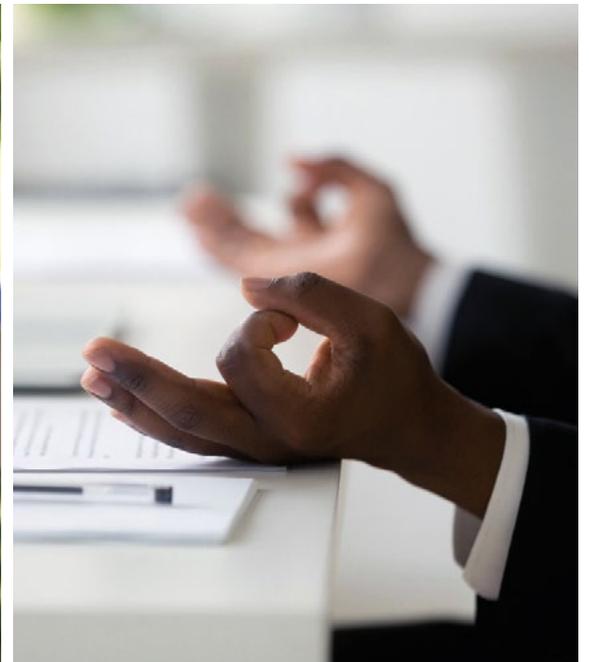


# Practicing Democracy at Work



Day after day, month after month, year after year, Americans spend a major portion of our lives at our workplaces. It's obvious, then, that if we are to embrace democratic values, virtues, and practices, we need to do so at work. The way we go about our jobs and how we relate to our colleagues — both in our own workplace and on behalf of the larger community of workers — will reveal how much we value the common good and the national motto “Out of many, one.”

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## 1

### Create a Mission Statement

Spiritual practice often begins with self-assessment. Do you feel that you can seek and express democratic values and virtues through your work? Spiritual writer Matthew Fox in *The Reinvention of Work* observes that “Both life and livelihood are about living in depth, living with meaning, purpose, joy, and a sense of contributing to the greater community.” His Holiness the Dalai Lama in *The Art of Happiness at Work* writes: “Workers should recognize that by actively participating in this workforce, in some way they are acting out their role as a good citizen in their society, a productive member of society. ... If they think along these lines, then they can see some purpose in what they are doing that is beyond just providing a means of livelihood for themselves.” Write a mission statement for your work identifying how it contributes to your community and nation. Keep this on your desk or elsewhere so you can refer to it daily.

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## 2

### Pause

Many Americans highly value professional achievement, which is reflected in such democratic virtues as the pursuit of excellence, determination, assertiveness, and love of learning and knowledge. At the same time, momentarily setting aside an achievement orientation helps us tune into deeper currents of wisdom that strengthen democratic virtues like adaptability, honesty, humility, integrity, and social conscience. In *Be the Change* by Ed and Deb Shapiro, meditation teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn shares a story about starting a business workshop with ten to fifteen minutes of sitting quietly with no agenda. Many of the participants had powerful and moving experiences as they shifted from a focus on *doing* to just *being*. To integrate a habit of pausing at work, begin each meeting with a few minutes of silence. If you can, hold longer silent-space sessions twice a day.

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## 3

### Organize a Service Day

Much has been written about the common good. Some Americans think of the common good as placing the good of the country and of our fellow Americans above individual interests. Others think of the common good as the individual taking responsibility to improve the lives of others. Whatever your understanding of the common good, it can be pursued in your work life. You can

do so by seeking to build and maintain supportive relationships with your coworkers. You can also do so by engaging with your coworkers in activities that are beneficial to your community and the larger world. Doing so can even contribute to recruitment efforts and employee retention. Some employers place such a high value on community relations that they offer employees paid compensation for two days of volunteering a month. Here are some ideas for organizing a service day.

