



# “What We Celebrate”

*December 7, 2019 | Civic Saturday Sermon by Eric Liu | Town Hall, Seattle, WA*

Today is a day to celebrate. We celebrate the holiday season, a season of gratitude and forgiveness. We celebrate the re-opening of the community treasure that is Town Hall Seattle. We celebrate three years of Civic Saturday. This is now the 21<sup>st</sup> time we’ve met in Seattle and the 79<sup>th</sup> such gathering has happened in the United States. We celebrate each other, the awesome team at Citizen University, and all the folks in our orbit who are spreading this civic ritual nationwide. We celebrate the ritual itself because ritual matters in a time when we are told that up is down and good is bad and real is fake.

*This is real. This is up. This is good.*

Civic Saturday is part of our mission at Citizen University to build a culture of powerful, responsible citizenship in the United States. It expresses a worldview: the idea that *culture precedes structure*. Structure gets the attention these days: calls for structural change in the rules of our government and economy; critiques of structural racism and sexism across many institutions. But culture is upstream of structure. It surrounds structure. It suffuses it. Culture – our values, our norms, our habits, our patterns of thought and feeling and creation, our *soul* – culture gives institutions their shape.

The culture we together are creating – along with groups like ours at dozens of Civic Saturdays gatherings in tiny rural towns and in big cities, including one this morning in Lincoln, Nebraska – is about values like mutual aid, bonds of trust and affection, bridging among not-quite strangers and soon-to-be friends. Our civic culture is grounded in what Alexis de Tocqueville called habits of the heart, what Adam Smith called the moral sentiments, what Clara Luper spoke of as faith in each other.

Do you all know who Clara Luper is? She was a history teacher in segregated Oklahoma City who organized her students to conduct a lunch counter sit-in at Katz Drug Store in 1958. It was the first and longest sit-in of the civil rights movement, a year and a half before Greensboro. She was a patient, relentless, loving, hard-as-nails organizer who signed her open letters to the white leaders of her city’s power structure, “Your citizen, Clara Luper.” She should be more celebrated. I celebrate her today.

Three weeks ago, Taneum and I went to Oklahoma City to lead a Civic Saturday, in partnership with their young mayor, David Holt, and the grassroots organizations Generation Citizen and Let’s Fix It OKC. At the invitation of the mayor, we went to an Oklahoma City Thunder basketball game. It could’ve been awkward, considering this team was formerly known as the

Seattle Supersonics. But two things made me OK with being there: First, Taneum made Sonics pins for us to wear in a subtle act of resistance. And second, honestly, I didn't care. The NBA bores me. Just don't touch the Mariners.

At our Civic Saturday the next morning, I pointed out, perhaps to the discomfort of those gathered, how much our two cities are alike. Born of a land rush and displacement of native peoples, with wild extractive cycles of boom and bust, short-sighted city planning, racial segregation, polite avoidance of the uncomfortable. We have the Seattle Freeze. They have "bless your heart" for those they don't wish to engage. Fundamentally both our cities are messy contradictory improvisations. And the improvisatory spirit of our cities – let's be honest, of every city in our nation – is both our strength and liability.

In improv sketch comedy, the cardinal rule is to never say no. However clumsy a lead-in your scene partner has just given you, no matter how flimsy a premise for the next line of dialogue, don't say no to it. You say, "Yes *and*" and then take the sketch in a new direction. In jazz, if your bandmate plays something that stirs or disturbs you, you don't cancel it. You acknowledge it, answer it, play off it. You extend the riff your own way.

Today I'd like to bring that spirit to the celebration of three things: our presence, our openness, and our heritage. First, our presence here together, which is proof of something sticking. Second, the openness of our society, which we too often take for granted. And third, our heritage, which we often take to mean something fixed and solid when it is in fact as fluid as blood.

