

CONVERSATION CARDS



**ON DEMOCRACY FREEDOM
EQUALITY COMMON GOOD**

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ON **DEMOCRACY** **FREEDOM** **EQUALITY** **COMMON GOOD**

These cards are designed to spark engagement with democracy and democratic values.

On your own or with family, friends, classmates, or colleagues, select a card and read its quote aloud. Scroll to the reverse side of each card for ways to act on these ideas in your personal and community life.

Thanks to the team at the **Practicing Democracy Project** (PracticingDemocracy.net) for helping develop this resource.

“Democracy belongs to those who exercise it.”

Bill Moyers

journalist and political commentator

REFLECT

What are the best ways you have found to exercise your democracy?

ACT

Choose a practice (such as meditation, prayer, or journaling) to enhance your capacity for citizenship. Follow up with an action (such as participating in a political conversation) to strengthen our democracy.



“Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part to help build what we called the Beloved Community, a nation and world society at peace with itself.”

John Lewis

civil rights activist and US Representative

REFLECT

John Lewis helped to change America's democracy. Identify turning points in our democracy. What do you think led to each change?

ACT

How has your generation acted to build the kind of democracy and society that could be called a Beloved Community? With some people your own age, identify one thing that you could do together toward that goal.



“The human heart is the first home of democracy. It is where we embrace our questions. Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions?”

Terry Tempest Williams
writer and conservationist

REFLECT

What would a heart-centered democracy look like to you?

ACT

Make a list of questions to use to evaluate a country's democracy. Then answer them based on your experience and observations.



“ If democracy is to survive... It requires that we engage regularly and permanently in political discourse. Speechlessness may be the most debilitating form of powerlessness. And the one thing we can be sure of is that democracy cannot be talked to death.”

Benjamin R. Barber
political theorist

REFLECT

Are you comfortable talking about politics with your family, friends, and others? What gets in the way? What is helpful?

ACT

Download On Being's "Better Conversations Guide." Hold a discussion about what you appreciate and what you'd like to see changed about US democracy. Invite people from different points along the political spectrum.



“The family meal is really the nursery of democracy. It’s where we learn to share; it’s where we learn to argue without offending.”

Michael Pollan
author and journalist

REFLECT

Where did you first learn democratic values and virtues?

ACT

Hold a household, workplace, or neighborhood gathering in which you encourage civil debate and make decisions by majority vote.



“I love America more than any other country in the world and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.”

James Baldwin
writer and activist

REFLECT

What are your chief criticisms of US domestic and foreign policy?

ACT

Read editorials and opinion pieces to get an overview of how the United States is being assessed within and beyond our borders. Be sure to read a variety of views.



“The death of democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment.”

Robert Maynard Hutchins

writer and activist

REFLECT

Have you seen interest in US politics and government shift in your lifetime? What do you think accounts for any shifts?

ACT

Find a time when you and another person can talk about the present state and future prospects for democracy. Agree not to judge each other and to speak openly from your hearts.



“The highest patriotism is not a blind acceptance of official policy, but a love of one’s country deep enough to call her to a higher plain.”

George McGovern
US Senator

REFLECT

How do you define patriotism?
Is it important to you?

ACT

Patriotism is often called “love of country.” Make a poster or write a statement to share with others to illustrate what this means to you.



“The thing about democracy is that it is not neat, orderly, or quiet. It requires a certain relish for confusion.”

Molly Ivins

newspaper columnist and humorist

REFLECT

Recall a time when you were struck by the illogical or irrational aspects of politics and government.

ACT

Collect cartoons that reflect the disorderly, confusing, and humorous sides of life in a democracy.

Write captions to news photos that convey the same things.



“ Our democracy is designed to speak truth to power.”

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
US Representative

REFLECT

Who has inspired you to become politically active? What lessons did you learn from them?

ACT

Read or watch stories about inspiring people who have spoken truth to power.