- Find out what is important to your coworkers and what is needed in your community. You might check what community service events have been held in the past and decide whether you want to create something new to fill a gap, partner with an existing organization, or expand an existing event. Here are some categories of need for your discussions with coworkers: schools/education, children, troubled teens, senior citizens, citizens who are hungry/homeless, the environment, animals, community safety and crime prevention, community enhancement.
- Consider your own and your coworker's skills and talents to make sure you put them to good use. You will want to choose your project or event based on what you're good at and what you have the resources to do, as well as its potential impact.
- Choose a date that works for as many of your coworkers as possible.
- Plan, plan, plan — far in advance. Consider your goals, the practicalities and logistics of accomplishing them, and possible partners. Factor into the picture potential complications, especially safety or liability issues, volunteer recruitment, budget, timeline, fundraising/ sponsorships, set-up and clean-up plans, and post-event assessment.
- Publicize your effort/event sufficiently in advance and as much as possible.

Here are some service day ideas to get your mental wheels turning:

- Coordinate a beautification project. You can clean up or plant flowers and trees at a local park or alongside a river, lake, or highway. Or repair, paint, or otherwise improve walls, fences, buildings, or playgrounds.
- Organize a community blood drive.
- Hold a fun run or other charity race like a walk-a-thon or bike-a-thon.
- Organize a car wash and donate the profits.
- Hold an auction to benefit a charity.
- Organize an event for teaching computer, smart phone, and other technology skills to older persons or new device users.
- Host a holiday meal.
- Start a community garden.
- Create a new walking trail or care for an existing trail.
- Organize an outing for urban youth who have little exposure to nature.
- Participate in building a house for Habitat for Humanity.

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## 4

### Encourage Employer Donation Programs

Throughout history, flourishing democracies have been known for their generosity and willingness to sacrifice for others. One proof of this is the number of charities and nonprofit organizations that regularly receive support from individuals, corporations, and government agencies. In *The Better World Handbook: From Good Intentions to Everyday Actions*, authors Brett Johnson, Brian Klocke, Ellis Jones, and Ross Haenfler suggest that you find out whether your workplace encourages charitable giving. Does your employer have a charitable donation matching fund program, or does it offer the option to take an amount you specify from your paycheck to go directly to the charities you chose? If it doesn't, ask if they would be willing to start one of these programs.

Regardless of your employer's participation in a donation program, you can create your own ways of bringing together your workplace and the social and environmental impacts that are important to you. Here are some possibilities:

- Ask for charitable donations instead of gifts for your next birthday, promotion party, or other celebration.
- When your office plans to hold a party for either an employee or a client, advocate for donating the money that would have been spent on the party to a cause of that employee's or client's choosing or a cause that relates to your work.

Not all company donations have to be monetary. Here are some ideas for non-monetary giving:

- Organize a lunch-time bake sale to benefit your favorite charities.
- Organize lunch-time meal deliveries to people in need.
- Organize a gift collection, like knitted blankets for hospital patients, persons who are homeless, or nursing facility residents, and deliver the gifts during a lunch break.
- Organize a collection event. Leave boxes in a lobby or break room for art supplies or used sports equipment you can donate to after-school programs, care kits or winter clothes for homeless shelters, unused makeup and perfume for a women's shelter, stuffed animals for hospitalized children, baby clothes and supplies for new parents, books for a library, and so forth. A powerful way to host a collection event related to food is to hold a fast-at-work day to coincide with collecting food you can donate to the local food bank.
- Organize a chores-for-another weekend. Identify an individual or individuals in your community who could use help with errands, housework, or yard work. Gather volunteers from your coworkers, and set a schedule.
- Organize a carpool.
- Once a month, invite a person who is food insecure to share a lunch with you and your co-workers.
- Organize a home-alone safety class for children or self-defense workshop for people of all ages.

