

DEMOCRACY'S

Choosing to Save

Our Country by

Bringing Democracy

to Life

EDGE



FRANCES
MOORE LAPPÉ

with the assistance of
Rachel Burton, Anna Lappé,
and Hope Richardson

 **JOSSEY-BASS**
A Wiley Imprint
www.josseybass.com

“There is a small number of people in every generation who are fore-runners in thought, action, spirit, who swerve past the barriers of greed and power to hold a torch high for the rest of us. Frances Moore Lappé is one of those. Her writing has done that again and again. Here, in her latest work, she brings the familiar eloquence of expression, simplicity of language, poetic and passionate, to our nation’s most urgent problem, the reclaiming of democracy.”

—**Howard Zinn**, author, *A People’s History of the United States*

“Make no mistake, this is a very powerful book, and its scope and vision are huge. In this century you will see the job of citizens is to keep their mouth open and their capacity to be heard in every discussion that will shape their lives. This is a book about finding our voices where all concerned about democracy are no longer merely passive onlookers but dedicated participants. *Democracy’s Edge*, thank God, is beautifully written. It gives us the language we need to reclaim our democracy and for seeing where our real democracy lies: in the grass roots, in the communities where creative solutions to social problems are aplenty. Please, please, please make this audacious book a priority, for it is written with the most careful and tender feelings about what we are all so near to losing—our democracy.”

—**Dame Anita Roddick**, founder, The Body Shop

“America is lost in a gnarled thicket of bought politicians, corporate con men, and media hucksters. But we’re lucky: Lappé has drawn the map that will get us out alive. Read it and get going.”

—**Greg Palast**, author, *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy*

“Our country is suffering from a serious ‘democratic deficit,’ a widening gulf between public opinion and public policy—and what ails America necessarily ails the world. A great many people do not like what is happening to their lives and their country, and what is being done in their name, but feel isolated and helpless, victims of forces beyond their control. With the clear thinking, plain talk, and penetrating insight that we have come to expect from her work, Frances Moore Lappé confronts these fundamental problems directly and constructively. The book is both a guide to the perplexed and a guide to action.”

—**Noam Chomsky**

“Lappé is a pioneer in democratic thought and action.”

—**Cornel West**, University Professor of Religion, Princeton University

“Extraordinary. Frances Moore Lappé, the brilliant woman who broke open the story of global hunger with her *Diet for a Small Planet*, has now burst forth with a provocative and exciting new approach to reviving democracy. She reminds us that a robust and wholesome democracy is what delivers a good life to a nation’s citizenry. Her challenge to us is to reinvigorate our thinking, to take individual actions, and to participate every day as citizens. She offers hope for those of us who believe that civic society is at the root of a healthy government.”

—**Amy Domini**, founder and CEO, Domini Social Investments

“Frances Moore Lappé believes deeply that true democracy is more than simply a set of institutions or a political system. It is the active engagement and voice of ordinary citizens in the decisions that shape their lives and communities. *Democracy’s Edge* is an exciting and hopeful account of the rebirth of a living American democracy as people connect with each other around the country to solve problems and build a better society. An important part of that rebirth is a new and growing movement by people of faith who are putting their faith into action for the common good.”

—**Jim Wallis**, author, *God’s Politics*, and editor and convener, Call to Renewal

“I am invigorated by this book. Lappé’s idea of drawing the corporation into democracy’s fold is a challenge I hope all of us will take up as our own. There is no more important task for us to embrace today.”

—**Marjorie Kelly**, editor, *Business Ethics*, and author, *The Divine Right of Capital*

“With an abundance of inspiring, well-told stories, Lappé sweeps away the disempowering myth that an individual can’t make a difference and demonstrates that democracy is a living practice. Essential reading for all who believe that democracy in America would be a good idea.”

—**David C. Korten**, board chair, *YES! A Journal of Positive Futures* and author, *When Corporations Rule the World*

“Frankie Lappé has a gift for synthesizing complex ideas into accessible and inspiring simplicity. *Democracy’s Edge* is an excellent primer on what our democracy was intended to be, where it went astray, and what needs to happen (and is in fact already happening below the radar of mainstream media) for democracy to come alive. Read, take hope, and take action!”

—**Nina Utne**, chair, *Utne Magazine*



Democracy's edge. It's not an easy place to be, but here we are—on the razor's edge, at risk of losing our hard-won democracy. Yet at the very same time, all around us, Americans are pushing forward democracy's edge—its edge of inclusion, discovery, and innovation. Fortunately, their breakthroughs also give us an edge, just what we need now to meet our toughest challenges.