Let me note: each of these celebrations comes with a trade-off, a counterbalance, a catch, an addendum. If you've ever seen the animated Disney film *Aladdin*, in which Robin Williams voices the genie, you'll remember when he tells Aladdin he gets three wishes. "I can wish for *anything*?" Aladdin asks. And in a manic improvisation, brought to life by animation, Robin Williams suddenly becomes William F. Buckley, the midcentury conservative pundit who spoke in a pretentious Britishy accent [glasses on nose]: "There are a few, uh, provisos, a, a couple of quid pro quos."

But I digress. What I was saying is that every celebration comes with a hook. A *yes-and*, if you will. Freedom comes with quid pro quos, as people in both the U.S. and Ukraine have painfully been reminded. With that proviso, let me speak first of presence.

## **Presence**

Who was here three years ago at the first Civic Saturday, among the 220 people crammed in the basement reading room at Elliott Bay Book Company four days after the 2016 election? I remember the heat and the tears not only of anxiety and fear but of reckoning and recommitment. We had to face ourselves that morning, as individual citizens, as a community, and as a nation. We had to do it face to face. Now we are gathered here today. Period. That's

something to celebrate. We show up and we keep showing up. And that fact that Citizen University has trained five dozen people since last year to lead these gatherings in their own places, and we have just sent out acceptance letters to nearly thirty more for our spring cohorts, is something to be cheerful about.

By the way, the last time we held Civic Saturday at Town Hall, among the folks in the room singing and meeting strangers and committing to action was the great musician and artist David Byrne. He was in town for a show he was doing and he joined us because he was curious. He loved it. David had been putting together a traveling PowerPoint presentation called “Reasons to be Cheerful,” and after we met he included Civic Saturdays in that presentation. And his spirit of joyful civic faith and purposeful presence now fuels his exuberant theatrical concert on Broadway called *American Utopia*, which I’m told is what Civic Saturday could be like if we flipped the ratio of singing to speaking and added cool gray suits and a lot of dancing. (And David Byrne).

Presence matters because it is getting too easy now to withdraw and retreat into our smallest circles of comfort. Presence – in our bodies – matters because when you walk around this tech-saturated town you can count at every corner a craned-neck father staring at his phone while his toddler tugs at his pant legs, teenagers not hearing the birds overhead or the bus barreling toward them because their wireless earbuds have taken them elsewhere, newcomers to Seattle walking past each other at lunch hour instead of making eye contact and making friends because their eyes are glued to the onscreen faces in their timeline and feed.

How do you weave a citizenry out of that material? How can the body politic move when it is self-anesthetized? How can you pull a community out of a well of self-absorption?

The student protestors in Hong Kong are no strangers to tech and apps and social media. Their movement for democracy could not be happening without those tools. But they have it right. The tools serve them, not the other way around. They know that you have to show up – in numbers, in song, in costume, in force – to change anything and to do anything constructive and useful to the community.

Before we get too self-congratulatory, though, for having made the choice to be here today, let us acknowledge that for most of us it was not that hard to show up. Three years in, Civic Saturday in Seattle still needs to invite and include more people for whom it *is* hard. We need to do that – not just me and my CU teammates; we all do.

If you were with us in February at El Centro de la Raza you will remember that during the community announcements, one man asked in accented English whether we might sign a petition on his behalf so that he would not be deported by the government of the United States. His name is Jaime Rubio Sulficio. He is undocumented, having come to the U.S. from Mexico over a dozen years ago. In those years he worked in construction and then started a construction business. He has taught Latin dance and volunteered to help veterans with home

repairs. He had been granted stays of deportation several times until the current administration took power. Then he was given 120 days to leave this country and leave behind his wife Keiko Maruyama and their young son.

Jená and I saw Keiko a few weeks ago. She spoke at a potluck fundraiser at a friend's home, organized by the Church Council of Greater Seattle. Jaime was not there. When his petitions were denied and he had exhausted every appeal, Jaime took sanctuary at St. Mark's Cathedral. He's lived there since April. He cannot risk leaving. I promised Keiko I would share his story, and she's here today. That potluck fundraiser was for the Church Council's programs to support families like theirs, including one that trains volunteers who accompany immigrants to appointments with government agencies. To celebrate presence is to remember our duty to champion. Our duty to show up for others. Our duty to accompany.

