



# “Oaths of Commitment”

*Sermon by Eric Liu • Civic Saturday • El Centro de la Raza in Seattle, WA • January 25, 2020*

What is the point of an oath?

When the impeachment trial opened last week and every member of the United States Senate took the oath we just heard, there was much commentary about the “solemnity” of the occasion. Yet we knew that many of them – maybe even most of them – were lying through their “I do”s. While it’s been Republicans who’ve been most brazen about abandoning the impartiality they swore to, let’s be real: many Democrats also had reached a verdict well before they entered the chamber.

So, again: What is the point of an oath?

Consider our first reading today, the naturalization oath – called an “oath of allegiance” – sworn by immigrants who are becoming United States citizens. A naturalization ceremony may have less of the pomp and formality of a full-Senate trial with the Chief Justice presiding. You’ll have kids running around, many languages buzzing in the air, the bustle and chaos of a city. But when you get to the part with the oath, the promise these new Americans are making, you feel the solemnity and you know it is sincere.

The difference between a senator going through the motions and an immigrant on the verge of becoming a citizen is partly about what each takes for granted. The new citizen takes nothing for granted. She knows in her bones that the privileges Americans enjoy as Americans are not available to everyone, that the world outside does not have the high ideals encoded in our great founding texts, that the defense of those ideals and privileges is an active responsibility. The average senator, by contrast, is steeped in a Beltway culture in which cynicism is the coin of the realm, where an oath is just words.

But there’s a bigger difference at work: a difference in consequences for betrayal of the oath. Politicians lie in public with impunity. Immigrants, especially in these times, know that lying in public could jeopardize their presence here. With greater power comes a lower penalty for disregarding the promises you make.

The same power gap is on display in the distance between the oath that the president takes at inauguration and the oath that every other federal employee and civil servant must take upon employment. The words of the two affirmations are roughly the same. But the practical effect is very different. A president can solicit foreign interference in a federal election and then use his office to extort a different foreign country to interfere in the next election and get away with it if he has the votes, while a middle manager in a federal agency could go to jail for such acts.

This isn't about Trump. It's about us. The middle manager is not necessarily a more virtuous person. If the middle manager became president, he too would be tempted to abuse his power. To me, the most alarming thing about Democratic primary race is that every candidate rails against Trump's executive overreach – and then promises in the next breath to bypass Congress and use executive orders to get things done.

An oath, then, is a fence against abuse of power. Even more, it is a fence against our very nature as humans, which is to want to abuse power when we can. If humans were angels then oaths would not be necessary. We promise what is hard. We do what is easy. We take oaths to symbolize our admission that we need constraints – public, ritualized pre-commitments to resist our worst instincts and tendencies. We do so knowing that the oath itself is a flimsy fence – that anyone, any malefactor, lawbreaker, or self-dealer can twist words and justify their actions as a defense of the Constitution.

An oath is only strong as the mutual norms and the culture of moral seriousness in the wider community. And that's where we're in trouble.

The theme of my civic sermon today is commitment. But earlier, I'd been playing with the theme that "right makes might" – a counter to the ethos in public life today that might makes right, that the winner determines the morality. If any of you heard Congressman Adam Schiff's remarks late Thursday, you know that he closed with this very theme: that right matters. "If right doesn't matter," he said, "it doesn't matter how good the Constitution is. It doesn't matter how brilliant the Framers were. It doesn't matter how good or bad our advocacy in this trial is. It doesn't matter how well-written the oath of impartiality is. If right doesn't matter, we're lost. If the truth doesn't matter, we're lost."

News flash: we're lost.

This morning I will share some thoughts that might help us find our way. They are all framed by a single question: What do we do? It's a question we get all the time at Citizen University from people who feel the crisis but don't know how to be part of the solution. It's a question with many meanings, and I'll explore three today.

## 1.

The first meaning of the question is what do we do now. That is, what we do today, at impeachment's halftime, when the game already feels over, when it already feels certain that the president will remain the president and Trump will remain Trump. Only more so, because another set of fences around him will have fallen.

My answer is to stick to our knitting. Literally, our knitting of the social fabric. Our repairing of trust and affection among people who are unlike us. Our rehabilitation of habits of turning to one another, whether to talk about challenging questions or to share our stories. Our cultivation of ourselves and each other as citizens.

This what Civic Saturday is for. Our team at times wonders whether we should be setting up tables and booths for you all to “take action” at these gatherings. We generally haven’t and in preparing this sermon the reason became clear: you are taking the first form of action, the form that matters most in civic life. Showing up. Joining a community. Meeting strangers. Opening our hearts. Being more than a spectator.

Eitan Hersh at Tufts has a new book out called Politics is for Power and his basic message is that too many Americans are mere hobbyists who count as “civic action” or “civic participation” a form of super-fandom. Watching every episode of the Impeachment Show, bingeing the podcasts and special video features, diving deep into the comment boards and posting with outrage on social media. But as Hersh puts it, such activity is to practicing citizenship as watching SportsCenter is to playing football.

