

A DECLARATION OF INTERDEPENDENCE

Jeremy David Engels

We have frequently printed the word Democracy. Yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps, quite unawaken'd.¹
—Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*

What passes for “democracy” today is anything but. We’ve been tricked into thinking democracy is a “war” between political parties for control over the levers of power, with everyday citizens like you and me expected to enlist in the “battle” to defeat our “enemies.” Many politicians seem to care more about winning elections than the impacts of their policies or actions on our collective wellbeing. This model of democracy is not just ineffective and wrongheaded. It’s destroying the human spirit, making us wary of our fellow citizens and compromising our capacity for wonder, belonging, and mutual care.

The “real gist” of democracy is not combat. Democracy is a practice—it is something that we do together, in community, with our friends, neighbors, colleagues, strangers, and yes, even supposed “foes,” to care for each other and for the miraculous life that we share. Democracy is rooted in our true nature: in love, compassion, and gratitude, not in hatred, rage, or resentment. Just because people disagree does not mean we cannot get along, or that we cannot work together to meet the challenges of the moment. Yet it has begun to feel like we live at high noon, under a blood red sky, just waiting for catastrophe to strike. Standing on the edge like this takes a real toll on the mind, the body, and the spirit.

My friends, I say to you today that there is a way to disengage from the vitriol without opting out of society or becoming a hermit. There is a way to engage more skillfully with the world without being overwhelmed by the doom and gloom. There is a way to effect change without going to war, even as we uphold our deep moral commitments to each other and to the common goods we share. There is a way to disagree with others without demonizing them. There is a way to live so life doesn't feel like a duel taking place at high noon. There is a way to be a citizen and not a soldier. There is a way to transform war into peace.

The way is mindful democracy. And the first step is to declare our interdependence.

On July 4, 2026, Americans celebrate the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.² Few documents have captured the world's imagination in the way this text has. In just 1,337 words, the Declaration announced the birth of a new nation in such inspiring and demonstrative terms that, in the ensuing centuries, dozens of nations modeled their own declarations of independence on it, as did the United Nations with its Universal Declaration of Human Rights.³ Whenever anyone today determines to "declare independence" with a public pronouncement, it's almost certain they will echo words originally written in Philadelphia during the sweltering summer of 1776.

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Though the Declaration of Independence was addressed to the “candid world,” it’s true audience was everyday Americans. Its authors intended it to be read aloud, in bars, parks, churches, town halls, and military encampments, because these places are where people gathered.⁴ They aimed to inspire common folks to believe they deserved the “inalienable rights” of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” and to believe, as well, that these rights required standing up for themselves and embracing self-government. The Declaration’s lasting rhetorical power lies in its ability to inspire everyday people like you and me to believe that we matter, and that if we work together, we can build the type of world where everyone gets to enjoy the miracle of this life.

The 1776 Declaration justified revolution and defended self-government in the language of “enemyship,” dividing the world into “us versus them.”⁵ We matter, it says, first and foremost as soldiers for democracy and self-government. The moment an enemy is named, though, a state of war exists; underneath its beautiful and inspirational phrases, the 1776 Declaration is a call to arms and a defense of political violence.⁶ The semi-quincentennial celebration of its signing is an auspicious moment to update this document to better suit the needs of this moment. The last thing we need today is more violence or more enemyship.

The 2026, updated Declaration must transcend enemyship and remind us of the meaning of true democracy. The world is not and has never been divided into friends and enemies. Enemyship is a cruel fiction: useful for justifying war, useless for democracy. The 1776 Declaration imagines divisions so profound they can never be healed. The 2026 Declaration must focus on what we share and how deeply we are interconnected. It must recognize that democracy is not a war—in fact, the surest and quickest means to destroy democracy is to transform it into a war.

I've written a new Declaration of *Interdependence* to begin this book. Like the original, it is 1,337 words long. If you agree to its principles, I invite you to sign your mark to it. It's printed on pages that can be torn out and carried with you; it's meant to be read aloud and discussed with friends and neighbors and strangers, and I hope that you will do so, on July 4 and on other days, too, in the United States and around the world. For if we are to stand up for true democracy—if we are to work together to care for each other and the life we share—Americans alone cannot do it. A world divided against itself cannot, and will not, stand. The people living on planet earth are interdependent and interconnected, today more than ever before—we must speak up in all the world's languages and stand for democracy in all the world's climates.