Also by Frances Moore Lappé

You Have the Power: Choosing Courage in a Culture of Fear
(with Jeffrey Perkins)

Hope's Edge: The Next Diet for a Small Planet (with Anne Lappé)

The Quickening of America: Rebuilding Our Nation, Remaking Our Lives (with Paul Martin Du Bois)

Diet for a Small Planet

Taking Population Seriously (with Rachel Schurman)

Rediscovering America's Values: A dialogue that explores our fundamental beliefs and how they offer hope for America's future

Betraying the National Interest (with Rachel Schurman and Kevin Danaher)

World Hunger: Twelve Myths (with Joseph Collins, Peter Rosset, and Luis Esparza)

What to Do After You Turn Off the T.V.

Nicaragua: What Difference Could a Revolution Make?
(with Joseph Collins and Paul Rice)

Now We Can Speak (with Joseph Collins)

Aid as Obstacle (with Joseph Collins and David Kinley)

Mozambique and Tanzania: Asking the Big Questions

Food First: Beyond the Myth of Scarcity (with Joseph Collins and Cary Fowler)

DEMOCRACY'S
EDGE

*To the reporters and editors of
the American News Service (1995–2000),
whose stories in over three hundred newspapers nationwide
inspired readers to the possibilities of living democracy,
especially Emily Bernheim, William Bole, Mieke Bomann,
Paul Bush, Mary Ann Carr, Mary Ann Comfort, Marcia Duffy,
Paul Karr, Mark Lewis, Jane Braxton Little, Linda Lutton,
Robert Preer, Peter Seares, Gustav Spohn,
Darren Waggoner, and Nancy Weil*

DEMOCRACY'S

Choosing to Save

Our Country by

Bringing Democracy

to Life

EDGE



FRANCES
MOORE LAPPÉ

with the assistance of
Rachel Burton, Anna Lappé,
and Hope Richardson

 **JOSSEY-BASS**
A Wiley Imprint
www.josseybass.com

Copyright © 2006 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved.

Published by Jossey-Bass

A Wiley Imprint

989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741 www.josseybass.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, 978-750-8400, fax 978-646-8600, or on the Web at www.copyright.com. Requests to the publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, 201-748-6011, fax 201-748-6008, or online at <http://www.wiley.com/go/permissions>.

Limit of Liability/Disclaimer of Warranty: While the publisher and author have used their best efforts in preparing this book, they make no representations or warranties with respect to the accuracy or completeness of the contents of this book and specifically disclaim any implied warranties of merchantability or fitness for a particular purpose. No warranty may be created or extended by sales representatives or written sales materials. The advice and strategies contained herein may not be suitable for your situation. You should consult with a professional where appropriate. Neither the publisher nor author shall be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damages, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

Readers should be aware that Internet Web sites offered as citations and/or sources for further information may have changed or disappeared between the time this was written and when it is read.

Jossey-Bass books and products are available through most bookstores. To contact Jossey-Bass directly call our Customer Care Department within the U.S. at 800-956-7739, outside the U.S. at 317-572-3986, or fax 317-572-4002.

Jossey-Bass also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lappé, Frances Moore, date.

Democracy's edge : choosing to save our country by bringing democracy to life / Frances Moore Lappé, with the assistance of Rachel Burton, Anna Lappé, and Hope Richardson.—1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-7879-4311-0 (alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-7879-4311-8 (alk. paper)

1. Democracy—United States. 2. Political participation—United States.
3. United States—Politics and government. I. Title.

JK1726.L36 2005

320.973—dc22

2005024330

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

HB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
The Path	xi

PART ONE

Living on Democracy's Edge	1
<i>Our journey to the edge and the forces making possible an invisible revolution of hope</i>	
1. The Frame	3
2. The Long Arc	13
3. Power Is Not a Four-Letter Word	29

PART TWO

Democracy Growing Up	49
<i>Outgrowing four beliefs that stymie us and discovering that power, even corporate power, isn't so stuck after all</i>	
4. Our Coat	51
5. The Elephant	77

PART THREE

Democracy as a Verb	109
<i>It's not what we have, it's what we do. Americans seize the rewards of self-direction</i>	
6. Attention	111
7. Action	151

8. Choice	183
9. Voice	219
PART FOUR	
Democracy in Our Bones	249
<i>Americans create a culture of empowered, connected people</i>	
10. Learning	251
11. Security	277
12. The Invitation	309
Two Frames for Democracy	319
Toward a Language of Democracy	321
Notes	325
Entry Points for Living Democracy	405
The Author	451
Index	453

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I was completing this book, scientist and environmental protector Marc Alan Lappé, my former husband, passed on. Because Marc so wholeheartedly encouraged me in writing my first book, I am indebted to him for all that has flowed from it, including *Democracy's Edge*. Thank you, Marc, for the powerful intellect and healing grace you brought to our wounded planet.

