



Episode 12

Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit with Parker Palmer

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Katie: [00:00:00] A politics worthy of the human spirit. These words, the subtitle of Parker Palmer's book, *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, capture the longing that is at the root of this podcast and the larger, this election project politics worthy of the human spirit. Is it possible? Do we have the capacity to create it?

These are the questions that we have been exploring for the past ten weeks. And their the questions we must continue to hold now that this election is over. Today, as we bring this mini series to a close and begin to contemplate what citizenship looks like tomorrow and next month and next year, we have the privilege to speak with Parker J Palmer himself.

Parker is a writer, speaker, and activist whose work focuses on education, community, leadership, spirituality, and social change. Parker is the founder and senior partner emeritus of the Center for Courage and Renewal, which offers long term retreat programs for people in the serving [00:01:00] professions, including teachers, physicians, nonprofit leaders, and clergy. He holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of California at Berkeley, as well as 14 honorary doctorates, two Distinguished Achievement Awards from the National Education Press Association, and an Award of Excellence from the Associated Church Press. Parker is the author of 10 books, including several award winning titles, that have sold over 2 million copies and been translated into 12 languages.

It is not an understatement to say that Parker's Wisdom has accompanied millions on their spiritual and vocational journeys. I am but one of those millions. It was Parker's book, *Let Your Life Speak*, that gave me the courage to leave a career in political science to focus on community work. That work brought me to the shelter, where once again I turned to Parker's Wisdom as I grappled with the trauma I witnessed there.

Let your heart break, he wrote, but let it break open and not apart. Let your heartbreak expand your capacity to love and see [00:02:00] all that this world holds. I practiced this at the shelter, and ultimately, this practice enabled me to come back to the heartbreak that left me fleeing politics in 2016. I picked up *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, ready for its invitation.

It had been nearly a decade since he wrote it, but the message felt even more urgent. Our politics is not worthy of us, and we the people must do something to change that. We must let our heartbreak open us up to the possibilities and the work required for a new way. It was a beautiful call to action, one that we must take with us now.



Now that our votes are cast, and now that the next season of politics has begun. Parker, thank you so much for joining me in conversation today.

Parker: Well, thank you, Katie. I'm honored to be with you. I'm very grateful for this opportunity and for the good work you've been doing.

Katie: Oh, thank you. one of the goals of this podcast is to expand our definition of [00:03:00] politics, so that we're not just talking about our partisan identities or our policy preferences, but we're also talking about politics as the way in which we engage. Other people, on these topics. And so with that definition in mind, could you share an early political memory you have and what it taught you about how we engage?

Parker: I was born in 1939, so I was very young when World War II hit, and we found ourselves, along with our international allies, in a battle against fascism on a variety of fronts. And that, of course, was followed by the, rather quiet and highly privatized fifties when I became a teenager, eventually going to college in 1957. And it was not until my senior year in college that I became more acutely aware of political issues when a group called Fair Play for Cuba. sprang up on my college campus, which [00:04:00] happened to be in Minnesota, a long way from Cuba. And I was a little baffled as to what that meant, fair play for Cuba.

But I remember talking with people about it and beginning to understand that the world was a larger place than I had been exposed to or knew anything about. And then to cut to the chase, I ended up in the 60s doing a Ph. D. at Berkeley, and of course, Berkeley in the 60s was a hotbed of political activity, of social change, engagement, and activism, and it had a tremendous impact on me.

I was studying sociology, data were falling all over the place on the streets of Berkeley during that decade. the rise of the women's movement, the rise of the black power movement, the war in Vietnam and, anti war efforts, not only in Berkeley, but [00:05:00] around the country and the governor of California at the time, who happened to be Ronald Reagan, hitting back pretty hard on, on Berkeley for its activism and gassing the city with tear gas. I remember clearly bookstores that you couldn't go into for months afterwards. That was a big wake up call for me. I went to Berkeley imagining that I would end up in an academic career. But by the time the end of the 60s came and American cities were burning because we were in the midst of yet another reckoning with the racial injustice on which this country was founded. I decided to reject the academic offers I was getting and I went to Washington, D. C. to become a community organizer in 1969. working on issues like redlining and blockbusting, which were destroying city life [00:06:00] as well as individual and family life in a most unjust and truly egregious way for the world's, quote, greatest democracy.

And I can't tell you exactly why. Maybe it was my training as a sociologist. And it was also, I think, some hard experiences at Berkeley where things got, very polarized, in a highly partisan way. For those reasons, I think I did my work, in Washington, D. C., my community organizing in Washington, D. C., not from an oppositional point of view, not trying to name the enemy and bring the enemy down, but rather from a community building point of view. I deeply believed, and I believe to this day, That if we can up build the community of we, the people, wherever we are in the family, in the neighborhood [00:07:00] and in religious organizations, in the workplace, in the spaces of our civic



life, we will have made a great contribution to love truth and justice because it's that community fabric in which we all live. And it's that community fabric that can be woven. tightly enough to resist all the tearing and tattering that's going on these days as we see our civic life, in shreds around us. Although I don't want to overdo that image because I think there are important pockets of community left among us, from which good things can happen. So my work as a community organizer was not about putting anybody down. It was about helping people meet each other. Newcomers were entering the area where I worked, an area that had historically been white, middle and lower middle [00:08:00] class folk. The population was becoming increasingly black, increasingly Hispanic, increasingly Appalachian white.

