

HEALING THE HEART OF DEMOCRACY

*The Courage to Create a Politics
Worthy of the Human Spirit*

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A Hidden Wholeness

Let Your Life Speak

The Courage to Teach

The Active Life

To Know As We Are Known

The Company of Strangers

The Promise of Paradox

The Heart of Higher Education
(with Arthur Zajonc and Megan Scribner)

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In memory of

Christina Taylor Green (2001–2011)

Addie Mae Collins (1949–1963)

Denise McNair (1951–1963)

Carole Robertson (1949–1963)

Cynthia Wesley (1949–1963)

Christina died when an assassin in Tucson, Arizona, opened fire at a public event hosted by Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, who was seriously wounded. Addie Mae, Denise, Carole, and Cynthia died when violent racists bombed the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

When we forget that politics is about weaving a fabric of compassion and justice on which everyone can depend, the first to suffer are the most vulnerable among us—our children, the elderly, the mentally ill, the poor, and the homeless. As they suffer, so does the integrity of our democracy.

May the heartbreaking deaths of these children—and the hope and promise that was in their young lives—help us find the courage to create a politics worthy of the human spirit.

The human heart is the first home of democracy. It is where we embrace our questions. Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions? And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up—ever—trusting our fellow citizens to join with us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy?

—Terry Tempest Williams

PRELUDE

The Politics of the Brokenhearted

In a dark time, the eye begins to see...

—Theodore Roethke²

I began this book in a season of heartbreak—personal and political heartbreak—that soon descended into a dark night of the soul. It took months to find my way back to the light and six years to complete the book. But as I fumbled in the dark, the poet Roethke’s words proved true time and again: my eyes were opened to new insights, and my heart was opened to new life. The evidence will, I hope, come clear as this book unfolds.

In 2004, I turned sixty-five. As I entered my “golden years” and saw how much of that gold was rust, I found myself disheartened by the diminishment that come with age. Family members and friends were failing and dying. Visions I once held for my life were slipping beyond my reach. My body kept reminding me that I am just a tad more mortal than I had imagined I would be. And I was no longer able to “read” American culture as easily as I could when my generation was helping to author it. It was as if I had lost the secret decoder ring I owned when I was a kid, and with it my ability to make sense of twenty-first century life.

As the shape of my personal life became less familiar and sometimes more frightening, the same thing was happening in American politics as viewed from my vantage point. Dismayed by the state of the nation, I began to feel like a displaced person in my own land. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001,

had deepened America's appreciation of democracy and activated demons that threaten it, demons still at large today. Wounded and overwhelmed by fear, we soon went to war against a country that had no direct connection to the attacks. Many Americans seemed willing to abandon their constitutional rights along with our international treaty obligations.³ Some Americans, including elected officials, were quick to accuse protestors and dissenters of being unpatriotic or worse, fragmenting the civic community on which democracy depends.

I am no stranger to this democracy's moments of peril, which have been precipitated by Democrats and Republicans alike. I lived through McCarthy's communist witch hunts; the pushback to the civil rights movement; the political assassinations of the 1960s; the burning of our cities; Vietnam, the Pentagon Papers, Watergate; and the electoral debacle of 2000. I have witnessed the rapid erosion of the middle class and the growing power of big money, an oligarchy of wealth, to trump the will of the people. But with fear and fragmentation becoming staples of our national life, and with the haunting sense that our "booming economy" was likely to implode, democracy felt even more imperiled to me in the America of 2004.

As our distrust of "the other" beyond our borders hardened and we began making aliens of each other (a "we" that included me), I fell into a spiral of outrage and despair. How did we forget that our differences are among our most valuable assets? What happened to "we have nothing to fear but fear itself?" When will we learn that violence in the long run creates at least as many problems as it solves? Why do we not value life, every life, no matter whose or where? Or understand that the measure of national greatness is not only how successful the strong can be but how well we support the weak?

And where have “We the People” gone—we who have the power to reclaim democracy for its best purposes, unless we allow ourselves to be divided and conquered by the enemy within and among us?



