

# The Open Space of Democracy

*by*

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## Foreword

Events of the past few years have not been kind to America. From the collective grief we shared witnessing the collapse of the World Trade Center to the polarized sentiments of our fellow citizens surrounding the current conflict in Iraq, we Americans have faced a tumultuous and historic time.

Now, on the eve of a defining national election, we are asking ourselves what is the true nature of democracy and the qualities of leadership necessary to guide and shape our nation and its future role in global affairs. Never has the participation of the individual citizen mattered more. Never has "the majesty of the vote" been more crucial in registering our dreams and desires.

For a democracy to be truly alive, vital, and revolutionary, for it to rise beyond abstraction and mere sym-

bolism, for it to become a throbbing head-and-heart-felt presence in our lives, we need to make it personal.

In this fourth volume of The Orion Society's New Patriotism Series, Terry Tempest Williams has made democracy personal. She has reminded us through the power and integrity of these thoughtful essays that democracy is not simply an idea but a place—the *land* of the free. Our responsibilities to the land, like the responsibilities of freedom, are patriotism's touchstones. Rare. Sacred. Precious. And they demand our highest attention.

Williams writes, "In the open space of democracy, we are listening—ears alert—we are watching—eyes open—registering the patterns and possibilities for engagement. Some acts are private; some are public. Our oscillations between local, national, and global gestures map the full range of our movement. Our strength lies in our imagination, and paying attention to what sustains life, rather than what destroys it."

There is an essential artfulness, suppleness, and fierce advocacy at the core of such a stance on living. One is simultaneously a citizen of a place—Castle Valley, UT—a citizen of a nation and its many places—including the Arctic Refuge—and a citizen of the world. The realization that these forms of citizenship are fundamentally connected, and need to become tripartite facets of our identity, seems to me to be a principal challenge for those living in the twenty-first century.

Too often in the last few years it has been suggested that Americans need to "go it alone" in the world, and

that a very limited sense of national interest define both our domestic priorities as well as our approach to foreign relations. A deteriorating environment and an unjustified, preemptive war on Iraq are just two tragic products of this line of thinking.

We need new leadership and a new process by which to engage with each other, our communities, and the rest of the world—human and more-than-human. We need a new commencement, a new gathering place. We need to ground-truth old truths. We need to spread democracy, especially in our own hearts and lives. We need to inhabit change more compassionately. And we need to heed the sage advice of those who, like Emerson, Whitman, and Carson, hold a close correspondence with the American oversoul.

Follow the words of Terry Tempest Williams and you will find yourself in the company of as important a thinker as we have in these times of terror and timorousness in our national life. A writer of brave imagination, Williams has created an authentic space of dialogue. It is our hope that her call for a “reflective activism” on behalf of a dynamic democracy will take root within our hearts as well as our public policies.

—Laurie Lane-Zucker  
Executive Director & Series Editor

mattered most to me was not what I was willing to die for, but what I was willing to give my life to. In war, death by belief is centered on principles both activated and extinguished in the drama of a random moment. Heroes are buried. A legacy of freedom is maintained through pain. Life by belief is centered on the day-to-day decisions we make that are largely unseen. One produces martyrs born out of violence. The other produces quiet citizens born out of personal commitments toward social change. Both dwell in the hallowed ground of sacrifice.

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Recently, my niece Sara and I visited the Chicago Institute of Art. She had just finished a class in art history. We stood before George Seurat's painting *Sunday Afternoon in the Park*. "What the Impressionists knew," Sara said, "was that if they placed primary colors side by side through the technique of pointillism, the eye would blend the colors together."

Her comment made me think of how we might face the polarity of opinion in our country right now, how we might take opposing views and blend them into some kind of civil dialogue. This is not easy. Since George W. Bush took the office of President of the United States I have been sick at heart, unable to stom-

ach or abide by this administration's aggressive policies directed against the environment, education, social services, healthcare, and our civil liberties—basically, the wholesale destruction of seemingly everything that contributes to a free society, except the special interests of big business.