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## 5

### Get Political

Whether we admit it or not, most of us bring our political views with us to work. Though our workplaces are not primary spaces in which we live our political lives, they can be appropriate venues for some democratic activities. You could organize a “write for a cause” lunch, in which you and your coworkers write articles, letters, or e-mails in support of causes of your own choosing. The organizer can provide contact information for government officials or agencies handling a wide variety of issues. As an election nears, have a “register to vote” station in your workplace. Bring voter registration applications and encourage your coworkers to complete the applications at lunch or during a break. Drop the completed applications at the post office on your way home.

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## 6

### Use Right Speech

Many values of American democracy are important in our work -- such as equality and justice. Likewise, many virtues of American democracy -- such as caring, cooperation, courage, honesty, integrity, respect, and trustworthiness -- help create a positive, professional, and productive working environment. Such an environment is only possible when assistants and supervisors alike are treated with dignity and respect. Right speech also is a democratic practice when used in correspondence to those both near and far. In *The Difference a Day Makes*, author Karen M. Jones suggests the following ways to encourage right speech:

- Speak up if you hear a slur against a person or group.
- Say “yes” when someone asks if you are offended by racial, ethnic, or otherwise inappropriate jokes. If you do hear such comments, explain politely and with humor, if possible, that you prefer not to hear them.
- Leave the room if someone persists in making inappropriate remarks.
- Be sure to follow both your workplace guidelines and applicable laws for reporting discrimination or harassment.

Another way to remind yourself to practice right speech is to use a gatha, a short saying from the Buddhist tradition. Here is one by Thich Nhat Hanh in *Happiness: Essential Mindfulness Practices*:

*Words can travel thousands of miles.*

*May my words create mutual understanding and love.*

*May they be as beautiful as gems,*

*as lovely as flowers.*

---

## 7

### Send Holy Emails

Practicing democratic virtues in relation to what we hear and say is only part of practicing democracy with our words. Our written words are equally important in making sure that we are practicing dignity, respect, and consideration. So why not take workplace civility to the next level? In *Liturgy of the Ordinary*, Anglican priest Trish Harrison Warren suggests that we reframe sending emails as holy tasks, as an unfolding of God's mission. She writes, "Our task is not to somehow inject God into our work but to join God in the work he is already doing in and through our vocational lives." Warren also asserts that we should love our neighbors through our work, even if that's "someone sitting at a computer screen far away." Our emails should carry hope and love. "Blessed and sent" emails are a great way to practice the democratic virtues of sincerity, responsibility, and self-discipline. Think of your work as an unfolding of a divine mission while you are drafting your emails, and set the intention to love your neighbors when you click "send."

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## 8

### Reframe Work Jargon

We can practice democratic virtues in how we refer to our work as well. In *Getting a Grip*, Frances Moore Lappé, who has written extensively on world hunger and living democracy, suggests that we consider the difference between such words as "consumers" and "buyers," "regulations" and "standards." She asserts that we don't "consume" the products we buy because those products don't just disappear from the ecosystem when we're done with them. Similarly, "regulations" conveys constraint and oversight whereas "standards" signifies our commitment to excellence. Accordingly, she advocates that we use "standards" when "addressing our needs as citizens for clean air, water, and soil." Take a few minutes to reflect on what jargon permeates your workplace. Do you use words like "consumers", "regulations," "minimum standards," "high standards," etc.? Does your work jargon coincide with your company's vision and mission? What about its ethics? Does the language you and your coworkers use reflect the full life cycle of your company's products or services? If not, consider changing your word choices, and start talking to your coworkers about doing the same.