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To declare interdependence is to acknowledge and celebrate a basic and inescapable fact of human existence: each of us is interwoven with other people, other beings, and this beautiful blue orb we call home. Just as a wave would not exist without the ocean, a tree would not exist without the ground, and a gust of wind would not exist without the atmosphere, the same is true of humanity: none of us would exist without waves, trees, wind, apples, bees, oceans, words, farmers, scientists, a planet earth, a moon, a sun—and other people. Life is collaboration, not combat. This recognition is a natural insight of mindfulness, the practice of being aware of what is going on inside of and around us.

In my experience, mindfulness gives rise to a sense of connection and compassion that make it not only possible, but inevitable, that we will care for each other and protect the well-being of all who share this planet. Only when we awake to interdependence can we begin to practice true democracy, can we reliably choose to cooperate with each other rather than to compete or engage in combat. And if we do, we will be so much stronger and more capable. Whatever moxie, whatever gumption, whatever pluck, grit, and stick-to-itiveness we have when we act alone is multiplied exponentially when we work together as a community that bridges difference and division. Two people generally have more strength than one; consider the strength of three, or four, or dozens, or thousands, or millions! That's the true power of democracy, the power of cooperation and community, the power that comes from standing on common ground and declaring interdependence.

A DECLARATION OF INTERDEPENDENCE TO MEND A FRACTURED WORLD

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for the citizens of the world to take a stand and declare, in a multitude of voices and all the world's tongues, that enough is enough—no longer will we stand aside while careless people casually set the world on fire, no longer will we watch democracy be destroyed and the inherent dignity of millions be slandered, no longer will we tolerate cruel and unjust systems that put profits ahead of people and deny that life, every single life, is a miracle—dignity requires that these citizens declare the causes which impel them to make this stand despite the possibility that simply continuing to suffer these evils would be so much simpler.

We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all people are created equal and interdependent; that everyone—all races, genders, classes, sexual identities, religions, and nationalities—belongs, and can be truly well, and has something to contribute to the ensemble, and deserves the opportunity to answer life's ultimate questions in their own words; that in this endeavor life, liberty, and happiness are sacred; and that no one need waste away from want, when there is abundance. We stand on the common ground of our existence, aware that the present moment is the only moment that exists, the only moment in which change is possible. Friendship, not enemyship, is our foundation; affirmation, not destruction, is our politics; love, not hate, is our motivation; we act not for light and transient causes, but for the eternal aim: that we all might be truly whole, safe, and at peace in this life, together.

We stand for democracy. However, when a long train of abuses and usurpations so completely corrupts the meaning of democracy that the word itself becomes a contradiction, casually continuing to use that word is counterproductive. New clarity is called for. Contemporary democracy no longer serves to empower the multitudes; we the people must take it back. Let us stand for true democracy: the practice of caring for each other and for the life we share, where everyone has a say in decisions that affect their lives, and where we all pitch in to fix an injustice that affects us all. True democracy is collective empowerment: democracy not just of, by, or for the people, but also with the people, regardless of who they are.

Let us stand for true democracy ...

Recognizing that there is no way to democracy—democracy is the way—we make this declaration to win hearts, not wars. We declare interdependence in the welcoming, compassionate spirit of beloved community, fully aware that the world we seek rests on the following insights:

- Life is not a chore, a debt, an obligation, or something to be casually tossed aside with indifference. Life is a shared miracle. We practice democracy because we actively embrace life.
- Democracy is how we care for each other and for the miraculous life that we share.
- Democracy requires us to be present with what is and see reality clearly, when it is joyful, and when it is painful. For this reason, we practice mindfulness of what is happening within and around us.
- Democracy does not work without mindfulness, for it requires us to be present, to see things clearly, and to refuse to continue to blindly repeat the errors of the past. We practice mindfulness to recover our agency as human beings, so that we can be more responsive and less reactive in how we live our lives.
- It is natural to run away from suffering, yet—like the lotus flower, which grows in the mud—we need suffering to bloom...
- And when we bloom, we bloom together.
- The present moment is a wonderful moment—because it exists, because we are alive, and because we are capable of connection, community, and change.

- Democracy requires us to show up for life, and for each other—so we are mindful of how we use technology and what media we consume.
- Even in moments of sorrow and grave injustice, the conditions for transformation are present—the on-ramp to a better life is wherever you happen to be right now.
- Gratitude is the foundational democratic emotion, for it reconnects us to ourselves, to each other, and to the life we share.
- Democracy requires us to open and strengthen our hearts and to expand them to the size of infinity—for this reason, we practice loving-kindness.
- Democracy starts when we stop living the lie that some people are naturally more important and more deserving of safety, happiness, and well-being than other people.
- Democracy is community, and we make our community “beloved” by transforming it into a gymnasium where we practice mindful democracy and a microcosm of the world we’d like to create.
- Democracy is a practice of inclusion, for there is wisdom, creativity, and joy in diversity.
- Every I is also a We; instead of fighting with our fellow citizens, we learn from and support each other as we collaborate on common projects, challenges, and dreams.
- The interdependence that demands conformity is not true interdependence: it is tyranny.