That can mean literally walking alongside someone like Jaime. And to embrace Keiko, so that she can pass on our embrace to her husband. It can also mean spending capital in solidarity with the disfavored. David Holt, my friend who's the mayor of Oklahoma City, is a former Republican state senator, a rising star. When the President of the United States tweeted in July that four liberal members of Congress, all women of color, three of them born in the USA, should "go back" to their "crime-infested countries, plenty of Oklahomans cheered. David responded with a tweet I want to share.

Oklahoma City is a diverse community where 60 percent of our children are non-white. Many of our residents are immigrants. Almost all of us are the descendants of immigrants. We are working closely with our Native community to honor those who were truly the first Americans.

As an Osage I'm a living example of the collision between the new world & the old. I supposed I could go back to my country but I would have to leave some of myself here. it's all messy & complicated but made simpler when we exercise empathy, grace & love and we welcome all.

That cost him something, and I admire it. So yes, let's celebrate presence – *and* let's celebrate the resilience of those who take risks to *be* present as well as those who show up on behalf of those who can't. If you do nothing else after we're done here today, support the Church Council with your dollars, your time, your presence.

## **Openness**

Let me now turn to our second celebration – the celebration of openness.

For the last few months, I've been reading one of the greatest novels you never heard of. It's by Vasily Grossman, a writer during the Soviet Union whose work was alternately celebrated and banned by the authorities. This book is called *Life and Fate*, a title that audaciously but

justifiably evokes Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Like his literary forebear, Grossman uses war as his canvas – in this case the Second World War during the battle of Stalingrad, and the way it touches the members of one family.

He paints indelible scenes of labor camps, of gas chambers, of last stands on the banks of the Volga, of dinner-table strife and lost love, of the private anguish of a scientist suddenly deemed ideologically incorrect. Woven through these scenes, like a rope that tightens around the heart and gut, is fear of the State. Fear of what would later be called the Orwellian power of a totalitarian party and state to break the spirit of individuals. To deform them so that they perform and redact their speech and thoughts, even among friends. So that they learn how to rationalize evil and inaction and treat down as up, wrong as right, slavery as freedom. Though the novel's action occurs in 1942 and 1943, its characters are haunted by 1937 – the peak year of Stalin's Great Purge, with its show trials and the denunciations of neighbors and the murder of a million citizens. Pressed between the randomness of life, on the one hand, and the implacable will of the state, on the other, the characters struggle to be more than the playthings of fate.

To read this novel is to awaken one's inner libertarian. In my case, that is saying something. To read this novel as an American is to remind oneself never to take for granted the way that freedom liberates. Freedom liberates first not by enabling consent of the governed or opening the machinery of state. It liberates first by opening the hearts and imaginations of human beings to express without fear the full breadth of their humanity. Freedom liberates first in the spirit and only later in the body of our laws.

But to read this book today is also to be nostalgic, if that's the word, for a time when malevolent Russian leaders didn't yet know that the openness of open societies can be exploited, and that open societies can be divided at the speed of the Internet and, if not conquered, at least crippled. Fake news generating divisive controversies, bot armies accelerating the polarization, conspiracy theories injected like infections into the bloodstream. *They* can do that to *us*, because our civic and cultural bloodstream is permeable. We can't do it to them because theirs is not. It's an asymmetric advantage that a weak society can wield over a stronger one.

Of course, it's not just that our system is open and permeable and therefore exploitable. The catalytic factor is that in our open society there are actors like Facebook and Twitter who are willing, as a matter of profit, to aid and abet the exploiters. I used to think that the problem of social media was a kind of tragedy of the commons, in which everyone extracts benefit from the common resource but no one thinks it's their job to maintain it. But even more, it is a tragedy of the *conscience*, in which people who know better or should know better actively shirk the responsibility to *do* better.