When things we care about fall apart, heartbreak happens. In my sixty-fifth year, it was happening, again, to me.⁴ I soon began to realize that this episode was darker than most of those I had known before: I was descending into depression, my third time down as an adult. Clearly I am predisposed to this form of mental anguish, so I cannot claim that heartbreak was the sole source of my misery. But neither can I attribute the whole of this episode to brain chemistry or genetics. There are times when the heart, like the canary in the coal mine, breathes in the world’s toxicity and begins to die.

Much has been said about the “voice of depression.” It is a voice that speaks despairingly about the whole of one’s life no matter how good parts of it may be—a voice so loud and insistent that when it speaks, it is the only sound one can hear. I know that voice well. I have spent long days and nights listening to its deadly urgings.

Less has been said about the life-giving fact that, as poet Theodore Roethke writes, “In a dark time, the eye begins to see.” During my sojourn on the dark side, it was hard to believe that my vision was growing sharper or to make sense of what I was seeing. And yet, as I slowly came back to life, I found that I had gained new clarity about myself, the community I depend on, and my call to reengage with its politics and relearn how to hold its tensions in a life-giving way.

During my recovery, I discovered a book that helped me understand how heartbreak and depression—two of the most isolating and disabling experiences I know—can expand one’s sense of connectedness and evoke the heart’s capacity to employ tension in the service of life. *Lincoln’s Melancholy*, by Joshua Shenk, is a probing examination of our sixteenth president’s journey with depression.⁵ What was then called “melancholy” first appeared in Lincoln’s twenties, when neighbors occasionally took him in for fear he might take his own life. Lincoln struggled with this affliction until the day he died, a dark thread laced through a life driven by the conviction that he was born to render some sort of public service.

Lincoln’s need to preserve his life by embracing and integrating his own darkness and light made him uniquely qualified to help America preserve the Union. Because he knew dark and light intimately—knew them as inseparable elements of everything human—he refused to split North and South into “good guys” and “bad guys,” a split that might have taken us closer to the national version of suicide.

Instead, in his second inaugural address, delivered on March 4, 1865, a month before the end of the Civil War, Lincoln appealed for “malice toward none” and “charity for all,” animated by what one writer calls an “awe-inspiring sense of love for all” who bore the brunt of the battle.⁶ In his appeal to a deeply divided America, Lincoln points to an essential fact of our life together: if we are to survive and thrive, we must hold its divisions and contradictions with compassion, lest we lose our democracy.

Lincoln has much to teach us about embracing political tension in a way that opens our hearts to each other, no matter how deep our differences. That

way begins “in here” as we work on reconciling whatever divides us from ourselves—and then moves out with healing power into a world of many divides, drawing light out of darkness, community out of chaos, and life out of death.



In my experience, the best therapy for personal problems comes from reaching out as well as looking in. Reading about Lincoln as my healing continued, I began to wonder about my own ability to reach across the divides that threaten our Union today, not as an elected leader but as a citizen, a trust holder of democracy. To make this something other than a pious exercise in forced altruism—which always leads me to feel-good failures that end in a pathetic “God knows I tried!”—I needed to find a true point of identity with people whose basic beliefs are contrary to mine.

What do I have in common with people who, for example, regard their religious or political convictions as so authoritative that they feel no need to listen to anyone who sees things differently—especially that small subgroup of extremists who would use violence to advance their views? My own experience of political heartbreak gave me a clue. Perhaps we share an abiding grief over some of modernity’s worst features: its mindless relativism, corrosive cynicism, disdain for tradition and human dignity, indifference to suffering and death.

How shall we respond to these cultural trends that diminish all of us? On this question, I, too, have a nonnegotiable conviction: violence can never be the answer. Instead, we must protect people’s freedom to believe and behave as they will, within the rule of law; assent to majority rule while dedicating ourselves to protecting minority rights; embrace and act on our responsibility to care for one

another; seek to educate ourselves about our critical differences; come together in dialogue toward mutual understanding; and speak without fear against all that diminishes us, including the use of violence.

