

American Democracy Project Quotes/Phrases

Bob Dylan

He not busy being born is busy dying

Henton, D., J. Melville, and K. Walesh. Civic Revolutionaries. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 2004.

Most Americans welcome the voice that lifts them out of themselves. They want to be better people. They want to help make this a better country... What you can do is to awaken them to the possibilities within themselves. Awaken them to what *they* can do for their country, the country of their children and their children's children.

So those who have not succumbed to the contemporary disaffection and alienation must speak the world of life to their fellow Americans. It is not a liberal or conservative issue. It is not Democrat or Republican. It is a question of whether we are going to settle into a permanent stat of self-absorption or show the vigor and purpose that becomes us. We don't want it said that after a couple of great centuries we let the American Experiment disintegrate. [O'Connell, 1999, p. xv]

*Declaration of Independence Road Trip, DOI Reading
"Independence Hall"*

Presenter: Morgan Freeman

Picture this. A group of politicians from the 13 American colonies come together in this building, right here, to plot what turns out to be a revolution.

A contentious Continental Congress needs to set forth some convincing reasons for declaring war. Congress turns to a brilliant 33-year-old aristocrat from Virginia, Thomas Jefferson.

In a matter of days, the red-haired wonder writes one of the most celebrated manifestos for human freedom and self-government in the history of Western civilization.

The Continental Congress authorizes Philadelphia printer John Dunlap to print 200 broadsides, poster-sized sheets. The document, unsigned, is then rushed to waiting horsemen who put it in their saddlebags and gallop throughout the colonies.

You see, if this revolutionary war is to be won, thousands of farmers and tradesmen must be persuaded to take up arms and fight, and they do. Not many people realize it today, but scholars believe Jefferson intended for the Declaration to be performed and not just read. Its words and rhythms were written to be spoken, in proud and defiant tones, in grand public places.

It's a safe bet that the Continental Congress never had in mind a performer like me, that is to say, a black man.

Thomas Jefferson was not ignorant of the problem of slavery; of course, he called it a moral and political depravity, and in the original draft of the Declaration denounced the slave trade as a cruel war against human nature itself. But Congress thought better of this particular item and deleted it. In fact, there is no mention of slavery, or black people, or of women for that matter, in this preeminent statement on the equal rights of man.

So it makes you wonder: How could a man who himself held slaves write with such incredible passion and eloquence about human liberation and the promise of a democratic republic?

Why, some may ask, do I bring up such embarrassing truths on this glorious occasion?

I answer: The real glory of the Declaration of Independence has been our nation's epic struggle throughout history to close the gap between the ideals of this remarkable document and the sometimes painful realities of American life.

The Declaration symbolizes the birth of our nation, of course, but also the constant struggle to achieve its ideals.

Consider: The words of this document inspired the French Revolution of 1789; 200 years later – the revolt of Chinese students in Tienanmen Square.

It inspired Abraham Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, Martin Luther King, Jr. to fight for civil rights, and women's suffragettes to fight for the vote.

This business of fulfilling the Declaration of Independence is a difficult struggle, but it is also an ennobling struggle. Jefferson called the Declaration an expression of the American mind.

It is why this nation is so great, and why I am so proud to be an American.

Emily Dickinson (about her poems)

Their message is committed / To hands I cannot see

(Gamson, in Ehrlich, T. (ed.) 2000. Civic responsibility and higher education. Phoenix: American Council on Education Oryx Press)

“Our ways of handling power differences and diverse points of view and cultures should be models of the civic life we wish to engender in our communities. Encouraging the articulation of differences, and then finding areas for collaboration, should be the norm rather than the exception.”

Mary Oliver

Like Magellan, let us find our islands
To die in, far from home, from anywhere

Familiar. Let us risk the wildest places,
Lest we go down in comfort, and despair.

For years we have labored over common roads,
Dreaming of ships that sail into the night.
Let us be heroes, or, if that's not in us,
Let us find men to follow, honor-bright.

For what is life but reaching for an answer?
And what is death but a refusal to grow?
Magellan had a dream he had to follow.
The sea was big, his ships were awkward, slow.

And when the fever would not set him free,
To his thin crew, "Sail on, sail on!" he cried.
And so they did, carried the frail dream homeward.
And thus Magellan lives, although he died.

Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural, March 4, 1861

The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.

Alexis d' Tocqueville

It cannot be doubted that in the United States the instruction of the people powerfully contributes to the support of the democratic republic; and such must always be the case, I believe, where the instruction which enlightens the understanding is not separated from the moral education which amends the heart.

Johnnetta Cole

An education that teaches you to understand something about the world has done only half of the assignment. The other half is to teach you to do something about making the world a better place.

Quotes from: A Practical Guide for Integrating Civic Responsibility into the Curriculum.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Everybody can be great because anybody can serve.

Marian Wright Edelman

Service is the rent we pay for living. It is the very purpose of life and not something to do in your spare time.

Jean Jacques Rousseau

I was born a citizen of a free state... however slight my voice may affect public affairs, my right to vote on them is enough to impose upon me the duty of learning about them.

Horace Mann

A different world cannot be built by indifferent people.

Henry David Thoreau

One is not born into the world to do everything but to do something.

Margaret Mead

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed it's the only thing that ever has.

Arthur Ashe

From what we get, we make a living; what we give, however, makes a life.

Aesop

No act of kindness, no matter how small, is ever wasted.

Dorothy I. Height

Without community service, we would not have a strong quality of life. It's important to the person who serves as well as the recipient. It's the way in which we ourselves grow and develop.

Albert Schweitzer

I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really be happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve.

Mahatma Gandhi

I shall pass through this world but once. Any good therefore that I can do or any kindness that I can show to any human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again.

Anne Frank

How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.

Henrik Ibsen

A thousand words will not leave so deep an impression as one deed.

Alice Walker

Treat people as if they are what they ought to be, and help them become what they are capable of being.

Wil Rogers

Work to make a living; serve to make a life.

John Dewey

"The work of history [is] to free the truth-to break down the walls of isolation and of class interest which hold it in and under. Truth only becomes free when it distributes itself to all so that it becomes the Commonwealth."

John Dewey

The trouble...is that we have taken our democracy for granted; we have thought and acted as if our forefathers had founded it once and for all. We have forgotten that it has to be enacted anew in every generation, in every year and day, in the living relations of person to person in all social forms and institutions.

I feel indebted to everyone who makes their contribution in the light of the analysis articulated by Dewey (1940:357f), as cited in Goodman (1995:7):

'The problem of education in its relation to the direction of social change is all one with the problem of finding out what democracy means in its total range of concrete applications: domestic, international, religious, cultural, economic, and political. . . . The trouble . . . is that we have taken democracy for granted; we have thought and acted as if our forefathers had founded it once and for all. We have forgotten that it has to be enacted anew in every generation, in every year, in every day, in the living relations of person to person, in all social forms and institutions. Forgetting this. . . . we have been negligent in creating a school that should be the constant nurse of democracy.'

Thomas Jefferson (1820)

I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion.

Benjamin Franklin, more than 200 years ago, reminded us of democracy's fragility.

Upon exiting the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Franklin was approached by a group of citizens; they asked what sort of government the delegates had created. His answer: "A republic, if you can keep it."