Being more than a spectator means living like a citizen. To live like a citizen is to take tangible forms of action: to vote, to organize, to protest, to argue, to serve. But it is also, in fact it is in the first place, to take intangible action: to listen, to sense, to question, to stay open, to feel responsible. And from there to walk into a room of strangers and friends and set an example for each other of human relationship-building and honest reckoning with our differences and our tensions. And from there to show other strangers and friends, in other places, how to do what you just learned or re-learned.

Donald Trump can execute policies that you might detest. He can strut and taunt after he gets acquitted. He can do great harm to people he deems to be his enemies, at home and abroad. But Donald Trump, even at his most unrepentant and reckless, cannot destroy our democracy. Only we can do that. We do that in part by buying into the idea that the democracy is a show that begins and ends with the presidency.

Many of you will, after impeachment ends, get more engaged in the presidential campaign. Great. But I beg you: set limits. Budget your energy and your time and leave a portion – the greater portion – for showing up in our community, face to face, on issues that matter to the humans who live around us. Do so with people you don’t know and who aren’t part of your set, do so in places and gatherings that might not even seem civic. Do it at Civic Saturday. Do it at Plymouth Housing downtown, where a resilient woman who had made her way out of homelessness was killed in the mass shooting this week. Do it here at El Centro de la Raza, which weaves cultures and communities into a Beacon Hill for all. Do it at the emerging Africatown Plaza.

I know showing up locally may seem like putting out a fire by watering a garden: too indirect, too blithe in the face of emergency. But we must have faith that the persistent irrigation of the field, the constant circulation of life-giving elements within it, is what will enable our democracy to survive. For what good does it do a person to oust a president and still hate your neighbor?

## 2.

The second meaning of the question is what do we do in these times – when truth no longer matters, when power can create its own moral reality. What do we do when the rule of law is undermined by those sworn to make and faithfully execute the laws?

My answer is to look at ourselves first and, with humility, to learn from the other.

The language I just used – that truth doesn't matter, that the rule of law is threatened – will resonate in this room as the language of the anti-Trump left or never-Trump right. It is important to note, however, that it is language that people on the right have long been using in resistance to and resentment of the social and cultural power of the left.

My friend Yuval Levin, editor of National Affairs magazine and a principled conservative, has a new book out called *A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream*. It's a mouthful but the two key words are recommitting and institutions.

He observes that while Trump inherited his wealth and privilege, he is in one critical sense self-made: he invented his public identity in a bubble of pure ego, without regard or allegiance to any institution. Trump is the fruit of these overmediated self-obsessed times, during which celebrity and self-amplification have swamped collective norms and institutional traditions and a shared habit of committing to institutions.

Where you might point to the ends-justifies-the-means nihilism of the hypocritical fundamentalist evangelicals who propelled an exceptional sinner into the White House, Levin points to the ends-justifies-the-means nihilism of the hypocritical fundamentalist identity politics practitioners who have made many campuses zones of self-censorship and have weaponized old and new media against dissenters.

We could argue all day about who started the sickness in our culture. But in these times what matters more is who can end it. Because there is truth to both critiques. Both express the same phenomenon: the rise of righteous certitude.

There is no single villain, no single person responsible for this cultural decay. Which is another way of saying we all are responsible. We all made this culture – by where we have given our attention, our power, our proxy. You can blame Twitter or Facebook. But Twitter or Facebook

would be as moribund as MySpace if we didn't give them our whole selves and ask them then to exploit and productize us for free.

The good news is we can all make a different culture – starting with cultivating ourselves. To cultivate ourselves first means to ask whether we might be a little too sure that we're right. It means being able to be devil's advocate. It means admitting where the other side has a point. It means giving an inch without fearing you'll lose a mile. It means knowing your own mind and not just going along with your team or your tribe or what you imagine the influencers in your circle would want you to think.

The Atlantic correspondent George Packer, in accepting the Hitchens Prize earlier this week, gave a speech that I want to quote at length.

Fear breeds self-censorship, and self-censorship is more insidious than the state-imposed kind, because it's a surer way of killing the impulse to think, which requires an unfettered mind. A writer can still write while hiding from the thought police. But a writer who carries the thought police around in his head, who always feels compelled to ask: Can I say this? Do I have a right? Is my terminology correct? Will my allies get angry? Will it help my enemies? Could it get me ratioed on Twitter?—that writer's words will soon become lifeless. A writer who's afraid to tell people what they don't want to hear has chosen the wrong trade.

Last year I taught a journalism course at Yale. My students were talented and hardworking, but I kept running into a problem: They always wanted to write from a position of moral certainty. This was where they felt strongest and safest. I assigned them to read writers who demonstrated the power of inner conflict and moral weakness—Baldwin, Orwell, Naipaul, Didion. I told my students that good writing never comes from the display of virtue. But I could see that they were skeptical, as if I were encouraging them deliberately to botch a job interview. They were attracted to subjects about which they'd already made up their minds.