Facebook and Twitter and YouTube could today adopt a simple rule of real, verifiable identity. Removing anonymity from their platforms would clean out a large proportion of the accounts

weaponized by hostile illiberal leaders in Moscow or Beijing. (Or Washington). But that would lower earnings per share. Still, let's imagine that the big social media platforms did clear out the hate-spewing disinformation bots today. Then the onus would be on us. Whether they clean house or not, the onus will always be on us. The responsibility to do better is not Mark Zuckerberg's alone. It is ultimately ours.

I am firmly of the belief that over the long term, open and inclusive societies should outperform and outlast closed, exclusive ones. But that belief assumes things we can no longer assume: that we know what to do with our freedom; that we know how to curb the excesses and sicknesses made possible by openness; that a free people could not, by disinformation and manipulation, be converted into mindless pawns.

We need to remember that freedom is responsibility. We need to know what we believe and why – and be willing to change our minds as circumstances change. We need to sustain habits of face-to-face gathering and learning and arguing and doing. And we need to share with others what we know about how to do these things.

Earlier this week in DC I had the honor of meeting a Polish citizen named Ryszard Pruszkier. During the 1980s he was active in the non-violent underground Solidarity Movement. Under a pen name, he published an illegal manual for Solidarity activists called "How to Survive Police Interrogation." After the Communist regime fell, he helped start grassroots civic organizations and he launched the Poland office of Ashoka, a global network of social entrepreneurs. He's now a respected elder at the University of Warsaw and for the Ashoka ecosystem, where he's like a civic Yoda.

Ryszard and I had a three-hour conversation about our lives and our histories. What struck me most about him was his theory, born of experience, of what it takes to preserve the advantages of openness. The secret, he says, is not the strong bonds of like-minded people who think and act in small-s solidarity. The secret is the so-called "weak ties" that web together many tightly bonded circles. A society with too many strong ties and too few weak ties is too easily divided and conquered. And by the way, if you know anything about the history of Poland, sandwiched by fate between Prussians and Russians, you know that "divide and conquer" is not a mere metaphor.

"The strength of weak ties" is what the social scientist Mark Granovetter calls it. Another way to put it is *internal permeability*. What good does it do us at the societal scale to be open and permeable to the outside if on the inside, at the human scale, we seal ourselves off in bubbles of purity? The point of living in a diverse, heterogeneous society is to be able to activate that diversity and heterogeneity for the greater good. To do that, we must make more weak ties – not only across left and right but also urban and rural, eastern and western, church and unchurched, young and old.

As Rysard writes in an essay about “profound and peaceful social transformations,” this is how the American civil rights movement worked. It’s how Solidarity succeeded. It’s how citizens in both countries resisted the propaganda of zero-sum thinking: by building trust with people outside their own circles. So yes, let’s celebrate our openness – *and* prevent the exploitation of that openness by those who would divide us.

## Heritage

This brings me to my final point of celebration, and that is to celebrate our heritage. Who is *us*, you might say. And I’d reply, yes. That’s exactly right. Who we are as Americans is this: a people ever arguing over who we are as Americans.

Heritage is a loaded word these days. It’s a concept more often invoked by paragons of purity and purge: white heritage, Confederate heritage, Southern heritage. But I refuse to yield the word or the idea. I insist upon claiming it for the forces of hybridity and inclusion. Perhaps you’ve heard me extol the all-American virtues of a kim chi burrito. I want to go further now. I want you to see the hybrid not just in your cuisine or in your playlist but in yourself. I am a conservative and a progressive. A believer and a non-believer. Parochial and cosmopolitan. Libertarian and communitarian. And so are you.