“ I wanna be in the room
where it happens
The room where
it happens...
We want our leaders to
save the day
But we don't get a say in
what they trade away.”

from “The Room Where It Happens”
in *Hamilton: An American Musical*
Lin-Manuel Miranda
composer and actor

REFLECT

Have you ever thought about running for political office? Why or why not?

ACT

Get involved in a political campaign on the local, state, or national level. Help plan strategies, secure signatures, canvass, raise money, etc.



“Politics in a democracy is transactional: Politicians seek votes by promising to do things for voters, who seek promises in exchange for their votes.”

George Will
political commentator

REFLECT

When have you felt that you or other citizens have gotten something in return for your votes? What other “transactions” influence government policy?

ACT

Participate in a get-out-the-vote drive. This may involve registering new voters, helping get voters to the polls, or volunteering as a poll watcher.



“The day we stop believing democracy can work is the day we lose it.”

Queen Jamilla

in *Star Wars: Episode II—Attack of the Clones*

by George Lucas and Jonathan Hales

REFLECT

When you reflect on whether democracy can work in our time, what hopes and fears do you have? Which are strongest?

ACT

Write a statement about your political beliefs—what you believe in and aspire to do or be.



“No borders, just horizons
—only freedom.”

Amelia Earhart
aviation pioneer

REFLECT

How do you describe freedom?

ACT

Make a drawing, painting, or other creative work to reflect your concept of freedom.



“What’s that I hear now
ringin’ in my ear?
I’ve heard that
sound before ...
I hear it more and more
It’s the sound of
freedom callin’
Ringin’ up to the sky!
It’s the sound of the old
ways a-fallin’
You can hear it if you try!”

from “The Call to Freedom”

Phil Ochs

singer-songwriter

REFLECT

When and where have you heard freedom calling? What does it sound like?

ACT

Talk with friends about which “old ways” need to be “a-fallin’” in order for more of us to hear the call to freedom.



“In a free society, all are involved in what some are doing. Some are guilty. All are responsible.”

Abraham Joshua Heschel
Jewish theologian and rabbi

REFLECT

In what ways do you find it difficult to take responsibility for the actions of others?

ACT

As you read or see the news this week, think about your part in what is happening. If this is something you are proud of, share your support on social media. If not, talk with a close friend about how you might change things or make amends.



“There was one of two things I had a right to: liberty or death. If I could not have one, I would take the other.”

Harriet Tubman

abolitionist and social activist

REFLECT

What risks are you willing to take for freedom? Consider the difference between having “freedom to” and having “freedom from.”

ACT

Make a list of the qualities that Harriet Tubman and other freedom fighters have demonstrated. Choose one to practice this week.



“Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground.”

Frederick Douglass
abolitionist and orator

REFLECT

When have you felt called to participate in a protest or demonstration for freedom?

ACT

Make a list of your heroes of agitation and find a way to honor them with a letter, a donation, or other tribute.



“ Without freedom of conscience, freedom to believe, and freedom to live and act on our beliefs, there is no freedom at all. Therefore, whenever we act to defend the freedom of others, ultimately, we are defending our own.”

Shapri LoMaglio
political consultant

REFLECT

Share a time when you saw in action the importance of the people's right to freely express their beliefs.

ACT

Gather people from different spiritual orientations to discuss how your community can ensure the freedom of religion. You might, for example, put out a joint statement about religious tolerance.



“May we think of freedom, not as the right to do as we please, but as the opportunity to do what is right.”

Peter Marshall

Christian minister and US Senate chaplain

REFLECT

How do you balance individualism (doing what you want and need) with doing what is wanted and needed by the larger community?

ACT

Find examples in current events of opportunities to merge individual desires with community needs.



“Your real job is that if you are free you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else.”

Toni Morrison
novelist and essayist

REFLECT

Who has given you your best sense of what liberty means? What are your earliest memories of liberty?

ACT

Identify a kind of freedom you can help another person achieve. Take one step toward that goal today.



“Each and every one of us has the capacity to be an oppressor. I want to encourage each and every one of us to interrogate how we might be an oppressor and how we might be able to become liberators for ourselves and for each other.”