With people who are irrevocably committed to violence, I may never find the smallest patch of common ground. Could I find one with others whose views differ sharply from mine—a small patch, perhaps, but one large enough that we could stand there and talk for a while? I had reason to believe that the answer might be yes. For example, I know of daylong dialogue programs for people who differ on difficult issues like abortion where participants are forbidden from proclaiming their positions on the issue until the last hour of the day. Instead, they are coached in the art of personal storytelling and then invited to share the experiences that gave rise to their beliefs while others *simply listen*.

Hearing each other's stories, which are often stories of heartbreak, can create an unexpected bond between so-called pro-life and pro-choice people. When two people discover that parallel experiences led them to contrary conclusions, they are more likely to hold their differences respectfully, knowing that they have experienced similar forms of grief. The more you know about another person's story, the less possible it is to see that person as your enemy.

Abortion is one of the many issues that generate what some people have called the "politics of rage." And yet rage is simply one of the masks that heartbreak wears. When we share the sources of our pain with each other instead of hurling our convictions like rocks at "enemies," we have a chance to open our hearts and connect across some of our great divides.



In this book, the word *heart* reclaims its original meaning. “Heart” comes from the Latin *cor* and points not merely to our emotions, but to the core of the self, that center-place where all of our ways of knowing converge—intellectual, emotional, sensory, intuitive, imaginative, experiential, relational, and bodily, among others. The heart is where we integrate what we know in our minds with what we know in our bones, the place where our knowledge can become more fully human. *Cor* is also the Latin root from which we get the word courage. When all that we understand of self and world comes together in the center-place called the heart, we are more likely to find the courage to act humanely on what we know.

The politics of our time is the “politics of the brokenhearted”—an expression that will not be found in the analytical vocabulary of political science or in the strategic rhetoric of political organizing. Instead, it is an expression from the language of human wholeness. There are some human experiences that only the heart can comprehend and only heart-talk can convey. Among them are certain aspects of politics, by which I mean the essential and eternal human effort to craft the common life on which we all depend. This is the politics that Lincoln practiced as he led from a heart broken open to the whole of what it means to be human—simultaneously meeting the harsh demands of political reality and nurturing the seeds of new life.

When all of our talk about politics is either technical or strategic, to say nothing of partisan and polarizing, we loosen or sever the human connections on which empathy, accountability, and democracy itself depend. If we cannot talk about politics in the language of the heart—if we cannot be publicly heartbroken,

for example, that the wealthiest nation on earth is unable to summon the political will to end childhood hunger at home—how can we create a politics worthy of the human spirit, one that has a chance to serve the common good?

The link between language and empathy was explored by the comedian and social critic George Carlin in his classic minihistory of the various ways we have named the postwar condition of some soldiers:

There's a condition in combat. Most people know about it. It's when a fighting person's nervous system has been stressed to its absolute peak and maximum. Can't take anymore input. The nervous system has either...snapped or is about to snap.

In World War I, Carlin goes on, "that condition was called shell shock. Simple, honest, direct language. Two syllables, shell shock. Almost sounds like the guns themselves." By World War II, the name had morphed into "battle fatigue. Four syllables now. Takes a little longer to say. Doesn't seem to hurt as much." Then came the Korean War, and the condition became operational exhaustion. "The humanity has been squeezed completely out of the phrase," Carlin comments. "Sounds like something that might happen to your car."

Then came Vietnam, and we all know what shell shock has been called ever since: post-traumatic stress disorder. Says Carlin,

Still eight syllables, but we've added a hyphen! And the pain is completely buried under jargon. ... I'll bet you if we'd still been calling it shell shock, some of those Vietnam veterans might have gotten the attention they needed at the time.⁷

Carlin missed one precursor to shell shock, an important one in the context of this book. During the Civil War, traumatized combatants developed a condition that they called "soldier's heart."⁸ The violence that results in soldier's heart shatters a person's sense of self and community, and war is not the only setting in which violence is done: violence is done whenever we violate another's

integrity. Thus we do violence in politics when we demonize the opposition or ignore urgent human needs in favor of politically expedient decisions.