The insights and attention of many talented collaborators made the writing of this book an experience of its message.

First are the inestimable contributions of the three women whose names appear on the title page: Rachel Burton brilliantly and cheerfully offered editorial feedback and oversaw the research and coordinated our “TeamDemocracy” volunteer researchers and editorial responders. Anna Lappé graciously provided overall feedback as well as expert help in the interviewing for and the crafting of Chapters Eight and Nine. Small Planet Institute Fellow Hope Richardson contributed in-depth research assistance, particularly for Chapters Four and Six, as well as careful and creative editorial feedback. Thank you Rachel, Anna, and Hope. What a joy it's been to work with each of you.

TeamDemocracy provided invaluable research and feedback on the flow and message of the book. Thank you, David Barnes, Zenia Dacio-Mesina, Wendy de Heer, Jim DeLorenzo, David Erlbaum, Jyoti Gupta, Mindi Hertzog, Stephen Lappin, Julie Claire Macé,

Thomas MacMillan, Caitrin McKee, Deesha Narichania, and Ginny Pidot. Your commitment to the project spurred me on.

Others to whom I am indebted for research help are Katie Cartier, Jovana Davidovic, Ellen Gray, Michael Johnson, Sierra Pettengill, and Leslie Wittman. I am grateful for the excellent editorial suggestions of my dear friends Diana Beliard and Susan Kanaan. A number of colleagues kindly went the extra mile to offer feedback, including Robert Hinkley, Marjorie Kelly, Tom Linzey, Mark Schultz, Michael Shuman, Timothy Smith, Judy Wicks, and Sheila Wilensky. Thank you for your generosity.

Thanks to Benjamin Barber, whose writing about “strong” and “thin” democracy helped shape my thinking. I am indebted to my insightful editor Dorothy Hearst and her Jossey-Bass colleagues, who poured their hearts and souls into this book, and to my world-class publicists, Jane Rohman and John Bianco.

Family and friends pitched in too. Thank you, Anthony and Clarice Lappé, for your encouragement and practical help every step of the way, and thank you, Linda Pritzker, for your steadfast belief in me and the importance of this message over two decades. My thanks, too, to dear friends Hathaway Barry, Ginny Benson, Sylvia Blanchet, Sue Bumagin, Mary Ann Carlson, Sarah Conn, Andrea Diehl, Mark Finser, Paul Korn, Paul Lacey, Mishy Lesser, Joshua Mailman, Nancy Moorehead, Jeff Perkins, Rose Pritzker, Susannah Rowe, Aaron Stern, Jan Surrey, Judith Thompson, Kaethe Weingarten, Monroe and Carol Whitaker, Anna Whyatt, and others who buoyed my spirits through this complex project.

Finally, Dick Rowe—your unwavering enthusiasm, your countless astute suggestions, your cheerful willingness to lend your creativity and technical savvy—whatever it took—at any moment. Not to mention the green ribbons! You make the journey fun.

I am grateful to each of you for believing in the power and possibility of living democracy.

THE PATH

*To save the democracy we thought we had,
we must take democracy to where it's never been.*

This book asks a lot. It asks us to hold in our hearts two seeming opposites, and that's awfully hard for human beings.

Most of us love to settle in with a judgment, to name our experience good or bad and be done with it. But this extraordinary moment in human history calls us to stretch our hearts—and our minds—to hold this era's pain as well as its promise.

We can acknowledge the terrifying, rapid degradation of democracy's core institutions and values: that human beings are being tortured in our name, that U.S. elections fail internationally recognized fairness standards, that government-made “news” is passed on to us as the real thing by corporate-controlled media, and that even here in America, the world's richest country, poverty cuts years off people's lives.¹

And at the very same time, we can perceive and then pour ourselves into the emerging, powerful practice of democracy that this book explores and celebrates: Americans in every walk of life discovering power within themselves to stay true to democracy's core principles and to create solutions to our toughest problems.