Laverne Cox

actress and LGBTQ+ advocate

REFLECT

Think of a time when you have acted as an oppressor. What was the occasion? How did the encounter turn out?

ACT

With family, friends, or your spiritual community, talk about how you can be supportive of oppressed people, both individuals you know and groups in the larger society.



“Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you.”

Ruth Bader Ginsburg
US Supreme Court Justice

REFLECT

Which struggles for freedom throughout history have most inspired you? When have you been encouraged to join them?

ACT

Read or listen to interviews with leaders in freedom movements today in order to better understand their perspectives.



“ We are trapped by stereotypes—Black as criminal, Latino as illegal, Muslim and Sikh as terrorist, indigenous as savage, trans as deviant, and women as property. Once a person is reduced to a stereotype, it becomes easier to rape them, imprison them, and kill them. But stories can destroy stereotypes. Our stories set us free.”

Valarie Kaur
activist and filmmaker

REFLECT

Assess your perceptions of different groups in your community. How have you been influenced by stereotypes? What encounters have you had that changed your opinions?

ACT

Listen to stories or read memoirs, paying special attention to stereotype-breaking revelations.



“From the extreme political polarization that is everywhere—there’s so much suffering going on—so many people are really thirsty to feel good about something.”

Jonathan Van Ness

podcaster and television personality

REFLECT

What freedoms in our democracy do you feel really good about?

ACT

Identify one issue in your community around which people are polarized. Then identify one thing all the people share in common. Write a letter to your local paper or post an online comment noting this good connection.



“ We must be honest about the foundations of the political and economic systems we call America. I love America because of her potential. But I know that America will never complete the work of reconstruction—will never even get close to being a more perfect union—until we are honest about her past.”

William J. Barber II

Christian minister and political activist

REFLECT

Name three events, attitudes, or programs in US history that need to be questioned. What is one thing you can do to make amends?

ACT

Learn more about moments in US history that reveal our country's dark side.



“ I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.’”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Christian minister and civil rights leader

REFLECT

What are your dreams for America's democracy?

ACT

Identify a political, social, or religious action you can take to affirm the belief in equality.



“You never completely have your rights, one person, until you have all your rights.”

Marsha P. Johnson

transgender pioneer and activist

REFLECT

What are some of the obstacles to equality in contemporary society?

ACT

Consider one barrier to equal treatment of all in your community and find a way to address it.



“The greatest movement for social justice our country has ever known is the civil rights movement and it was totally rooted in a love ethic.”

bell hooks
writer and activist

REFLECT

Have you been involved in any social justice movements? What motivated you to participate?

ACT

Look deeper into the US civil rights movement. In what ways was it rooted in a “love ethic”?



“ O, let my land be a land
where Liberty
Is crowned with no false
patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real,
and life is free,
Equality is in the air
we breathe.”

from "Let America Be America Again"

Langston Hughes

poet and activist

REFLECT

What false promises and real opportunities do you see in the United States today?

ACT

Write a short statement or poem using an image for equality, such as Hughes' "Equality is in the air we breathe."



“The greatest nations are defined by how they treat their weakest inhabitants.”

Jorge Ramos
journalist and writer

REFLECT

In what ways is the United States living into Ramos' definition of greatness? In what ways is it failing?

ACT

What organizations and services in your area are working on behalf of the poor and the vulnerable? From their websites and other sources, find out what they need in terms of volunteers, financial support, or advocacy and outreach.



“It’s important that people see themselves mirrored in government.”

Ayanna Pressley
US Representative

REFLECT

When you look in the government mirror, what do you see?

ACT

Find ways to make your local, state, and federal government more representative of the make-up of their constituents.



“ Let us never forget that government is ourselves and not an alien power over us. The ultimate rulers of our democracy are not a President and senators and congressmen and government officials, but the voters of this country.”

Franklin D. Roosevelt

32nd President of the United States

REFLECT

What words would you use to describe the government?