This morning there was a reading of civic scripture from Wilma Mankiller. Do you know who Wilma Mankiller was? She was the first woman to lead the Cherokee Nation. She came to the attention of tribal leaders in 1979 when she organized volunteers in Bell, Oklahoma to lay 16 miles of pipe for a shared water system. Seven years later she was elected Chief of the Nation. The text we heard today might sound like what you’d expect from a liberal Native American woman, with its emphasis on relationships and memory and the interconnectedness of things. What I noticed, though, when I first encountered those words was that they could just as easily been spoken by a conservative man who is an NRA member and a hunter. Tradition. Place. Nature. “The context of the family, clan, community, nation.” As Mankiller said, context is everything.

Context means that we face our past in full. Yesterday Nikki Haley – the former South Carolina governor, the daughter of immigrants from India, the sole person to exit the Trump cabinet unsullied – chose not to do that. On a podcast, she said that Dylann Roof, the white supremacist who perpetrated the massacre at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, had “hijacked” the meaning of the Confederate battle flag. As if, until the moment Roof killed those nine African Americans in Bible study, the flag had been just an innocent symbol of, as she put it, “service, sacrifice, and heritage.” That was a fail. She could have shown us a better way to reckon. In fact, she did so in 2015, after the massacre, when she took the flag down from the state capitol.

Yet I will curb my Twitter-fed reflex to demonize her absolutely. She may be cynically playing to Trump’s base now that she’s seen as a future presidential contender. But she’s not wrong that

Confederate soldiers served and sacrificed. She just lacked the courage to spell out what they served and sacrificed for: family, clan, community. But also nation. And not *this* nation. A breakaway Confederate nation dedicated to the proposition that some men are created to be enslaved. A nation, if I may borrow FDR's language from this day 78 years ago, that shall live in infamy.

We know moral courage when we see it. Recently I read about the provost of Indiana University, Lauren Robel, who had to deal with a professor there who in his personal Facebook posts had been unabashedly racist, sexist, and homophobic. She issued a statement that I urge you to find and read in full. No mealy-mouthed administrator-speak from her. She blasted this professor as a bigot, saying it was not even a close call to call him that. But then she added, "We cannot, nor would we, fire Professor Rasmusen for his posts as a private citizen, as vile and stupid as they are, because the First Amendment of the United States Constitution forbids us to do so. That is not a close call." She didn't stop there, with a mere philosophical statement of two opposed principles. She declared that no student would be forced to take a course from this professor – alternatives would be provided – and that all his grading would be double-blind so that no student's grades would be distorted by his prejudices.

Racism, sexism, and homophobia are all part of our heritage as Americans, as is rapacious capitalism. But so is an exceptional creed of freedom and equality and justice for all, and an imperfect record of deeds to redeem that creed. It's both-and. It's yes-and. It's not either-or. America is neither innocent nor wicked.

You know who was good at naming our heritage in full? Will Rogers. We tend to think of the great American humorist as just that: a humorist. But he was also a prairie populist. And as much as I love his quips that we heard this morning, which truly are part of our heritage as Americans, I love even more a speech he ad-libbed in Guymon, Oklahoma on April 14, 1935 – Black Sunday, the darkest, most terrible day of the Dust Bowl. Here's what he said that day:

You know, we're always talking' about the pioneers and what great folks the old pioneers were. Well, I think if we just stop and look history in the face, the pioneer wasn't anything in the world but a guy that wanted something for nothin' – that's about all they were. He was a guy that wanted to live off everything nature had done. He wanted to cut a tree down that never did cost him anything but he never did plant one. We're just now learning that we can rob from nature the same as we can rob from an individual. All the pioneer had was an ax and a plough and a gun and he went out and lived off nature. Least he thought it was nature he was livin' off of, but really, it was future generations he was livin' off of!

Our true heritage is not the pioneer myth that assumed the non-existence and non-humanity of Native peoples and that valorized resource-depleting selfishness. Our true and complete heritage is a mixture of rugged individualism and dogged collective effort. Our true heritage is a

hybrid of the homespun Will Rogers who makes you chuckle at human foibles and the firebrand Will Rogers who makes you boil at American hypocrisy.