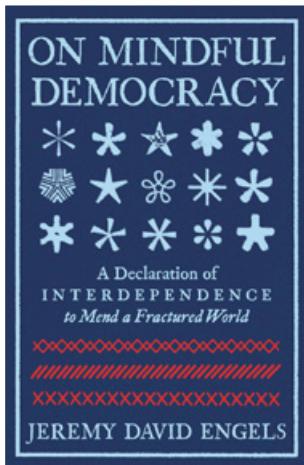
- The surest way to destroy democracy is to treat it like a war; enemyship is easy, but it is to be avoided at all costs.
- Democracy requires collaboration. Whenever people work together, conflicts arise; when we disagree, it's skillful to treat others as "mistaken" rather than "evil."
- Democratic power is not physical power: it is not about domination; democratic power is spiritual power: it is the power we collectively generate from building safe, inclusive, and vibrant communities in which we care for each other and for our shared life.
- Mindful citizens care: we do not acquiesce to injustice or bow to the status quo.
- Democracy is about opening minds and hearts, not winning wars. Democracy is not a battle between enemies; it is an argument between equals. When we speak and act, our aim is persuasion, not domination.
- The skillful use of words is the cornerstone of democracy: Before we act, we deliberate.
- Changing your mind is not weakness, it is the work of a brave soul.
- The true power of words is to mend.
- Hatred has no place in democracy.
- It is a mark of wisdom to pause before acting to ask, "Are you sure?"
- When it's time, we act to affirm and to awaken, not to denigrate or destroy.

Friends, comrades, camarados, let us heed these insights and join together in building communities of mutual support and transformation around the world so that we might work hand in hand to care for the life we share. Friends, we are enemies only in our minds, so let us mutually pledge to engage with the present moment—and all moments to come—in the spirit of collaboration rather than competition. Friends, if we see things clearly, there is always hope, so let us set out on a journey together, around the broad circle of the world, from now to next and encompassing all hours of the twenty-four, through night and day, through misery and joy, through unity and division, to experience a life whose true worth can never be calculated in dollars and cents, a life too valuable to be bought and sold, a life that is the greatest gift any of us will ever receive, a life meant to be treasured and enjoyed and never wasted, a life that is shared.

Our independence has always been interdependence. Let us embrace it, declare it, and live by it, for the benefit of all beings. §



Info



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Jeremy David Engels, Ph.D., is the Liberal Arts professor of Communication and Ethics at Penn State University. He is also a longtime teacher of mindfulness, meditation, and yoga and since undertaking a pilgrimage to walk in the footsteps of the Buddha in India and Nepal in 2018, a student of Thích Nhất Hạnh. He is an award-winning teacher and scholar, and has published numerous books and articles about democracy, community building, deliberation, and peace. He lives in State College, Pennsylvania, where he and his wife Anna run a community yoga and meditation studio called Yoga Lab. Jeremy joyfully joins the Plum Village Beloved Community in practicing mindfulness as “the practice of peace.”

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Endnotes

1. Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas* (1871), in *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (Library of America, 1982), 960.
2. For helpful scholarly background on the Declaration of Independence, see Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (Knopf, 1998), and Danielle Allen, *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* (Norton, 2014).
3. David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Harvard, 2007). The Declaration also inspired Americans—farmers, labor activists, abolitionists, suffragettes, socialists, civil rights activists—to craft alternative, more radical documents: see Philip S. Foner, ed., *We, the Other People: Alternative Declarations of Independence by Labor Groups, Farmers, Women's Rights Advocates, Socialists, and Blacks 1829-1975* (University of Illinois Press, 1976).
4. Through careful archival research, Jay Fliegelman demonstrates that the Declaration of Independence was intended to be read aloud and performed publicly in *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, 1993).
5. I describe how the rhetoric of enemyship works in my first two books: Jeremy Engels, *Enemyship: Democracy and Counter-Revolution in the Early Republic* (Michigan State University Press, 2010), and Jeremy Engels, *The Politics of Resentment: A Genealogy* (Penn State University Press, 2015).
6. The fact that the Declaration of Independence justified populist, democratic violence created real problems for the founders of the United States, who found that the Declaration's powerful rhetoric became an impediment to building a strong central government; I catalogue many of their innovative solutions to America's founding paradox in my book *Enemyship*.