than people thought they had.
- I know supervisors of work groups who practice nonviolence by starting some of their meetings with a few minutes of personal storytelling, posing a low-stakes question that allows people to learn a little about one another’s lives and helps them feel less like replaceable parts—for example, “What was the best vacation you ever took?” or “How did you earn your first dollar outside the home?”
- I know about a large health care system whose CEO practices nonviolence by creating safe spaces within her organization where employees can tell the truth without penalty. The organization eventually won a coveted quality award in part because of this blame-free zone where doctors and nurses can report their mistakes. “Half the reported incidents lead directly to system improvements,” says the CEO, herself a former nurse who “once failed to report her own error in medicating a patient.”¹⁸

If we want to walk the third way, it is important to see how simple such steps can be—and it is equally important to see that they are not as simple as they may look! It is daunting to ask honest, open questions in a corporate culture that values speed above thoughtfulness or to evoke personal stories in a workplace where people are cautious and self-protective or to invite truth telling in a field where people habitually dissemble to protect themselves and their colleagues.

A person who walks the third way in such settings will likely meet with suspicion, resistance, scorn, or worse, reminding us of how pervasive non-physical violence is. So people who wish to serve as agents of nonviolent change need at least four resources in order to survive and persist: a sound rationale for what they are doing, a sensible strategy for doing it, a continuing community of support, and inner ground on which to stand.

The core rationale for nonviolence is simple and self-sustaining: we act in ways that honor the soul because the soul is worthy of honor. When we act from that motivation, we may or may not change the world. But we will always change ourselves for the better by practicing reverence and respect. And yet agents of nonviolent change do not lack practical motivation: they know that honoring the soul as an end in itself can strengthen our capacity to do the world's work well.

The core rationale for nonviolence is simple and self-sustaining: we act in ways that honor the soul because the soul is worthy of honor.

People who ask honest, open questions in meetings know that when we think together, instead of in isolation or in combat, we are more likely to make good decisions. Supervisors who provide opportunities for team members to learn more about one another's lives know that colleagues with personal connections are more productive in general and more resilient in a crisis. CEOs who create blame-free truth-telling zones know that no organization can improve until people feel free to acknowledge and correct their mistakes.

The second resource needed by agents of nonviolent change is a sensible strategy. When people decide to participate in decision making by asking questions instead of arguing, their "strategy" is simply to play this new role with competence and an open heart, modeling new possibilities without attempting to manipulate the outcome. Done this way, a movement toward collaborative decision making may proceed without resistance, because no one notices what is happening! And if the organization starts making better decisions in support of its mission, the practice may multiply.

When supervisors decide that some storytelling could strengthen a work group, they do not drop it on people out of the blue. They share their rationale in advance, and if they obtain enough consent to proceed, they introduce the practice gradually, gaining advocates as they go. Done carefully and respectfully, with honorable "outs" for those who are uncomfortable with it, a "bizarre" practice such as getting to know one another better can become the new normalcy, making people feel more visible and more valued.

When CEOs decide to invite risky truth telling in order to strengthen the corporate mission, they know that the process must begin with some risky

truth telling of their own. It is no accident that the story of that award-winning health care system includes a CEO who publicly acknowledged her own failure to admit a critical mistake when she was working as a nurse. Her strategy was simple: truth telling by a leader can legitimate truth telling at every level.

The third resource vital to agents of nonviolent change is an ongoing community of support, which might mean something as simple as two or three trusted friends with whom one gathers regularly. With such people, we can find support for our forays into the world, sharing our failures and successes, our hopes and fears, and finding the courage to take a next step on the third way. With such people, we can get help keeping our hearts open when the world threatens to shut them down.¹⁹

Finally, agents of nonviolence need inner ground on which to stand. We cannot walk the third way and survive in a “fight or flight” world without knowing how to find our way toward a place of inner peace, which is why we need something like the three spiritual practices I explored earlier. But that inner sanctuary is not for our survival alone: it is the soulful ground of nonviolent actions that serve others well.

Asking honest, open questions, inviting people to tell their stories, and encouraging organizational truth telling cannot be mere techniques of management or methods of social engineering. Done from a desire to manipulate and control and from the fear behind that desire, they are fraudulent and destructive acts. But done vulnerably and with goodwill, done from a heart of hope, such acts can evoke the goodwill and vulnerability of others. We can be peacemakers in our small part of the world only when we have peace within ourselves.

Standing in the Tragic Gap

Finding inner peace requires us to hold perhaps the most subtle and yet most difficult tension of all: the tension between reality and possibility. I have come to think of this as “standing in the tragic gap,” the gap between our knowledge of what is and our knowledge of what might be. If we find ourselves unable to stand in that place, we will be pulled to one side or the other, toward the paralyzing cynicism that too much “reality” can breed or toward the wistful and irrelevant idealism that is bred by too much “possibility.”

The gap between what is and what might be is “tragic” not simply because it is sad. It is tragic because in the classic sense of the word, it is the inevitable

outcome of the flawed nature of human life. There will always be a gap between reality and possibility, and the moment that gap is closed in one situation, another gap opens up as new and vital visions call us forward.

We live, for example, in a society laced with racism. Over the past fifty years, we have made progress in outlawing the most egregious institutional forms of this cancer. But institutions are endlessly inventive in finding their way around the law, and no law can eliminate the racism we harbor within. So those of us committed to eliminating racism will never achieve success. We will forever find ourselves standing in a tragic gap, reaching for what is right, and if we fail to hold that tension, we will render ourselves irrelevant to the ongoing struggle for a just and humane society.