I believe it's possible to hold both truths.

This book is about how I believe we got to this precarious place, democracy's edge, and now that we're here, how very personally we might choose to respond.

looking for patterns

I flash back to a favorite memory of my Fort Worth, Texas, childhood: lying in my bedroom listening to my parents and their friends in the kitchen down the hallway. With coffee and conversation percolating, they taught me what grown-ups do. They talk—a lot—to make sense of the world. That’s how they figure out what to do to make things better.

My parents and their friends in the 1950s sought to make sense of the world—to see patterns of causation—in part by identifying the evils of Nazism and Soviet-style communism. They saw the suffering caused by these two thought systems, and when the church my parents co-founded sponsored a family who had escaped communist Hungary, they witnessed the pain up close.

My parents assumed that America was free of any such grand “ism” that could enslave us. Like their friends and most Americans, they believed our basic operating system to be just fine: the market economy plus electoral democracy gives us what we need to thrive—forever.

I absorbed the notion that we live in a country that had figured out the basics. America had not only a proven-the-test-of-time democratic government but widely shared core values that we could rely on to smooth the remaining rough edges—persistent poverty, racism, violence, corruption. Our biggest remaining task and obligation, I learned, was to share our success formula with poor people still struggling overseas; so in my first year of college I trained to become a Foreign Service officer to do just that.

Then came the first big jolt—the war in Vietnam. While I’d previously trusted my parents’ support for Lyndon Johnson and the war, once on my own I began trying to understand its roots for myself. I concluded that “my” government was lying to me. This shock was intensified by others—the assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King Jr. All led to a sense that something was profoundly amiss and more than rough edges needed attention here at home.

My internal disquiet led to my first job—helping welfare recipients in Philadelphia secure the federal benefits due them. Within a year, the poverty-stricken mother with whom I worked most closely died suddenly in her forties of a heart attack. Lilly had at least one child with asthma and worried every day about whether she could feed and clothe her kids.

I was convinced that poverty killed Lilly, and I doubted that what I was doing addressed the roots of her untimely death. I was twenty-four.

Soon I'd concluded that our challenge was not just cleaning things up piecemeal—a bit of racism here, poverty there. My gut told me something systemic was really off: core assumptions of our society needed reworking.

To dig up those assumptions, I started with a single question, a pretty straightforward one:

Why hunger in a world of plenty?

To answer it, I had to peel away layer after layer of causation until finally it dawned on me. Hunger isn't caused by a scarcity of food. It is caused by a *scarcity of democracy*.

Huh?

Democracy? Food?

Have I grabbed your attention? The puzzle certainly grabbed mine, as I struggled to understand the irrationality of hunger amid plenty for my first book, *Diet for a Small Planet*, in 1971. Ultimately, this cruel paradox forced me to see that a society could have all democracy's formal trappings—adding up to what I call “thin democracy”—but still lack its heart and soul.

A nation may have on its books the most elegant structure of democracy anywhere and still, I realized, not have a society in which all, or even most, people have the essentials they need to thrive, or even to survive. Think only of the “democracies” of India, Philippines, or Guatemala, where vast numbers live trapped in destitution. Or consider that the old Soviet Union had a superb bill of rights—on paper.

The heart of democracy, I finally came to understand, is *voice*—the capacity of citizens to have a say in those critical choices shaping their lives and their futures. Since all life seeks to further life, no living creature *chooses* to go hungry. Hunger is therefore proof that certain citizens—huge numbers of us today, even in the United States—have no effective voice. The very existence of hunger belies democracy’s promise.

Wanting to awaken people to the human-made causes of hunger, in 1975 with Joseph Collins I co-founded the Institute for Food and Development Policy (Food First). As I look back over the early years, I can now see that much of my thinking was grounded in a sense of “what’s right”—what is ethical and good. It is wrong for some people to be denied food while others are drowning in surplus, wasting, as we do in the United States, almost half of all that’s grown.²

What could be more obviously wrong?

But gradually, my grounding began to shift, or certainly to widen.

In 1990, I left Food First because I wanted to cut beneath all the issues—hunger, the environment, violence—to the underlying question of democracy itself. My hope was to show others not a blueprint but a pathway, not some idealized form of democracy but examples of regular Americans moving us in the direction of its fuller, more effective practice.