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## 9

### Advocate for Corporate Ethics

In *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological and Economical Transformation*, Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, a professor of Christian ethics, argues that we are called to love neighbor as self and to nurture Earth's well-being. Thus, she asserts that we are obligated to strive against any powers that keep us from following this call. She specifically points to global corporations that have become so powerful that they negatively influence our relationships with our neighbors and with the Earth. Her concern with the imbalance of corporate power versus public power is worth considering in light of the core American democratic value of public sovereignty -- the principle that the power of the government comes from us, the people. Moe-Lobeda offers the following approaches to restoring a balance of power to and for the people:

- Turn to local and small- or medium-scale businesses and financial institutions as an alternative to global entities.
- Evaluate a business corporation's moral culture as part of its corporate social responsibility; especially do this for your own company or organization.
- Take action as citizens and consumers to pressure a corporation to voluntarily change its conduct and constrain corporate conduct within socially responsible, moral, and ethical bounds.
- Take citizen action to achieve corporate social accountability through publicly mandated regulation and legislation and to limit the privatization and marketing of some essential goods, such as water, seeds, and HIV/AIDS drugs.

## 10

### Reduce Your Footprint

The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, an internationally recognized authority on climate science, recently released an alarming report warning that if global warming is not kept to a maximum of 1.5 degrees Celsius within the next twelve years, then even half a degree will significantly worsen the risks of drought, floods, extreme heat, and poverty for hundreds of millions of people. Ninety-one leading climate scientists from 40 countries analyzed more than 6,000 scientific climate-change studies and concluded that we have an extremely short time to transition our economy away from fossil fuels and other carbon pollution as part of a necessary global mobilization in pursuit of a stable climate. At the same time, the U.S. has been the world's biggest source of historical emissions, and the Trump administration has withdrawn the U.S. from the 2015 Paris climate agreement. Yet the report predicts drastic reductions in grain yields and food supplies, dramatic shrinking of the economy, six times as many wildfires in the U.S., states of permanent drought, many major cities flooded as Arctic ice sheets melt and sea levels rise, the death of nearly all coral reefs, and other disasters. What does this mean for how we practice democracy? We encourage you to consider the democratic values of justice for all, the common good, and popular sovereignty as you take the following steps:

- Consider what changes you can make to reduce your carbon footprint and make a commitment with your coworkers to do so. Check in with your coworkers regularly to make sure you are all meeting your goals. A free carbon footprint calculator (such as those listed below) can help you determine the amount of carbon dioxide and other carbon compounds emitted due to your consumption of fossil fuel.

[terrapass.com/carbon-footprint-calculator](http://terrapass.com/carbon-footprint-calculator)

[carbonfootprint.com/calculator.aspx](http://carbonfootprint.com/calculator.aspx)

[nature.org/en-us/get-involved/how-to-help/consider-your-impact/carbon-calculator](http://nature.org/en-us/get-involved/how-to-help/consider-your-impact/carbon-calculator)

- Determine your workplace's carbon footprint. Start with the office, plant, or store. Then consider how much travel is required as part of your doing business in the world. Convene a group to review what actions your company/organization can take to reduce consumption and emissions. Make recommendations to the appropriate decision-makers. Make sure the group follows up regularly to see how you are doing in meeting your goals.

- Research the impact of global warming on the area in which you live and work. Find out what, if any, actions your local, state, and federal authorities are planning to address these problems. Consider how you believe a government of the people, by the people, and for the people should address these challenges. Get involved in advocating for the solutions you believe are fair, just, and a reflection of America's core democratic values.

## 11

### Support Living Wages

The U.S. Declaration of Independence espouses equality. The U.S. Pledge of Allegiance espouses justice for all. The U.S. Constitution espouses the general welfare, i.e., the common good. Yet, according to a 2017 report by the *Wall Street Journal*, the median pay for CEOs of the largest U.S. companies was \$12.1 million. At the same time, the current federal minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour, and has not increased since July 2009. Many refer to the federal minimum wage as “starvation pay.” Millions of low-wage workers in our country work full-time and still can’t afford life’s necessities. And the gap between workers’ wages and the cost of necessities is growing. Are we living up to our American democratic values and virtues of equality, justice, and the common good with the U.S.’s income inequality at an all-time high?