But institutions are endlessly inventive in finding their way around the law, and no law can eliminate the racism we harbor within

People who collapse into “reality” untempered by possibility often become cynics, embracing a *realpolitik* that targets and tries to exploit the worst human impulses as a way of gaining power. They tell us that life is a jungle and then proceed to make it more so by becoming social, economic, or political predators.

People who collapse into “possibility” untempered by reality often become dreamy-eyed idealists, embracing a utopianism that can be as dangerous as cynicism. They float above the political fray, leaving the ongoing struggle for power untouched by the values they claim to represent. In the words of Edmund Burke, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good [people] to do nothing.”²⁰

Democracy depends on our capacity to stand in the tragic gap with hearts of hope—which means hearts that can hold the pain to which hope exposes us—refusing to abdicate our citizenship by collapsing into either resigned cynicism or irrelevant utopianism.

Name anyone famous for a devotion to justice and peace. I cannot think of a person fitting that description who has not spent long years in the tragic gap, holding the tension between what is and what could and should be. That, in brief, is the story of the Dalai Lama, Aung San Suu Kyi, Nelson Mandela,

Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Vaclav Havel, and Thich Nhat Hanh, as well as the millions of anonymous heroes who joined these icons in great movements for social change.

Such people came to trust, not resist, the journey of heartbreak described by the Sufi master Hazrat Inayat Kahn: “God breaks the heart again and again and again until it *stays open*.”²¹ Hearts like these have been broken open to a largeness that holds the promise of a better future for all, a “habit of the heart” without which democracy cannot survive, let alone flourish.

“God breaks the heart again and again and again until it stays open.”

I began this essay with the words of Terry Tempest Williams: “The human heart is the first home of democracy.” A few more words from Williams will help bring it to a close. The human heart, she says,

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?

*The heart is the house of empathy whose door opens when we receive the pain of others. This is where bravery lives, where we find our mettle to give and receive, to love and be loved, to stand in the center of uncertainty with strength, not fear, understanding this is all there is. The heart is the path to wisdom because it dares to be vulnerable in the presence of power.*²²

And history teaches that when the heart dares to be vulnerable in the presence of power, it can become a source of countervailing power, keeping our best hopes alive in the hardest of places and times.

Notes

- 1 Terry Tempest Williams, "Engagement," *Orion*, July-Aug. 2004, p. 4.
- 2 I heard this Hasidic tale from the philosopher and writer Jacob Needleman, who kindly put it in writing for me so that I could recount it correctly.
- 3 E. F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (New York: HarperCollins, 1973), pp. 97-98.
- 4 The best book I know on consensus is Michael J. Sheerhan, *Beyond Majority Rule: Voteless Decisions in the Religious Society of Friends* (Philadelphia: Religious Society of Friends, 1983).
- 5 Go to www.geocities.com/CollegePark/Union/3417/quaker.htm.
- 6 Lincoln's first inaugural address, as posted at www.bartleby.com/124/pres31.html, paragraph 33.
- 7 William Sloane Coffin, "Despair Is Not an Option," *The Nation*, Jan. 12, 2004.
- 8 Jacob Needleman, *Two Dreams of America* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Fetzer Institute, 2003), p. 3.
- 9 Rainer Maria Rilke, "As Once the Wingèd Energy of Delight," in Stephen Mitchell, ed., *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), p. 261.
- 10 Definitions of *wu-wei* can be found at <https://www.thoughtco.com/wu-wei-the-action-of-non-action-3183209>.
- 11 I examine this form of community in greater detail in *A Hidden Wholeness*.
- 12 Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (New York: Marlowe, 1999).
- 13 I explore these ideas more fully in *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).
- 14 Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).
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- 18 David S. Broder, "Promising Health Care Reform Passes Almost Unnoticed," *Washington Post*, Apr. 9, 2003.
- 19 For further exploration of relationships that help keep the heart open, see *A Hidden Wholeness*.
- 20 Edmund Burke, quoted at www.bartleby.com/66/18/9118.html.
- 21 Hazrat Inayat Kahn, quoted in Mark Nepo, *The Exquisite Risk* (New York: Harmony Books, 2005), p. 50.
- 22 Williams, "Engagement," p. 4.

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PARKER J. PALMER, founder and senior partner emeritus of the Center for Courage & Renewal, is a world-renowned writer, speaker, and activist who focuses on issues in education, community, leadership, spirituality, and social change.

Parker holds a PhD in sociology from the University of California at Berkeley, as well as thirteen honorary doctorates, two Distinguished Achievement Awards from the National Educational Press Association, and an Award of Excellence from the Associated Church Press. In 2010, Palmer was given the William Rainey Harper Award whose previous recipients include Margaret Mead, Elie Wiesel, and Paolo Freire. In 2011, he was named an Utne Reader Visionary, one of “25 people who are changing your world.”

He has reached millions worldwide through his books, which include several best-selling and award-winning titles: *The Heart of Higher Education* (with Arthur Zajonc), *The Courage to Teach, A Hidden Wholeness, Let Your Life Speak, The Active Life, To Know As We Are Known, The Company of Strangers,* and *The Promise of Paradox.*

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