What I knew on a very simple level, somehow in my bones was that if we could just get to know each other as human beings, the fear level would drain away. And when the fear level drains away, the social fabric gets stronger and the political life becomes less toxic. I guess that's for a guy who's 85 years old and has a lot of history behind him, that's a relatively brief sketch, of some of those early political experiences and instincts that brought me where I am today.

Katie: Yeah, it's so fascinating, to think about how the volatility of the 60s and what you experienced at Berkeley could still bring you to a place that was not [00:09:00] oppositional, that was this place of meeting and of like, we can't operate in fear. We have to figure out how to get beyond the fear to move forward and I think it's just really inspiring because right now we're in this very oppositional moment and to still be able to learn from those moments and come back to community and meeting each other and seeing each other, I think is just really beautiful.

Parker: Yeah, I'm glad you underscored the word fear, Katie, because I think fear is a part of life. For a long time, I think I tried to run from the notion that I had fears. I do have fears. I've always had fears. I think most people if they're honest with themselves can say the same thing. And once I started reflecting on what my fears were doing to me, I realized that they were shutting down relationships. They were making the world feel an unsafe [00:10:00] place to live. They were hampering my thinking. And, brain science has shown us that fear can shut down the mind and make us less intelligent, less creative, than we would otherwise be. So when I got onto that, in, in the course of self examination, It started to become clear to me that I needed to deal with fear, to address fear, to find ways to dial down fear, not only for my own sake, but for the sake of the common good. And so that has been, I think, an important piece of my life. And it also, illustrates what I believe, and I think you share this belief, the importance of working on ourselves and our own inner lives in order to work on the outer world. Because if I go out there living an unexamined life, I'm going to [00:11:00] do all kinds of damage. But if I can go out there aware of my inner dynamics and try to help other people. deal with similar dynamics in their own lives, case in point, creatively dealing with our fear of each other and of the world at large. then I might make some sort of positive difference, but it has to begin with me.

Katie: Yes. Yes. I'm a hundred percent with you on that. And I think so often we begin with what can someone else do, to fix this problem. And one of the things I loved about what you did in the heart of democracy was say, this is not what a politicians need to be doing differently. This is what we, the people, need to do differently.



Can you talk a little bit about that emphasis and why? Change has to come from us and not from, those people in Washington.

Parker: Well, [00:12:00] the founding documents of this country hit us over the head with it. don't they, when they keep emphasizing, we the people. we the people are meant to hold the power in our hands. We the people are meant to elect to office those we want to lead us. We the people are meant to hold accountable, those who lead us, which means we the people need to get our act together and decide what it is that we collectively value. We'll never come to a hundred percent agreement on that. We might even not come to. 52 percent agreement on that, but anything we can do to identify and hold up the common good, what we regard as the common good, and I think there is a broadly shared consensus on some major points about what the common good looks like, anything we can do along those lines strengthens American democracy. So that's one reason that [00:13:00] I focus on we the people, it's in the books It's in the charter. It's in the founding documents.

But the second reason I focus on we the people is that I Was taught and I believe truly that grown ups take Responsibility for their own lives and for whatever part of the collective life they impact rather than always blaming other people. And it always astonished me, or at least I eventually got to a point of astonishment. The number of political conversations I would find myself in, where all the talk was about those people in Washington, D. C., or those people in the state capitol, or those people on the school board, who were screwing everything up, or occasionally deserved a bouquet rather than a brick bat. But [00:14:00] most often they were screwing things up. And we talked and talked as citizens about that. And I found myself speaking up in groups of that sort, and simply saying, I notice that none of those people, quote, are here. When was the last time that talking about people who aren't in the room helped you solve a problem, right? And nobody ever came up with an example.

Katie: Never.

Parker: common sense suggests, oh, we ought to be talking about us. We ought to be talking about what we're doing and not doing. we ought to be talking about how we understand the problem and see if we can come to a shared understanding of the problem. And then we ought to be talking about what kinds of collective action or individual action we might take in order to do something about the problem. I didn't get that from a political science [00:15:00] textbook. it's common sense, I think. And, again, it's something that, that every time we put that idea into practice, let's talk with each other, not about someone else. It seems to bear good fruit.

Katie: Yeah. And I think it's interesting because as you've said, we, the people is it's in our founding documents. It's part of who we are. But another part of who we are as Americans is, fiercely individual people sometimes too, that believe so strongly in, in our own ability to craft our own destiny. And I think that's an important part of our founding as well. But there's a tension that those two things have, right. That's makes it hard for the, we not just because we have different beliefs and may not agree on the common good, but because of this innate individualism as well.

