

# Democracy Under Construction: Reading & Discussion

*Democracy Under Construction* was originally planned as a republishing and continuation of our previous publication *Heal Up and Hair Over*. However, with the vision of our editor and board member, Dr. Henkel, we realized this could be something more, and that it was time to move the conversation beyond *Heal Up and Hair Over*. While many of the works from *Heal Up and Hair Over* remain, we have added quite a few new ones to recontextualize and focus the book on a conversation about our democracy.

**Terry Tempest Williams writes “[i]t doesn’t matter whether an answer is right or wrong, only that ideas be heard and discussed openly.” To that end, Wyoming Humanities has prepared this brief discussion guide to help you get started.**

- **Alexis de Tocqueville states:**

I am convinced that, if the Americans had been alone in the world, with the freedom and the knowledge acquired by their forefathers, and the passions which are their own, they would not have been slow to discover that progress cannot long be made in the application of the sciences without cultivating the theory of them; that all the arts are perfected by one another: and, however absorbed they might have been by the pursuit of the principal object of their desires, they would speedily have admitted, that it is necessary to turn aside from it occasionally, in order the better to attain it in the end. . . . (pg. 6)

## Discussion Q’s

### Q1:

What does de Tocqueville mean when he says that “it is necessary to turn aside ... to better to attain in the end”?

- **Peter Simpson states:**

To take [ideas] seriously is to be thoughtful, and there is nothing we need more at this juncture of human history than to be more thoughtful societies—societies in which ideas matter and inform our public discourse, broadening our understanding of issues, helping us to become more creative problem solvers and wiser decision-makers. . . . (pg. 54)

### Q2:

Would de Tocqueville agree with Simpson’s quote that we need to take ideas seriously?

For both authors, from where might these ideas come?

## Discussion Q's

- **Elizabeth Cady Stanton states:**

Now, in view of this entire disfranchisement of one-half the people of this country, their social and religious degradation,—in view of the unjust laws above mentioned, and because women do feel themselves aggrieved, oppressed, and fraudulently deprived of their most sacred rights, we insist that they have immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of these United States. (pg. 30).

- **Ralph Waldon Emerson states:**

There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction ... [and] [t]he power which resides in him is new in nature. (pg. 24)

- **Abraham Lincoln ends his address with this:**

“let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nations' wounds.” (pg. 49)

**Terry Tempest Williams begins by writing, “Democracy invites us to take risks (pg. 115).” In the Editor's Introduction, Dr. Henkel asks big questions to consider while reading the book. Now that you are familiar with the content, revisit them.**

- How free is your speech? Does it take courage to speak? Are there some ideas that should not be a part of a civil community?
- What is the value of political debate? Does it help us understand the truth?
- How should we understand civility? How should we understand protest in a free community?
- Even though many of these readings are from different eras, how can they help us understand our time?
- How can we use these ideas to solve the problems that will come up in our communities?
- What will our future look like, and what role will we play in it? What could our democracy be?

### Q3 & 4:

Stanton, speaking up for women's suffrage, wrote this in 1848. What do you think of her comment that one-half of the people of this country had been disenfranchised?

What do Truth (pg. 35), Douglass (pg. 37), and Tecumseh (pg. 19) say about this?

### Q5, 6 & 7:

What kind of power is Emerson talking about?

How does Emerson's power speak to and inform the actions of the Black 14 (pg. 99)?

How do you see this power manifest in Fahlsing (pg. 103)?

### Q8 & 9:

What similarities do you see between Lincoln's speech and Sam Mihara's story (pg. 89)?

How do Jeff Lockwood's concerns over the “nature of commitment (pg. 113)” relate to Lincoln's speech?