In my darkest moments, I rant and write polemics as I watch a war of exploitation being waged against our public lands in the American West and Alaska, be it the press of coal-bed methane gas in the Powder Basin of Wyoming at the expense of precious water; the removal of wilderness protection in Utah, which translates to 200 million acres of public lands now open for business in a deal struck behind closed doors between Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton and Utah Governor Michael Leavitt, now head of the Environmental Protection Agency; or the "Healthy Forests Initiative" affecting millions of acres within our national forests, which is nothing more than a government-subsidized timber sale in sensitive roadless areas; or the relentless push to drill for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. I want to howl from the top of the mesa where we live, call friends, light fires, and dance wildly around them.

Not a wise thing to do in southern Utah.

It is difficult to find peace. I am torn between my anger and my empathy. And then I go for a walk. My balance returns. I calm down, breathe, and allow for deep listening to occur. Senator Bob Bennett listened. He disagreed. He responded. And he asked for more discussion.

I want to offer him the same courtesy, time, and respect. I want to listen to what he has to say and why, and answer with a thoughtful response.

Carlo Maria Martini, a member of the College of Cardinals at the Vatican, in a letter to writer Umberto Eco regarding the nature of democracy, wrote: "The delicate game of democracy provides for a dialectic between opinions and beliefs in the hope that such exchange will expand the collective moral conscience that is the basis of orderly cohabitation."<sup>7</sup>

I begin to compose my letter, trying to articulate my views with as much composure, fairness, and accuracy as I can, making the best possible case for what I believe.

*Dear Senator Bennett:*

*Thank you for the generosity of your letter. Forgive my delayed response. It has taken me weeks, months, to sort through my thoughts and feelings regarding what you have asked of me...*

*We do not agree on the war on Iraq. We do not agree on the role of the United Nations, which I believe is essential if we are going to restore dignity and order to Iraq through broad-based international coalitions. And we do not agree on America's Redrock Wilderness Act currently before the Senate. But I do believe we can come closer to understanding why each of us is committed to our own points of view and perhaps even adjust our perspectives along the way to find creative alternatives that we cannot only both live with, but feel comfortable in proposing*

together. These are the exchanges necessary to maintaining the open space of democracy...

I would like to propose an exchange program between us. I was thinking how our points of views might expand, even change, if we were to accompany each other to these areas of conflict. I would visit Iraq with you to witness the situation in Baghdad through your eyes and then you would visit with me areas now open for oil and gas exploration in Utah (once held as wilderness study areas before being released by Governor Leavitt and Secretary of the Interior Norton last April). Both are regions in need of creative discourse. Both are sites of deep philosophical divisions. Would these field trips interest you? I would like to think that we could bring our imaginations to the table and find a way through our positions to possibilities.

If you and I, a senator and a writer, but first, as neighbors, could find our way to common ground through shared experiences, perhaps it could provide an example of how people can come to listen to one another with real, authentic exchanges. I have always held the image of our founding fathers close to my heart, how they dared to disagree passionately with one another, yet remained open to what each had to say, some even changing their minds, as they forged our Constitution. This is the bedrock of our evolving republic...

Senator Bennett, you asked me a critical question in your letter, one I have pondered for months: What am I willing to die for?

Before the war in Iraq, thousands of Americans turned



## Commencement

*to poetry to voice their opposition to the invasion, creating the largest written protest in the history of this country. Eleven thousand poems were presented to Congress on March 5, 2003, by Sam Hamill and W. S. Merwin. My words were simple ones:*

The erosion of speech is the build-up of war.  
Silence no longer supports prayers, but lives inside  
the open mouths of the dead.<sup>8</sup>

*After much thought, what I would be willing to die for, and give my life to, is the freedom of speech. It is the open door to all other freedoms.*

*We are a nation at war with ourselves. Until we can turn to one another and offer our sincere words as to why we feel the way we do with an honest commitment to hear what others have to say, we will continue to project our anger on the world in true, unconscious acts of terror.*

*Please know how much I appreciate the honesty and thoughtfulness of your letter, the gesture of time spent on the page with sincere regard for our differences as you expressed your concrete ideas and beliefs. I have to believe this is a foreign policy we might make more common within our own state of Utah.*

*I look forward to our ongoing conversation.*

*Respectfully yours,*  
TERRY TEMPEST WILLIAMS