Parker: Right. Absolutely. It's, it's really clear if you study the history of [00:16:00] this country. that the American project, was developed because of two streams of energy that somehow managed to



come together often enough to get somewhere good. One was individual effort, to be a pioneer in a new land was to exert a lot of individual effort, often without other people within a hundred miles or a thousand miles of where you were but at the same time, coming together in community, played a critical role as well. And of course, it's a very complicated history because in the course of those efforts and in the course of community building, we're now talking about a lot of white European pioneers who came to this land. They drove indigenous [00:17:00] peoples off land that they had occupied for generations, made and broke treaties, something that goes on to this very day. And the economy of the country was founded on the labor of enslaved human beings, which is totally contradictory to the charter with which this nation began, and which is a vile abomination by any moral law that I know anything about.

And so the contradictions involved in weaving this country together, are many and powerful. And we have to live honestly in the midst of all of that. I myself, was never a slaveholder. I'm sure I had distant relatives. I don't know them. I don't know about them who were [00:18:00] slaveholders, I personally didn't create that problem, but I live with that problem today. As a white man, I carry privileges that were created, via doctrines of white supremacy and white racism. And that I am responsible for. If I live with white privilege, believing that it is mine to claim, I'm making a grave moral error easily in my own time, as vile as the original sin of enslaving human beings. If I don't recognize that form of white supremacy continues to drive a lot of American life. including the American economic system, from which people like me benefit while others do not, then I am culpable. [00:19:00] I am guilty. And if I have a moral compass at all, I need to do something about it. I don't think we have to look much farther than the last decade or so, and the current election and January 6th and the election denialism that lies behind so much of what's happening now to see that white supremacy is alive and well among us. it simply is. And I think to deny that fact is to become morally culpable because moral action begins with seeing reality, seeing truth. Love, truth, and justice. go together and they can't be separated into some mushy definition of let us love one another.

Katie: You speak about looking at our world, honestly, which can be really hard sometimes. And the book itself, healing the heart of democracy in many ways came out of your own [00:20:00] political heartbreak. and heartbreak is often the catalyst for change can you talk about the role of heartbreak and healing our politics?

Parker: Sure, as you know, Katie, it's very central for me. And you've said that the same is true for you. I think it's true for a lot of people. I think everybody knows what heartbreak is. We often think about it in. highly personal terms. lose to death someone I've dearly loved. That's heartbreaking. Someone I care for deeply has a profound failure in their life. That's heartbreaking. I find that I can't get ahead with some of my fondest dreams and aspirations, no matter how hard I try, that's heartbreaking. on every level, we are vulnerable to heartbreak, especially if there's anything at all in the world that [00:21:00] we love. And to be a person in the world not loving anything is a condition worse than heartbreak. Nihilism, I guess. but I've experienced in my own life and I've seen in many other people's lives, two ways for the heart to break. the most common understanding of the term, I think, is where the heart simply shatters under the pressure of heartbreak, scatters in pieces all over the floor as a result of a devastating experience.

And sometimes in the course of that explosion, if you will, gets, hurled at the ostensible source of its pain, like a hand grenade or a fragment bomb. that's not an uncommon scenario for how one kind of



heartbreak happens. And again, I think in our political life today, we see a lot of that going on. The demonizing, the weaponizing of this or that, [00:22:00] the aiming at the enemy with what originates in a broken heart, but quickly becomes a weapon of war that gets expressed in all kinds of crude language and personal insults and attacks that again, take us nowhere politically. However, they may satisfy the lesser angels of our nature. But there's another way for the heart to break that is not a wish dream or a fantasy. It happens all the time. And that is, in suffering, the heart can sometimes break open. Not into a million pieces, but into larger capacity. into a greater ability to hold all of life, its sufferings as well as its joys. At age 85, I've become accustomed to friends and family dying, to people I know losing the most loved person [00:23:00] in their lives. And always the survivors go into A period of underground life, as if the sun will never feel warm again, or the air will never feel fresh again, or spring will never come again.

But in so many, many cases, they emerge from that darkness that comes with deep loss. They emerge from that darkness with a sense That not in spite of the tragedy, but because of the tragedy, they are larger people. They have become more open to others. They have become more understanding and compassionate towards the various forms of life, because they now know that life is brief, and life needs to be lived with gratitude, and life needs to be lived with appreciation for otherness. It's a form of spiritual [00:24:00] maturity that for many of us often comes only when we have suffered grievous loss. And again, not in spite of the loss, but because of the loss. That's the heart opening that we're all looking for.

And I've wondered sometimes what makes the difference between those whose hearts are so brittle that they shatter, and those whose hearts, open up to new life and one way I have of thinking about that is to suggest that some people work at keeping their hearts supple, the way an athlete works at keeping the muscles and tendons supple. So that when they're put under strain, they don't snap. And the athlete can continue to function, as a trained athlete wants to function at high levels of, of [00:25:00] capacity. I think to translate that into everyday life, I think it means we suffer little deaths along the way, long before the big deaths hit us. we suffer a bad grade at school in a subject that we really wanted to major in. We suffer the loss of a friendship. It isn't the last friend we'll ever have access to, but it's a loss and it hurts. we suffer the failure of a dream. it turns out we can't pursue a career we wanted to pursue. Other work is available, and it could be, might be good work, it might be better work, You keep your heart supple, I think, by acknowledging, openly acknowledging the pain that comes with those little deaths. Not trying to pretend, oh, I can just brush that off. don't worry about me, it doesn't hurt. and then going home at night and, weeping into your pillow at 3 a. m. there's a kind of emotional honesty, I [00:26:00] think, that's possible as life goes on that keeps the heart supple and that keeps trying to learn, trying to ask the question, what's the lesson here? And one lesson certainly that's so clear to me at age 85 is that in the good times and in the bad times, life is good and I'm grateful for life. it's really about that simple.