ACT

Using social media or a letter to the editor, challenge the idea that the government is something separate from the people.



“Democracy...is the only system built on respect for the infinite dignity of each individual man and woman, on each person’s moral striving for freedom, justice and truth. It would be a great error to think of and teach democracy as a procedural or political system, or as the principle of majority rule.”

David Brooks

political and cultural commentator

REFLECT

There are different kinds of respect: respect for the dignity of the individual, for authority, for tradition, for history, etc. What has been your experience with these kinds of respect? Which is most important to you?

ACT

Come up with a simple gesture, such as bowing or putting your hand over your heart, that you can use to signify your respect for the dignity of those you encounter.



“Tolerance isn’t about not having beliefs. It’s about how your beliefs lead you to treat people who disagree with you.”

Timothy Keller

Christian pastor and theologian

REFLECT

How does your faith tradition or your personal philosophy influence how you treat those with whom you disagree?

ACT

Find quotes or passages from sacred texts to support the importance of loving your enemy.



“Diversity is not a matter of different expressions of the same truth, but rather points to differences that touch the very core of who we are and what we believe.”

Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz
theologian and educator

REFLECT

What groups do you identify with?
What about them do you celebrate?

ACT

Get to know people from groups (religious, ethnic, economic) different from your own. Talk with them about the equality to be found by affirming diversity.



“As a child of immigrant parents, as a woman of color in a white society, and as a woman in a patriarchal society, what is personal to me IS political.”

Mitsuye Yamada
writer and activist

REFLECT

How do you make the abstract idea of equality personal?

ACT

Make equality a priority in your home or social circle. You might start by modeling equal gender roles, giving equal time for the expression of opinions, and sharing decision-making.



“The ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) was a wonderful achievement. But it was only the tip of the iceberg. You can pass a law but until you change society’s attitudes, that law won’t mean much.”

Denise Sherer Jacobson

disability rights activist and writer

REFLECT

Make a list of attitudes—your own and some you have encountered—that need to be changed for every person to feel valued.

ACT

Research the turning points for the rights of different groups in American history. What sparked changes in our laws and societal attitudes?



“ Come senators, congressmen
Please heed the call
Don't stand in the doorway
Don't block up the hall
For he that gets hurt
Will be he who has stalled
The battle outside ragin'
Will soon shake your windows
And rattle your walls
For the times they are a-changin'”

from “The Times They Are A-Changin'”

Bob Dylan

singer-songwriter

REFLECT

Dylan addressed this lyric from his classic song to members of the US Congress. Who else would you advise to “heed the call”?

ACT

What battles raging today are signs of changing times? Choose one to support with your time or money.



“ So many struggled so that all of us could have a voice in this great democracy and live up to the first three words of our Constitution: We the people. I love that phrase so much. Throughout our country’s history, we’ve expanded the meaning of that phrase to include more and more of us.”

Kerry Washington
actress and director

REFLECT

What does the phrase “we the people” mean to you? How do you define the “common good”?

ACT

Draw a picture or make a collage of “we the people.” Explain it to a friend or a child.



“ It all means nothing
if you don't stand up
for something
You can't just talk the talk
You got to walk that walk,
yes you do
It all means nothing
if you don't stand up
for something
and I'll stand up for you.”

from "Stand Up for Something"
by Common and Diane Warren
sung by **Andra Day**, singer-songwriter

REFLECT

What “talk” about democracy most appeals to you? How can you walk that talk?

ACT

Make a list—from everyday tasks to lifetime goals—of ways to stand up for yourself and others.



“The fabric of American society must be rewoven one loving stitch at a time: one child read to, one sick person prayed for, one elder given respect and made to feel needed, one prisoner rehabilitated, one mourner given comfort.”

Marianne Williamson

writer and spiritual leader

REFLECT

Reflect on the concerns and causes that are most important to you. What do you think is “yours to do”?

ACT

Check out volunteer opportunities in your community. Find out what is needed and assess which project is the best fit for your passions and gifts.