To do this work, I co-founded the Center for Living Democracy (1990–2000) and with Paul Martin DuBois co-authored in 1994 *The Quickening of America*.

I had no idea this book would forever change the way I see the world.

In our research we expected to dig up a few evocative stories revealing a first stirring of what I had come to call Living Democracy—citizens finding their voices to co-create solutions to public problems. But the handful grew to hundreds, many hundreds, so vast in number that we couldn’t possibly squeeze them into one book. Knowing that the corporate media don’t typically see these

breakthroughs as “news,” we felt we had to make them news. Only then could they spread.

We figured that if Americans could read about, and see, others like themselves engaged in their communities—out there building what *they* want—then they’d believe themselves capable of doing it, too. To create this kind of democratic “social multiplier effect,” in 1995 we at the Center decided to start our own national news service. We called it the American News Service (ANS) to proclaim that these stories—ultimately sixteen hundred original solutions-news stories—are not “alternative,” not on the sidelines of American culture. They are at its center. They tell perhaps the most important story of all—what regular people are doing about the biggest, most pressing problems of our time.

ANS lasted only five years, but in its short life published stories in nearly half the biggest U.S. newspapers, including *USA [Today] Weekend* and the *Boston Globe*. You can read these stories via our Web site.³

Today, looking back on my years as founding editor of the American News Service, I realize what changed for me: I came to see pattern not just in the causes of suffering but also in the solutions emerging. Within desperate examples of engagement I saw common lessons giving shape to a new concept of democracy itself, perhaps to democracy’s next historical stage. In this way, I came to appreciate not just the rightness of democracy—the rightness of its inclusivity and fairness—but its power.

Without this power—without the edge Living Democracy gives us—we *are* lost. Thus rethinking the meaning of democracy is not something that would be “nice”; it is the only way to save what we hold most dear. Living Democracy is not a luxury. It is not something that’s great for good times. It is what we most need in these perilous times.

Over all these years you might say I’ve just been trying to do what my parents did around our kitchen table with their friends: trying to make sense of the world, stripping away layers to get at root causes so that I might help make things better.

I believe that all of us are capable of identifying causal patterns, but more than that I believe that doing so is essential. Without this work we feel powerless. Unable to see the patterns creating the catastrophic losses we face today, we're apt to grasp for anything—any act of charity, any protest, any good cause. Or any rationale to retreat into our private worlds. Or simply to sink into despair.

Once we recognize causal patterns, we become powerful. We're able to identify personal entry points and join with others for clearer vision and effectiveness. Our considered actions can then begin to shift entire patterns toward health.

This book is about both patterns and entry points. Part One probes the myths and practical obstacles that block Americans from jumping in—along with new ideas and practices to free us. Part Two looks at the bigger picture—four assumed “givens” about economic and political life that have locked American society in a downward spin—and contrasts them with a new framing of possibility. Part Three telescopes in to show how Americans are transforming democracy into a living practice, from economics and politics to food and the media. Finally, Part Four traces the contours of a culture of connection now being woven—one strong enough to break the grip of fear and to enable effective learning and real security.

Three offerings close the book. “Two Frames for Democracy” contrasts the dominant understanding of democracy with the emergent Living Democracy frame and “Toward a Language of Democracy” suggests new terms to more effectively communicate the emergent frame. These can be copied and used as handouts. “Entry Points for Living Democracy” is a resource guide to help you connect.

In all, I invite you to rethink long-held, disempowering assumptions and offer, I hope, fresh conceptualizations of power within reach of each of us. One thing I promise: after meeting the people in this book, you'll never again see your country or your possibilities for personal happiness in the same light.

Welcome to life at democracy's edge.

DEMOCRACY'S
EDGE

PART ONE

LIVING ON DEMOCRACY'S EDGE

I'm hooked for life!

PAM EMIGH,

*after joining a Pennsylvania citizens' effort to
stop mining companies from degrading the land*

Out of sight of most of us, millions of Americans are satisfying their deep needs for connection with each other and expanding their capacities for effectiveness in the larger world. They are showing us how democracy can become more than a set of unapproachable, distant institutions—how it can become the rewarding way of life I call Living Democracy.

And none too soon!

The indignities and misery of economic insecurity and deepening poverty, the devastation of our ecological home, and the assault on our basic freedoms are of such magnitude that the emerging, more powerful practice of democracy may be our last, best hope.