Katie: one of our commitments at the project is politics is practice, That we have to build our capacity to do this and we're not going to be perfect all the time. And so we're going to have to do some repairs and then try again. But what I love about what you're saying is that life can also help us practice for politics, right? Like all of these little things that are happening in our day to day life that happened to all of us. Our opportunities to practice getting our heart ready for even harder things. And those harder things may come. In other aspects of life, but they may come in politics, the way we are [00:27:00] in these little moments is what helps get us ready.



Parker: I think that's absolutely right, and you're reminding me, Katie, of an old saying. I think I probably first heard it in Berkeley in the 60s. The personal is political. And I know people argue about that, but I love the phrase because it reminds me that politics isn't something that's set apart from the rest of life as a field, or an arena for the few and the skilled and the trained to occupy. Politics, doing politics, is part of being human and every part of being human feeds into how we do politics. If you're in the world as a mean spirited person, you're going to do mean spirited politics. If you're in the world as a compassionate person, you're going to do compassionate politics.

Politics is about how we understand and deploy power [00:28:00] to achieve ends, but what's the nature of those ends? are those ends that might serve the common good or are those ends that simply feather my nest? when you start putting the political question that way and not. Do I vote Democrat or Republican? Am I left or am I right? When you start putting it in terms of whose ends am I going to be serving here as I work to deploy power, my power, our power, this way or that, it suddenly, I think, becomes something that everyone can relate to. not only can be engaged in, but is engaged in, whether they think they are or not. I don't think it's possible to be alive without being political.

Katie: I think it was a, growing edge episode and you talked about this higher level question about power as a way to actually get us to be able to talk about politics [00:29:00] In a deeper way and in one way that's a lot less triggering, right? Because if you get into the specifics of policies, it just can feel so tense sometimes and it can be impossible But you suggested why don't we ask people about how comfortable are you with power? What do you think the right uses are of power that actually that offers an opportunity for some? deeper conversations that we can have across the aisle, without getting at each other's throats.

Parker: Right. And I think as we do that, one of the things that we're going to find is that a lot of people in this country feel disempowered politically. They feel so small in relation to this. this behemoth thing called politics. And part of that is, is the image of politics that we've created, partly in our minds, but the mass media creates it too. You know that somehow you're not political if whatever you're doing doesn't make a headline [00:30:00] in the New York times. As my beloved grandfather would have said, that's horse hockey. that's just not the way it is. I heard Wendell Berry once say something very wise. Wendell Berry, of course, the novelist, the poet, the essayist, who is so dedicated to ecological issues and to living in creative resonance with the land, having not only written about that, but having done that himself for decades and decades. I think he's in his late eighties now. And he once said in relation to the issues that he's devoted himself to, everybody goes around looking for a big answer to this big problem. But he said, there is no big answer to any big problem. Never has been, never will be. The only answer. to a big problem is a million, million little answers multiplied over and [00:31:00] over time and again by the small steps that each of us is able to take as a man, a woman, a human being, living on our little patch of ground during our time on earth. every step counts, you know, Every act of kindness counts. Every act of generosity counts. Every act in which you encourage a young person to grow into their potential counts. Maybe your child, it may be someone else's child. it doesn't matter. It all counts. And I think a big part of being a citizen of a democracy. is to value whatever it is we're able to do. Again, at age 85, I know people who are confined to a wheelchair or to a nursing home who have very little mobility. They're sending postcards out [00:32:00] urging people to register to vote. They're making phone calls urging people to register to vote. They remain politically engaged and they somehow understand that whatever



little they can do matters. It matters to the world and it matters to them, that we continue to feel engaged whatever our status and station in life may be. so we're talking really about how the underlayer of politics. is a lot of stuff that doesn't look political. And in partisan terms, it isn't political. It's simply a contribution to the common good. And we're all capable of doing that, whether our arena is the home, or the neighborhood, or the classroom, or the workplace, whatever it may be.

Katie: in the book, you call those spaces pre political spaces, right? They're these like civic spaces where we can [00:33:00] practice these habits. And, and you come at the, some of that is, is declining. Can you talk about what these spaces are, give some examples, and then talk about how we can practice the habits, of the heart that we need to cultivate democracy?

Parker: Yeah, let me name the Habits of the Heart first. I think we haven't had a chance to do that yet. Five of them. And then as I do that, I'm going to invite people who are listening to be thinking about, one of the venues in which they live and move and have their daily being. Maybe this is a parent of young children at home. Maybe it's someone who's neighborly or in some way active in their own neighborhood. Maybe it's someone who occupies a face to face or even a virtual workspace, five days a week. Maybe it's someone who belongs to a religious community of some sort. Maybe it's someone who [00:34:00] spends time in public spaces like sidewalk cafes and, rallies and forums and debates, sporting events, just walking down the street in a city where you run into other people, that's a public space. But just to think about these spaces a bit as I name these habits of the heart.