A living wage is the minimum income necessary for a worker to meet basic needs like food, housing, clothing utilities, transportation, health care, and child care, in consideration of location and type of household. As many full-time workers in the U.S. do not earn enough to support themselves and their families, living wage campaigns are becoming more visible and frequent. These campaigns assert that a living wage is a human right and that the employee, employer, and the community all benefit from a living wage. Employees would be more willing and better able to work, employers would have less costs associated with employee turnover or reduced productivity, and the community would be helped by having citizens able to purchase their basic needs. Moreover, the lack of a living wage has been linked to other workplace abuses and labor-rights violations. Our fellow citizens cannot fully participate in our democracy if they are forced to work multiple jobs and expend all their time and energy to simply survive, and our democracy cannot flourish without the participation of all its citizens. Here are some suggestions for how you and your colleagues can help secure a living wage for all citizens:

- Support campaigns to ensure that no full-time worker lives in poverty by raising the minimum wage to at least \$15 per hour.
- Join a group or take a service trip that focuses on advocating for a living wage and other worker’s rights, like the right to breaks, potable drinking water, well-maintained toilet and handwashing facilities, and overtime pay protection.
- Support the labor movement to ensure that workers can engage in collective bargaining to have a say in their own economic futures.
- Join an advocacy group that focuses on establishing equal pay for women.
- Support legislation to raise the minimum wage, legislation that makes it easier for workers to organize and bargain collectively, and legislation that establishes equal pay.
- Encourage large employers to provide on-site child care.

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## 12

### Hire People Who Are Differently Abled

In *The Problem of Wealth: A Christian Response to a Culture of Affluence*, theology professor Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty tells the story of her experience of a ropes course. At the time she was teaching at St. Andrews Presbyterian College, which had established a curriculum with the mission of educating able-bodied students alongside differently abled students. In the ropes course, both groups of students participated; often able-bodied students assisted their peers with disabilities. Towards the end of the course, when everyone was getting tired, two of the students in wheel chairs wheeled able-bodied students through the remainder of the course. Hinson-Hasty writes, “When the students faced the challenges, they entered into a sort of dance; learning how to work together, collaborating to find a way through. Everyone was involved, and as a result, a household of equal partners emerged. Everyone was valued according to what they contributed as anyone might have needed help on that day. ... [This] model for daily life suggests a way of ordering social, economic, and political systems and structures in forms appropriate to what [Catholic theologian Catherine] LaCugna calls ‘the mystery of persons in communion.’ ”

As Hinson-Hasty points out, people with disabilities frequently experience income poverty and other economic deprivation at two to three times the rate for persons without disabilities. To practice the democratic values of equality and justice for all, and to also practice the democratic virtue of embrace of diversity, make a commitment to promote the hiring and retention of differently abled persons as an important step toward reducing poverty and expanding economic inclusion. You can easily find free online resources with helpful recruitment and retention suggestions. Here is one: [eeoc.gov/eeoc/interagency/upload/employing\\_people\\_with\\_disabilities\\_toolkit\\_february\\_3\\_2015\\_v4-2.pdf](https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/interagency/upload/employing_people_with_disabilities_toolkit_february_3_2015_v4-2.pdf).

Consult whoever handles human resources for your business, and get started.

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## 13

### Create a Modern-Day Jubilee

The Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania — widely known as a symbol of American independence — was rung on July 8, 1776, to summon people to hear the Declaration of Independence. The bell is cast with the lettering “Proclaim LIBERTY Throughout all the Land unto all the Inhabitants Thereof”, a reference to the hallowed 50th year, known as the jubilee, mentioned in the Bible (Leviticus 25:10).