Chapter One, “The Frame,” challenges prevailing wisdom about the core crisis facing our nation. Chapter Two, “The Long Arc,” reminds us of competing currents in our culture’s history that have taken us to democracy’s edge and points to underrecognized common ground on which we can now walk to move that edge forward. Chapter Three, “Power Is Not a Four-Letter Word,” invites us to discard long-held, stifling assumptions about power, self-interest, and public life and to embrace liberating alternatives that are already proving effective.

THE FRAME

discovering democracy's power

It is far too late and things are far too bad for pessimism.

DEE HOCK¹

Contemporary social critics see America divided—left versus right, conservative versus liberal, religious versus secular. I disagree and even find these framings destructive. They deflect us from the most critical and perhaps the only division we have to worry about.

It is that between those who believe in democracy—honest dialogue, basic fairness, mutual respect, inclusivity, and reciprocal responsibilities—and those who do not. In the latter category are those willing to put ends over means, violating these core principles in pursuit of an ultimate goal.

Antidemocrats here or abroad include those willing to demonize opponents and even to kill innocent people in pursuit of political power, an idealized future, or a superior afterlife.

At home they include members of our own government who allow illegal detention and torture of captives, arm known tyrants, meet secretly with private interests to hash out the public's business, bar congressional colleagues from hearing rooms, interfere with voting by citizens likely to disagree with them, remove vital information from government Web sites, disguise government propaganda as real news, and employ Orwellian labels to mislead us.²

All are justified by perpetrators as necessary tactics to move us to their idealized future.

In the past two centuries, we human beings have proved to ourselves something vital to our survival: that we have the capacity to make democracy work. Within democracy's framework of values, we *are* able to address even our biggest problems by working creatively with—and even gaining from—differences of opinion and culture.

Thus the only real threat we face now is that to democracy itself.

Democracy—negotiating interests by relying on fair play, honest dialogue, and mutual respect—is powerful, I will argue; yet it is also fragile. Democracy can “easily be lost, but is never fully won,” Judge William Hastie once observed.³

Social creatures, we humans are easily molded by those around us. Once the bullying begins, once dishonesty appears to succeed, it can quickly avalanche toward fascism, the term I use for a society ruled by the power of wealth and fear.

Glancing back over the twentieth century and now the early twenty-first, we see just how startlingly malleable we humans are. The Holocaust. Pol Pot. Bosnia. Rwanda. Abu Ghraib. Darfur. We see decent people commit unthinkable acts. We see decent people silent in the face of unthinkable acts.

Once acknowledging the potential for brutality in each of us, we become incapable of locating evil in “the other”—in everyone else but not in ourselves. It is, yes, a terrifying thought, but also liberating, for this admission helps us appreciate the power of the culture we ourselves create to bring forth either the best or the worst in human beings.

And from there the survival task for humanity is clear: it is to envision and create institutions, from our schools to our media to our businesses, that foster our democratic selves—people able to feel and express empathy and to see through the walls of race, culture, and religion that divide us, people who know how to exert power while maintaining relationship.

This book is an invitation to engage in that vital task. It is more than a call to resist our downward slide. It is an invitation to stand up energetically for democracy in the biggest and littlest ways. It is an invitation to hone our democratic selves and therefore to strengthen a kind of courage that doesn't come easily to most of us—certainly not to me.

Yet as much as this book invites us to the difficult—to uncertainty and to risk—it also invites us to the reward: to the personal power, connection, learning, and fulfillment that is the promise of Living Democracy.

my love affair with democracy

Here and in “The Path,” I’ve shared with you a glimpse of the thinking that has propelled my journey. Now I want to share why I’ve given not only my head but also my heart to democracy.

As a young woman, I thought I grasped the worsening global crisis. It seemed all too obvious to me. I saw it as needless, life-stunting hunger, relentlessly concentrating wealth, and escalating violence.

But gradually it sank in on me, and then, one day, I had an epiphany: These problems aren't the crisis. They're all solvable. In most cases, solutions are already widely known.

The crisis is our *feeling of powerlessness* to address them.

And this is true because we've blinded ourselves to the most powerful tool we have. That tool is democracy.

I'd be surprised if my epiphany bowls you over! If you're like most Americans, the word *democracy* is a yawn; it's boring, wrapped in duty or perhaps hypocrisy. You've learned to see democracy not as alive and fluid but as dead and rigid—as a collection of inherited structures far removed from our daily lives.