The point here is to say that democracy depends on citizens having certain habits of the heart which lend themselves to being good citizens in a democracy. What's the opposite of good citizens in a democracy? Abject subjects in an authoritarian system. I don't think any American wants that. I hope Americans yearn for all people in the world to be free of that. So we're talking about habits of the heart that move us toward good citizenship and a democracy. So here are the five that I talk about in the book. [00:35:00]

Number one is an understanding that we are all in this together. it's a very simple proposition, but as you were saying earlier with American individualism, We sometimes act as if it weren't true. But it is true. And if we didn't learn anything else coming out of the pandemic, we should have learned how thoroughly intertwined we are. That a toxic virus that arises halfway around the Earth is suddenly spreading across this country and killing millions of people worldwide. We're all in this together.

The second is an appreciation of the value of otherness. Because if it's true that we're all in this together, that means that there's a lot of difference between us. A lot of variety. Surface variety, racial variety. gender variety, sexual orientation variety, [00:36:00] religious philosophical variety, language, et cetera, et cetera. And there is value in that. That's I think one of the most fundamental, propositions on which democracy gets built, that diversity is not our enemy. Diversity. In human life, as in an ecosystem, a natural ecosystem, is actually a source of vitality and resilience over the long run. And you don't have to know much about American history to realize how much creativity has been instilled in this land. Because we have embraced a variety of viewpoints, experiences, ways of thinking, ways of being in the American reality.



Third, an ability to hold tension in life giving ways. absolutely critical, because with that variety comes tension. We're going [00:37:00] to disagree with each other. we're sometimes going to get upset with each other. We might get angry with each other. We might differ so profoundly that we don't see how we can ever reconcile with each other. But democracy depends on us holding those tensions in a way that, that expresses the hope that someday, some way, we may be able to find a middle ground. between two opposing stances on an issue or a problem. Or, maybe better yet, we'll find a third thing that, involves a creative synthesis of two positions that seem to be flat out opposite, contrary to each other. Both of those things have happened in human history. Both of those things have driven democracy forward, finding common ground between [00:38:00] opposite points of view and finding a creative synthesis where there suddenly emerges a third idea that neither of the contestants had thought of until the struggle of ideas began. I guess I've written somewhere that civility is not about holding our tongues. Civility is about valuing our differences. I can listen to you say something that I profoundly disagree with and I can be real polite about it and just shut up. But that's not what I'm talking about. Tolerance is, Something I can barely tolerate I've never really liked it when somebody looks at me and says I hear what you're saying and I've decided I'll just try to tolerate you. I Don't find that a very community building notion but if they're saying we differ, but let's continue to talk. Let's continue to listen Let's see if over the long haul, we can take this difference [00:39:00] somewhere creative. So that's the third habit of the heart and ability to hold tension in life giving ways.

The fourth one is a sense of personal voice and agency that each of us has a voice worth speaking and a capacity to act on whatever it is we care about or worry about.

And then finally, fifth habit of the heart, a capacity to create community, because we can't do this job alone. We always have to come together to achieve the common good. The common good is a communal virtue, not an individual virtue.

So, Early on, Katie, I said, imagine whatever venue you live and move in on a daily basis. The family, for example. I hope folks are thinking about, Okay, I'm raising a couple of kids or I have a couple of grandkids. how can I help them understand that we're all in this together? How can I help them [00:40:00] appreciate otherness? So they're not scared by it. They don't run away from it. They run toward it with curiosity, open minds. What might I have to learn? How can I help them hold tension in life giving ways? listen to each other when we get into an argument instead of flying off the handle. Maybe we'll learn something. A sense of personal voice and agency. Kids at every age have that. And sometimes with parental or grandparental encouragement, they express it in wonderful ways, and a capacity to create community, which I think is an instinct kids have until we train it out of them and tell them, you've got to do this all by yourself, which is nonsense. Nobody's ever done it all by themselves.

Katie: I can think about that in my own family, how I help my kids navigate their conflicts, right? But also, like you said, it applies to our workspaces. It applies to, neighborhood [00:41:00] disagreements. any time we interact with anyone, we have the chance to practice these things.

Parker: Absolutely. One of my favorite examples, Katie, is, walking down the streets of a city where, unlike the suburbs, you can walk for an hour and not meet up with anybody, but in the city, you're meeting up with a lot of people a lot of the time as you just walk down the sidewalk. And what you learn as you do that is that it is possible for people, for millions of people in an urban community to



move individually toward very different destinations on very different schedules in very different ways without slamming into each other and breaking their noses. You learn what I call the choreography of urban life. You learn that you can get exactly where you want to go without hurting [00:42:00] or being hurt if you're willing to jog a little right, jog a little left, slow down a little, speed up a little. Negotiate the foot traffic on the sidewalk and everyone just comes out fine and everyone gets where they're going on time.