In a jubilee year, liberty was to be proclaimed to all inhabitants of the country, servants and masters alike; property ownership was to revert to the family that originally possessed the property to reestablish the original arrangement regarding the division of land; and all inhabitants of the country were to live a simple life, living off of storage from previous years, allowing the land to rest. The jubilee was to be a year of spiritual and physical renewal. In “[Toward a Jubilee Economy and Ecology in the Modern World](#),” American Rabbi Arthur Waskow offers possibilities for a modern-day jubilee:

- Recycle wealth by transferring liquid assets from large corporations to grassroots and local businesses that are worker-owned, consumer co-ops, family-operated, or neighborhood-operated. If liquid assets aren't available, transfer a portion of the ownership rights to a community-ownership trust that can transfer assets to workers.
- Take a sabbatical from research and development every seven years to reflect on the environmental and social impact of production and technology.
- Empower neighbors to encourage economic renewal, cooperative business ventures, and celebrate their life together one day a month. In "[Healing America: Beyond Economics](#)," Rabbi Waskow offers the idea that community celebrations could relate to a neighborhood venture, like an energy co-op to reduce energy costs for neighborhood homes and businesses.

Now it's your turn to "proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." Take 10–15 minutes to reflect on the merits of a jubilee and its possible applications for you, your workplace, and your community. Jot down whatever ideas you have without editing. Come back to the list later and read it over again before making any changes. Then discuss your ideas with a coworker and decide which ones to act on.

## 14

### Practice Humility

In *From Enemy to Friend: Jewish Wisdom and the Pursuit of Peace*, Rabbi Amy Eilberg considers how Alan Morinis, a teacher of Jewish Mussar practices, defines humility: "to occupy as much space as is my natural right in the world, neither to diminish my own place nor to rob others of theirs." This definition fits perfectly with practicing democratic virtues. If we embody this sort of humility, we "lay claim to that which is rightfully ours, including speaking up for our views" while being "careful not to deny the other's right to his or hers." How better to practice core democratic values like equality, freedom, liberty, and justice than with the virtue of humility? When we do so, we can't help but recognize each other's humanity even when we have difficulty valuing another's point of view. Here are some suggestions from Eilberg and Morinis for how to practice democracy with humility:

- Pay attention to how you share space with others. Do you spread your stuff around? Do you place your things on the empty chairs beside you? Do you move them when someone else enters the space? Do you diminish your own needs by squeezing or twisting yourself to make room for others as if you don't have the right to be comfortable?
- Pay attention to how you share airtime in meetings or classrooms. How often do you insist on sharing your thoughts? Do you do so at length or succinctly? Are you aware of how your sharing impacts the time available for others? Do you defer to others? Do you act as if you have little to contribute?
- If you notice that you often claim the available time or space, experiment with stepping back and inviting others to take their rightful place.
- If you tend to think of your viewpoint as the only view, practicing asking yourself whether someone knows something you don't. Practice learning from other's perspectives.
- If you avoid stepping up or speaking out, practice asserting your personhood, needs, and perspectives.

## DEMOCRATIC VALUES, VIRTUES, AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

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

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

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

For more on American democratic values, virtues, and the language of democracy, visit [PracticingDemocracy.net](http://PracticingDemocracy.net).



## Additional Resources

1. For more resources related to the **Practicing Democracy Project**, visit: [spiritualityandpractice.com/projects/practicing-democracy-project/overview](https://spiritualityandpractice.com/projects/practicing-democracy-project/overview)
2. To download additional **Practicing Democracy Guides**, visit: [spiritualityandpractice.com/practicing-democracy-project/program-plans](https://spiritualityandpractice.com/practicing-democracy-project/program-plans)
3. For more on **compassion**, visit: [spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/6/compassion](https://spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/6/compassion)
4. For more on **kindness**, visit: [spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/19/kindness](https://spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/19/kindness)
5. For more on **justice**, visit: [spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/18/justice](https://spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/18/justice)
6. For more on **transformation**, visit: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/practices/alphabet/view/32/transformation>



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

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

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

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**For more information on the Project, visit [PracticingDemocracy.net](https://PracticingDemocracy.net).**