This book, like the personal journey that helped shape it, does not blink at the darkness laced through American life today. Still, it is full of hope about our capacity to see the light. When I came out of my own darkness back into the light—to the people I love, the work I believe in, the world about which I care—the conflicts within and around me no longer tore me apart. With eyes wide open and a broken-open heart, I was better able to hold personal and political tensions in ways that generate insight, engagement, and new life.

Looking at politics through the eye of the heart can liberate us from seeing it as a chess game of moves and countermoves or a shell game for seizing power or a blame game of Whac-A-Mole. Rightly understood, politics is no game at all. It is the ancient and honorable human endeavor of creating a community in which the weak as well as the strong can flourish, love and power can collaborate, and justice and mercy can have their day. “We the People” must build a political life rooted in the commonwealth of compassion and creativity still found among us, becoming a civic community sufficiently united to know our own will and hold those who govern accountable to it.

In January 1838—when Abraham Lincoln was twenty-eight years old and the Civil War was twenty-three years off—a prescient Lincoln addressed the Young Men’s Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, on “the perpetuation of our political institutions.” Exhorting his audience to understand the responsibility to protect American democracy against its enemies, he said:

At what point shall we expect the approach of danger? ... Shall we expect some transatlantic military giant, to step the Ocean, and crush us at a blow? Never! All the armies of Europe, Asia and Africa combined...could not by force, take a drink from the Ohio, or make a track on the Blue Ridge, in a Trial of a thousand years.

At what point then is the approach of danger to be expected? I answer, if it ever reach us, it must spring up amongst us. It cannot come from abroad. If destruction be our lot, we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen, we must live through all time, or die by suicide.⁹

The Cold War made it clear that America was vulnerable to attacks from abroad despite the protection of two oceans, a fact underscored by the events of September 11, 2001. Still, Lincoln's case holds. If American democracy fails, the ultimate cause will not be a foreign invasion or the power of big money or the greed and dishonesty of some elected officials or a military coup or the internal communist/socialist/fascist takeover that keeps some Americans awake at night. It will happen because we—you and I—became so fearful of each other, of our differences and of the future, that we unraveled the civic community on which democracy depends, losing our power to resist all that threatens it and call it back to its highest form.

Our differences may be deep: what breaks my heart about America may make your heart sing, and vice versa. Protecting our right to disagree is one of democracy's gifts, and converting this inevitable tension into creative energy is part of democracy's genius. You and I may disagree profoundly on what constitutes a political failure or success, but we can still agree on this: democracy is always at risk. Government "of the people, by the people, and for the people" is a nonstop experiment in the strength and weakness of our political institutions, our local communities and associations, and the human heart. Its outcome can never be taken for granted.

The democratic experiment is endless, unless we blow up the lab, and the explosives to do the job are found within us. But so also is the heart's alchemy that can turn suffering into community, conflict into the energy of creativity, and tension into an opening toward the common good. We can help keep the experiment alive by repairing and maintaining democracy's neglected infrastructure, whose two levels are the primary concerns of this book: *the invisible dynamics of the human heart and the visible venues of our lives in which those dynamics are formed.*

It is well-known and widely-bemoaned that we have neglected our physical infrastructure, the roads, water supplies and power grids on which our daily lives depend. Even more dangerous is our neglect of democracy's infrastructure, and yet it is barely noticed and rarely discussed. The heart's dynamics and the ways in which they are shaped lack the drama and the "visuals" to make the evening news, and restoring them is slow and daunting work. Now is the time to notice, and now is the time for the restoration to begin.

For those of us who want to see democracy survive and thrive—and we are legion—the heart is where *everything* begins: that grounded place in each of us where we can overcome fear, rediscover that we are members of one another, and embrace the conflicts that threaten democracy as openings to new life for us and for our nation.*

* In the course of writing this book, I have heard a good deal of debate on the question, "Is the United States a democracy or a Republic?" My answer is yes: we are a representative democracy set in the context of a constitutional republic. I give due attention in this book to the structures of our Republic, one of whose most important functions is to protect the rights of individuals and minorities from being overwhelmed by the majority. But my primary focus is on the health of the democratic processes characterized by Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address as a "government of the people, by the people, for the people."