Katie: That's a bodily lesson in civics. that gets lost when we create these communities where you never run into anyone on the streets.it's a lesson in how it really is possible, for us to understand that we're all in this together and to learn how to negotiate that in ways that allow us to pursue our own goals. So I want to dig into something you said a little bit earlier, which is this connection between inner work. and social change. I see it a lot in, the collaboration you have with Carrie Newcomer at the Growing Edge, where there's so much about our personal spiritual journeys and our vocational journeys, but also this social journey [00:43:00] that we're on together as a collective and how those intertwine. But also then the work you've done on wholeness and our need to confront What is divided within us before we can create wholeness outside of us. So can you talk a little bit about how those are related?

Parker: I think in Western culture especially, the inner life has been a highly neglected, subject for a long time. it gets very little attention in our educational system. I went through our educational system from kindergarten on through a Ph. D. And observed, as the years went by, that I was never really asked,to examine myself.I was increasingly asked to examine the world around me and to gather the information and the skills necessary to manipulate that world. in the profession of my choosing, whether that was a [00:44:00] sociologist or an organizer or whatever it might be but the deeper I went into education, the quote, higher I went into education, the less I was challenged to think about what I was bringing to that equation.

And whether the knowledge that I was gaining and the way I was holding it and my intentions in using it were for better or for worse for me, the spiritual life is about doing that kind of self examination, reflecting on where I am in this mix, reflecting on the various drives within me and asking which of them is going to get expressed in this particular moment around this particular challenge or need. I often think of Abraham Lincoln in this regard. As you know, one of the things I do in my book *Healing the Heart of Democracy* is write about Lincoln, who from a [00:45:00] very young age was challenged with pretty severe clinical depression. his survival depended on coming to terms with this darkness within him, which frequently tempted him from his late teens onward. Um,to take his own life. When he was in his late teens or early twenties, his neighbors in Illinois, actually kept watch on him for periods of time for fear that he might go over to the dark side and commit suicide.

I've had three deep descents into clinical depression myself. I've written about them and especially in other books like *Let Your Life Speak*, but also in the *Democracy* book. And so I understand why it is that in order to survive that kind of deep darkness, Lincoln had to wrestle with himself. And he came up I think with a very interesting language around [00:46:00] what he discovered. He discovered that we have the lesser angels and the better angels of our nature.better angels language. I don't know that he ever wrote about the lesser angels, but anybody who talks about the better angels knows that there are lesser angels backstage.It's not just a rhetorical flourish, it's not just a poetic phrasing, it's a profound truth. And I think we all need to come to terms with a darkness within us that can pull us



over to the side of despair, of anger, the kind of anger that's rooted in despair. the kind of destructive action that can come out of that anger.

And again, I invite people to look through those lenses at what's happening in our political life in the United States of America right [00:47:00] now. a lot of despair is getting reflected in political nihilism, where the basic message is burn it all down. it's very strange for me to see people running on the notion that the only good government is no government, or very little government, and they want to be elected in order that they can create less government, not more and better, but less. There are countries in the world that have no government. And I would challenge advocates of the less or no government belief to visit one of those countries for a year or so, and then come back and tell us what they now believe. so much of what's happens in our world is a projection of what's going on inside of us.

And what's going on inside of us ranges from [00:48:00] brilliant light to deep and self destructive dark. And we have to be courageous enough to find out what's in there and to watch it happening. And, try to understand how to come out on the right side of these very complicated inner dynamics, the life giving side. So let me just, conclude my response to that inner life question by reading the quote from Terry Tempest Williams that was so informative to me, when I set out to write *Healing the heart of democracy*. I love this quote and I love what Terry Tempest Williams, a great American writer has written about the democratic spaces in our lives.

She says, the human heart is the first home of democracy. It is where we embrace our questions. Can we be [00:49:00] 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? Now, I think anybody who studies that quote will understand That Terry Tempest Williams gets it. That the human heart is a mixed bag. She's not guaranteeing that because it comes from the heart it will end up being democracy. It might be authoritarianism. It might be totalitarianism. It might be fascism. It might be nihilism, because the heart has all those impulses in it. She asks questions of the heart. Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? [00:50:00] 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 not give up on each other? to not say, let's just burn the whole thing down or blow the whole thing up. I deeply believe that we need in our common life to be paying attention to these inner life questions. for our own sake, the sake of our resilience and our capacity to enjoy life and share life with others. And for the sake of the democracy, which we inherited as an ongoing task to create a more perfect union.

Katie: I just love that quote, by Terry Tempest William. it's on the website. I come back to it all the time for myself of, can I listen? can I be equitable? it's one that. That we can [00:51:00] examine collectively, but also individually. one of the other things that I really love about your book, that shines through is you really deeply love, American democracy and our institutions, and I think we live in a time where we can get really cynical about those institutions, and give up on them a little bit. And so I would just love a little bit of your reflection on what you love about our form of government.

Parker: I think what I love, above all else is that in its purest form, in its most deeply realized form, democracy puts faith in people like you and me. It says you are capable of self determination in a way



that takes into account the needs of other people. And that's big trust. That's very big trust. [00:52:00] And, we should value that. We should value that profoundly. In a world that has said to so many people, you don't know anything worth knowing, you don't understand anything worth understanding. You need to turn your life over to experts or people who will live it for you, whether that's religious authorities or scientific authorities or educational authorities.