“ We must learn to judge our social and economic choices by whether they empower the powerless, protect the earth, and foster true democracy.”

Jim Wallis
theologian and activist

REFLECT

What criteria are important to you when you make social and economic choices?

ACT

Select an existing law or a policy being considered by the government. Does it address the things you value? If not, how might it be improved?



“Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired, signifies in the final sense a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.”

Dwight D. Eisenhower

34th President of the United States

REFLECT

When you read statements like this or reports on military spending compared with expenditures on community needs, how do you feel? Why?

ACT

Find a pie chart of how tax dollars and other resources are allocated in the annual budget between departments of the government. Redraw it with your values and beliefs in mind.



“ Preservation of one’s own culture does not require contempt or disrespect for other cultures.”

Cesar Chavez

labor leader and civil rights activist

REFLECT

How does living in a multicultural society affect you?

ACT

Take a walk through your neighborhood—what cultures are present? Now, walk through your home, identifying well-used and favorite objects that have come to you from another culture.



“It is in the common good to hold our political differences and the conflicts they create in a way that does not unravel the civic community on which democracy depends.”

Parker J. Palmer
writer and educator

REFLECT

Do you regularly connect with people who hold different political views, or do you tend to stick with those who agree with you? What experiences guide your engagement?

ACT

Look up Braver Angels' "With Malice Toward None" pledge. Together with someone who holds different political views, sign the pledge. Forward it to others.



“The common good is best served when each community has a chance to make its unique contribution.”

Eboo Patel

founder and president of Interfaith Youth Core

REFLECT

What has your community (ethnic, religious, gender) contributed to American politics and culture? Are you proud of that contribution? Why or why not?

ACT

Read interviews with leaders of different constituencies in your area to learn about their aspirations and accomplishments. Find a way to support them.



“It is important for all of us to appreciate where we come from and how that history has really shaped us in ways that we might not understand.”

Sonia Sotomayor
US Supreme Court Justice

REFLECT

Reflect on where you come from and how you have been shaped by your personal history.

ACT

Write a letter to your ancestors, thanking them for what you have received from them. Then write a letter to future generations, spelling out what you want your legacy to them to be.



“Every moment is an organizing opportunity, every person is a potential activist, every minute a chance to save the world.”

Dolores Huerta

labor leader and civil rights activist

REFLECT

How important is organizing, protesting, and other forms of activism to your vision of what is needed in our world? Share an example.

ACT

Watch a movie or read a biography of a “moral mentor,” who inspires you with their efforts to bring about change.



“ We need a vision that recognizes that we are at one of the great turning points in human history when the survival of our planet and the restoration of our humanity require a great sea change in our ecological, economic, political, and spiritual values.”

Grace Lee Boggs
writer and activist

REFLECT

What contemporary artists, spiritual teachers, or activists have given you a soul-stirring vision of the future that you can align yourself with?

ACT

Write a message to your “citizen” self. List the major changes you have observed in the world during the past five years. Then add changes you want to see happen in the next five years.



“ Maybe the adults have gotten used to saying, ‘it is what it is,’ but if us students have learned anything, it’s that if you don’t study, you will fail. And in this case, if you actively do nothing, people continually end up dead, so it’s time to start doing something.”

Emma Gonzalez

Parkland shooting survivor and activist

REFLECT

Which of these statements do you feel most strongly about? “It is what it is.” “It’s time to start doing something.” Why?

ACT

Emma Gonzalez helped organize a national march for gun reform. Choose a cause that you think is important to the common good. Study up on it. Then, consider how you can help, such as creating a list of actions to take to those with whom you work, worship, or study.



“If you do not have a moral question in your governing process, then you do not have a process that is going to survive.”

Oren Lyons

Indigenous rights advocate and Faithkeeper of the Turtle Clan of the Seneca Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy

REFLECT

What moral questions do you want to be central to decision-making in our democracy?

ACT

What spiritual values do you want to encourage?

Find an object you can carry that symbolizes the spiritual values you want to encourage in our democracy, such as a pin of a bird for freedom or peace.