We don't have to look far to see where some of these notions come from. Think back to your middle school classroom. What did you learn about democracy? In Texas public schools in the 1950s, I learned that it was secret ballots, multiple parties, countervailing

powers. If these structures are in place, *voilà*—democracy! Preparing for citizenship meant memorizing how a bill becomes law or reciting the Gettysburg Address. Sure, rough edges—the legacies of racism and poverty—will always need smoothing. But democracy is what we already *have*, certainly not something we *do*.

Moreover, we're made to believe that we like it this way—that we *prefer* to leave our futures to others. Only a few oddballs care about contributing to something bigger than themselves. You know, those *activists*.

And expectations have continued to shrink. Recall that after 9/11, when our hearts were torn open, releasing an outpouring of desire to help, President Bush told us that our real job was to go shopping.

Also likely is that for many Americans, democracy reeks of weakness—something “good” and “just” but not necessarily strong. Especially today when our government defines our fight against terror as “permanent war,” democracy may hardly seem up to the task. Some may doubt that democracy could ever be tough enough to win out against extremism rising around the globe—those willing to kill themselves, kill civilians, and send others to die to advance their absolute truths.

To me, this perception of democracy is the central and most tragic error of our time.

Yet the doubters are probably right about one thing. Thin democracy *is* weak. It is weak because it's hard to take seriously. True, some Americans are willing to risk their lives for a system that doesn't offer them fair opportunity at home (or even adequate armor over there!) and caters to an ever smaller wealthy minority. But willingness to sacrifice can change: Whether in the voting booth or on the battlefield, it is hard to keep standing up for something called democracy that you know in your heart excludes you.

Some extremists hold out the glorious prospect of a theocratic state. Its moral rationale and promise of otherworldly salvation can understandably look awfully good to many of the world's down-trodden. The purity of this grand idea inspires even some who are educated and better-off—as many suicide terrorists are.

Can thin democracy rooted in a narrowly individualistic, material view of life compete? I have my doubts.

By contrast, Living Democracy respects and builds our capacities to create community, not just consume things. It is an uplifting, inclusive vision that calls forth the best in us and justifies our devotion, including a willingness to sacrifice. Thus, bringing democracy to life as the Americans featured in this book are doing may be the only path to a society robust and resilient enough to resist extremism of all stripes.

“THIN DEMOCRACY” FAILS TO ENGAGE US

- In most presidential elections in the past seventy years, barely half of eligible voters actually cast a ballot.⁴ Voter turnout here is 63 percent of that in Western Europe.⁵
- Thirty-three percent of voters said they didn’t care who won congressional elections in 2000.⁶
- Only 3 percent of Americans worked for the election of a political party in 2002.⁷
- U.S. elections fail to meet internationally recognized fairness standards.⁸
- Between 1973 and 1993, the number of Americans writing to Congress dropped by 23 percent, and the number attending a political rally or speech dropped by 34 percent.⁹
- The share of Americans who feel that “the government is run by a few big interests looking out only for themselves” more than doubled between the mid-1960s and the mid-1990s to reach 76 percent.¹⁰
- Lobbyists in Washington outnumber members of Congress by fifty-six to one, tripling since 1996.¹¹

“THIN DEMOCRACY” FAILS TO SERVE US

- *America is dividing.* The United States underwent the largest wealth transfer in our history during the 1980s and 1990s. Net worth of the top 1 percent rose by 63 percent while those of the bottom 40 percent dropped by 44 percent.¹²
- *Americans are working but still poor.* One in five jobs in the U.S. cannot keep a family of four out of poverty and provides few or no benefits. The buying power of the minimum wage has sunk by 25 percent in twenty-five years.¹³
- *Americans are facing financial disaster.* Just since 2000, personal bankruptcies are up by a third, half of them estimated to be triggered by paying for a health crisis (and three-quarters of those bankrupted by illness were “covered” by health insurance!).¹⁴
- *Americans are dying from poverty.* Eighteen thousand Americans die unnecessarily each year because they lack health insurance, estimates the Institute of Medicine.¹⁵ Our health care failure means that the United States—one of the world’s richest countries—ranks forty-second in infant survival.¹⁶
- *Americans are going hungry.* Thirty-five million Americans—equivalent to the entire population of Canada—live in households so poor they’re often not sure where their next meal is coming from.¹⁷
- *Our government is failing to protect our health.* Pollution is so bad that over half of Americans live where air quality falls below Environmental Protection Agency minimum standards.¹⁸