So yes, let's celebrate our heritage – *and* let's recommit ourselves to our country's creed and tell the full, hybridized, morally complex story of that heritage. If old American history was triumphalist and new American history accentuates the undertold underside, then let us live and write the synthesis that contains both. Let us insist that our history cannot be celebrated in halves, either the good alone or the bad alone; that it can be celebrated only in full – the good, the bad, and the ugly, each shaping the others.

## **Yes-and, Net-net**

In all these yes-and combinations of celebration, there is an implied concept from accounting. We aren't as good as our strengths or as weak as our weaknesses. We are the net of our assets *minus* our liabilities. If the balance of that equation is positive, then we are doing all right; if not, then not so much. This is true of individuals, like our presidents. It is true of you and me. It is true of cities, like OKC and Seattle. It is true of a society, like Poland or Russia or Canada or China or the U.S.

Bill Clinton once said, "There's nothing wrong with America that can't be fixed by what's right with America." True in theory. But whether the fixing will *in fact* occur, whether that potential for a net-positive outcome is ever achieved, depends on what you and I choose to do. The variable that determines whether we are net-positive or net-negative as a society is *responsibility*. The responsibility or irresponsibility of a single leader can't make or break a society: Obama and Trump are both proof of that. It's whether we who are the people are a responsible people in our countless everyday choices.

Here in the non-Soviet non-Confederate United States of America, we have some great rights: To assemble peaceably and joyfully even if sometimes angrily and anxiously. To express ourselves openly without fear of reprisal, whether by the state or by self-appointed enforcers of cultural orthodoxy. To combine our stories and souls and bloodlines into a grand synthesis of civic heritage.

And here in the non-Soviet non-Confederate United States of America, we have some great responsibilities: To welcome new people into the spaces where we gather. To create new connections between those who live like we do and those who don't. To tell a new story of who *us* is and to ask people to reflect on who and what has shaped their sense of Americanness. And to do all this with an open heart, a curious mind, the humility to know that each of us is ignorant in different ways, and a faith in each other and in our ability to improvise a way forward.

How lucky are we that we get to save our country now. Let's celebrate that. Together.

## Readings to Precede the Sermon

December 7, 2019

### **Clara Luper, From the blog *Stories in America***

**July 28, 2005**

I was always taught that segregation is wrong. I came from a family that understood the scars of segregation and they knew it was wrong, but doing something about it was a different story because Oklahoma was primarily at its infancy a Democratic state. In writing the Constitution, the first laws that were passed were segregation laws, so my parents had lived with it. My dad was a veteran of World War I and he believed what Woodrow Wilson said: they were fighting to make the world safe for democracy. My mother was from Texas and she saw a black person burned in Paris, Texas and she was afraid that would happen to anyone who spoke out against segregation. When I would say, "Why do we have to go to the back of the bus?" my mother would say, "Shut up." My dad would say, "Someday you'll be able to ride anywhere on the bus." He had a lot of faith in what would happen and what would change in Oklahoma.

### **Wilma Mankiller, From *Every Day Is a Good Day***

**Published 2011**

[M]y relationships with indigenous women, particularly those who synchronize their lives with the land and the community, are markedly different from my relationships with most of my other friends. The deep, binding connection among indigenous women can be explained in part by our common life experiences, patterns of thought, and shared values, but I also believe it can be explained by a more complete, whole, interconnected understanding of the world. Among these women, there is less of a tendency to organize everything into categories and segments than there is in the larger society. While many of my other friends describe objects or events in a way that detaches them from their context, my tradition-oriented indigenous friends tend to think about, describe, and view things in their totality. They conduct their work and live their lives within the context of the family, clan, community, nation, and universe. Context is everything.

### **Will Rogers, Selected Quotations**

Never let yesterday use up too much of today.

Good judgment comes from experience, and a lot of that comes from bad judgment.

There are three kinds of men. The one that learns by reading. The few who learn by observation. The rest of them have to pee on the electric fence for themselves.

Everybody is ignorant, only on different subjects.

Never miss a good chance to shut up.