Now there's a place for authority in life, of course there is. There are people that I recognize as knowing a lot more about X, Y, or Z than I do. but, the fundamental need to live a life of self determination and to be trusted, to be able to do that in a way that recognizes the needs of other people. That to me is a pearl of great price. And I think that's what democracy rightly understood does for us. when we live it. in a way that, that lives into the trust that American democracy puts in people, [00:53:00] then our hearts and minds are going to be enlarged and expanded because we are invited into other people's realities.

I'm a white middle class straight guy who has been favored, through no merit of my own, with a good education and enough to retire on in some comfort. but I will tell you this, if the only people I could interact with were the kind I just described, I would be bored unto death. to keep recycling the same worldview, the same point of view, the same opinions, the same material that, that comes from living the lifestyle that I've lived for 85 years. I can't imagine anything more stifling, [00:54:00] more stultifying, less stultifying. Contributory to my growth than that. I so deeply value the growth that has come from meeting people who fit none of my demographic characteristics. If I had never encountered that kind of diversity in a way that democracy, if I want to take democracy seriously, forces me. If I had never encountered any of that, I think I'd still be probably thinking and acting the way I was when I was, I don't know, 16 years old. I don't think I would have grown an inch. How could I possibly, if I hadn't started encountering otherness and diversity and the richness of the American project along the way?

So I love that about democracy. It has allowed me to grow. It has in some ways compelled me to grow. I sometimes think, All of our problems would go away if people [00:55:00] would just grow up, if adults would just grow up, they have all this power, why don't they just grow up. And of course, I can't assume that I've grown up and I don't, I, I don't think I have because that's an ongoing project. but I said earlier, it is a basic expectation of grownups that they take responsibility for their own lives rather than spending the rest of their lives blaming other people. And I do think that democracy invites us to take that step into maturity, personal and political maturity, just say, okay, This is us. And I'm part of us. And I need to take my own responsibility and help the rest of us do the same. that minimal form of being grown up, I think, would help a lot in our present troubles.

Katie: I [00:56:00] love that reflection back and it's interesting because it's, loving democracy for what it creates and it's this, and really it's this opportunity to be in community with people who are different from us. And so it's almost, it takes us those habits of the heart that you talked about that allow us to engage politically and have our hearts break open and grow our capacity. That doesn't only, improve our collective life, it allows us to flourish, all of us as individuals to flourish, too. your own reflections about how, living into democracy has enriched your life is just such a beautiful testament to what's possible when we try and hold those differences and celebrate them, you know?



Parker: This is why, Katie, I feel so strongly that The struggle for liberation among the oppressed is not just their struggle. It's my struggle, too I'm not among the oppressed I'm the kind of person that this society was designed to work best for it [00:57:00] has worked for me and it does work for me I can get the kind of medical care I need I, I could send my kids to the colleges they wanted to go to, et cetera, et cetera. Things that a lot of other people cannot do. As long as one of us is oppressed, that pain is going to land back on my life. And I feel it. I feel it as a tragedy that I have a responsibility to help correct. even though I wasn't there at its origins. what I'm trying to say here comes not simply from some sort of altruism or some sort of empathy for the other. It comes from a recognition that when one person in this world is oppressed the way so many are, I pay a price of unease, even dis ease, about living in a world that's capable of treating [00:58:00] people with such cruelty.It's very hard for me

Katie: Yeah.

Parker: and here I know that I speak in relation to your experience working with homelessness as well, it's very hard for me to get comfortable in a world where 25 percent of the kids in this most affluent of countries go to bed hungry every night and live in food insufficient households.

Katie: Yeah.

Parker: And in some cases, subsisting on starvation diets. It's very hard for me to pretend that doesn't exist. And that impacts. the quality of my life, and it drives me to do what I can, when I can, to try to somehow, help them find a way toward living a full and fruitful [00:59:00] life.

Katie: It's really hard to look at that and say that out loud, say it to ourselves. Even, the ways in which we are failing as a country, right? to those Children, to people who are incarcerated for people who don't have homes, people don't have enough, but people aren't safe. Mhm. And this was another area of the book, especially when I read it again in preparation for this call that really struck me, which is that there is a tendency to either not look at that because it's so painful to acknowledge. So it's easier to just turn the other way. If you have the privilege of being able to do that without it directly impacting you, So there's this tendency, this push here, because it hurts so much to look at it with honesty. I go back to my experience of political heartbreak, and I grew up, I loved our founding documents. I loved our country. my dad was in the military, being able to believe in, [01:00:00] everyone's created equal, everyone has opportunities. That was a core part of who I was. In addition to our family discussing it, it was also like, my dad is willing to go die for this, right? It must be important. We must be good. And he's willing to, leave us for a long periods of time and we move all the time. We do all of this for this country. when my eyes became open to the ways in which we weren't meeting those ideals, it was devastating and it made me want to pull away, honestly. And so when I. Read the last bit of the book where you talk about myths and what myths are, and that myths they're true in some ways, but they're not true in others. But more than anything, they're aspirational. It made me be able to love our country again. It made me be like, I can believe in this again, because it is aspirational. So can you talk about myth as aspiration and how that invites us to action?



Parker: [01:01:00] Yeah, thank you for that. that means a lot to me, growing up in a military family as you did, and to go through that evolution of understanding, and to have been helped by the notion of aspiration. I find the founding documents of this country very human. not only because of the high values they express, but because of the contradictions that are built into them.

That's what it is to be human. To be human is, I'll quote Leonard Cohen here, the great singer songwriter. It is a crack in everything and to be human is to be cracked, right? But Leonard Cohen says, forget your perfect offering. ring the bells that still can ring. There's a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in. I love those lines it is in the cracks that the light comes through and the light reveals us as we are, which is complex and contradictory beings who [01:02:00] aspire to the best, but who often fall short of the best. And when the founders included a phrase like, achieving a more perfect union, they were acknowledging that we don't have it right yet. and we may never. it's an ongoing struggle to get it right. It's an ongoing struggle between the lesser angels of our nature and the better angels of our nature, as Lincoln would have it, duking it out, in hopes of making a little progress, a little more progress, knowing that we also take steps back. as people rewrite history and actually actively try to forget stuff that's true. One of the big flaws of our politics today is that there's a whole wing of American politics that imagines that somehow America [01:03:00] once achieved perfection and has now lost it.

I've asked a lot of people. When was this country great for everyone that is supposed to be included in this democratic experiment of ours, and nobody's ever been able to answer that 'cause there never was a time when that was the case. what I love about aspirations is even though they aren't. real in the moment they are true and that truth calls us forward. That truth reminds us, Oh, that's what we wanted when we were in our right minds, that's what we wanted when the better angels of our nature were speaking through us and the last thing we want to do is to give up on our aspirations. I, I don't know about anybody else, but I think, I've lived an aspirational life. have [01:04:00] I achieved everything I hoped to achieve? No. And I'm old enough now to realize That was, it was a total pipe dream that would ever even possibly happen. Right. but do my aspirations still count? You bet they do because they pull me forward, into life, animated with gratitude and animated by a sense that I would like to use my privilege and whatever power comes with it. For something other than feathering my own nest, for a higher purpose, a higher good, for the common good, which again, is the healthiest place for me to be individually, as well as the best place for other people, to find relief from their suffering.

This is a long project, this thing called democracy. It's an intergenerational project. [01:05:00] your dad made his contribution to it. God bless him. You're making your contribution to it. God bless you. we're all working it out in our own way, with our own gifts and with our own sense of what's needed and what's within our reach to do.

I'm going to read a quote from the book, thinking that we're probably coming close to the end here. and this is a summary of where I am with some of these questions. And then one more quote from, An activist that I learn a lot from. the quote from the book goes like this, the democratic experiment is endless unless we blow up the lab and the explosives to do the job are found within us. You notice I didn't say within the other party, or within the other guy. They're within us, and I'm part of us. But so also is the heart's alchemy within us that can [01:06:00] 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, which of course is what we've spent a lot of time during this hour talking about.

Our job is just to keep at it, doing what we can day by day. I don't have the same energies at 85 as I had at 45, but there's still stuff I can do. I can't multi task anymore, like I used to do, but I can do one thing at a time, and sometimes do it reasonably well.

The activists [01:07:00] who has inspired me most recently, and there have been a lot of them over the years, is a woman named Cheryl Eiffel who was for a number of years the head of the legal defense fund of the NAACP. I learn a lot from my black activist friends and colleagues and from those I admire from afar as with Cheryl Eiffel, whom I've never met. But she was interviewed a few months ago on public radio talking about her long tenure with the NAACP. legal defense fund of the NAACP. And she talked about this long intergenerational struggle that black Americans have been engaged in since the day the first ship holding enslaved human beings hit these shores. And she said towards the end of the interview, she said to me, I've read a lot of black history. Story after story, episode, after episode. And the one thing I can tell you is I have [01:08:00] never read a story where the last line reads, and then we gave up.

And there was a long silence as the interviewer and I'm sure many in the audience, like me, just absorbed what she had just said. That the story of social change, especially among oppressed people, never ends with the statement, and then we gave up. I'm not going to give up either, and I know you aren't. And, I'm pretty certain that people who care enough about democracy to listen to this podcast Won't be giving up anytime soon

Katie: you know, this is the final, episode of our series, and I think to end on that is beautiful, Whatever happens in the election, whether your party wins or it doesn't win, whatever happens, there's still so much work to be done. And if you're discouraged, if you think it's just too [01:09:00] much come back to that, to not give up.

Parker: If you need to celebrate, celebrate if you need to grieve, grieve, but whatever you do don't give up

Katie: thank you so much for your wisdom and the book and the conversation today and for the work you continue to do as an individual in this great ongoing experiment called democracy.

Parker: Thank You Katie and for the powerful work you're doing for this wonderful interview for all that's on your heart regarding democracy and the common good. And I'll just add this, Katie, I don't know how old you are, but I'm at least twice as old as you. And the, among the other connections that I truly value in this long term work are the intergenerational connections that, that you represent as we sit here talking with each other.



So thank you for holding up that end of the conversation. You know, we elders. need [01:10:00] you younger people and maybe from time to time we can help you along as well. So thank you and take good care.

Katie: Oh, thank you, Parker.