My students have come of age during a decade when public discourse means taking a position and sticking with it. The most influential writers are those who create a dazzling moral clarity. Its light is meant to overpower subjects, not illuminate them. The glare is so strong that readers stop seeing the little flaws and contradictions of actual life, and stop wanting to—they have only to bask in the warmth of a blinding glow. The attraction of moral clarity is obvious, never more so than in the Trump years, when everything of value—honesty, kindness, tolerance, loyalty, courage—is daily trashed by the most powerful people in America. The Trump presidency is tremendously clarifying, and the duty of a citizen is also clear—to uphold those values in every way possible.

But the situation of writers is different.

I'm with Packer all the way until that last part, when he suggests that citizens and writers aren't the same thing – that citizens get to see things as either-or while writers don't. I don't think citizens get to either. I believe that every citizen should strive for the standard that Packer upholds for good, fearless writers. Because we are writers, all of us. We are authors of a democracy. And our work suffers if we start already having made up our minds. I believe it as a citizen. I believe it as a parent.

For Christmas, I gave my daughter four books off my shelf and bundled them in what I called the "Right-of-Center-on-Race Book-of-the-Month Club." I am not right-of-center on race. But I had read these books to know with nuance why. Olivia grew up in Seattle and is now at Colorado College, which is just as orthodox in its social-justice pieties. She's studying English and her minor is REMS – Race, Ethnicity, and Migration Studies. And while she's had excellent, inspiring teachers, her curriculum and the general terms of what she's been exposed to have been nearly 100 percent progressive. So, I gave her this membership in this pretend book club just to broaden her perspective on race and identity and sharpen her thinking on everything.

If the result is she may ask an impolitic question in class, if it means admitting that she may have doubts about the orthodoxy, if it means leaving the safety of certainty, then great – because that safety is false. That safety is temporary. That false safety begets Trumpism and it begets left-Twitterism and it begets authoritarian tendencies that make it so that truth no longer matters, power makes its own moral reality, and the rule of law is undermined by those sworn to make and faithfully execute the laws.

Let's all start our own such book clubs of the other. Let's all take a piece of responsibility for cultivating in ourselves and those we encounter new habits of mind and habits of the heart – without fear that exposure will contaminate us, with confidence that our prior beliefs can take the exposure and might even evolve. Let's make ourselves more ready to fight fundamentalism by fighting it within ourselves.

### **3.**

The final meaning of the question is what do we do with our ideals – when all our institutions have corroded and the words of our founding documents ring false.

My answer is to worship those ideals in the way that they deserve – by arguing fiercely over our interpretations of them. The great scholar of comparative religion Karen Armstrong has an epic new book called *The Lost Art of Scripture*. In it, she looks at spiritual traditions ranging from early Christianity and Judaism to Confucianism and Daoism, from the beginnings of Islam in the Arab peninsula and the evolution of Buddhism in India to even the emergence of theater in ancient Greece. The narrative she weaves is about how people throughout history have sought spiritual meaning in a creed – not as a fixed and unchanging object but as an object of constant contestation.

Armstrong reminds us that while every tradition has its literalists and originalists and selective fundamentalists, scripture and scriptural interpretation in every tradition has in fact always adapted fluidly to circumstances. When the Romans burned Jerusalem to the ground in the year 70, one of the results was what Armstrong calls a “textual revolution,” in which the most learned of the Pharisees, called rabbis, had to save their religion by improvising new interpretations of the Torah and sharing them with students, who in turn would develop their own interpretations and form a new oral tradition.

This tradition of interpretation happens not in solitude but in the company of others. It is done not in the rigid format of indoctrination but in the rollicking form of well-informed disputes. It is practiced not as a sterile intellectual exercise but as an embodied practice, involving gesture and voice and the full use of the instrument of the human body in action. One might call rabbinic Judaism a form of “living constitutionalism.” I certainly see it as a template for how we should practice American civic religion.

Instead of giving in to the cynicism that says this age of exploitative late-capitalism and corrupt inhumane government makes a mockery of phrases like “equal protection of the laws” or “liberty and justice for all” or “I have a dream” or “I do solemnly swear to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States” – instead of seeing such phrases as dead letters, we now have a chance and a choice to salvage our belief in democracy. And we can do so by engaging in a textual and interpretative revolution of our own.

Here at Civic Saturday, at home at your kitchen tables, in the classrooms where young people learn, in the office where staff meeting happens, in the houses and halls where you pray to a god, in the parks and libraries where we meet the world, what we can do with our ideals is to dust them off, take them seriously, and really figure out what we think of them and how to live up to them. How to live like a citizen.

Here’s a piece of scripture for you: “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on the finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds.” Lincoln’s Second Inaugural combines a call for compassion with an unflinching caveat about how hard unity can be. As God gives us to see the right. That’s a Donald Trump-sized loophole. That’s a Jim Crow-sized loophole. That’s a Gulf of Tonkin-Japanese internment-Trail of Tears-sized loophole.

And what it calls us to do is to argue out what it means to “see the right.” It calls us to admit that the argument will never end – indeed, because humans are fallible even when their intentions are good; perhaps most fallible when their intentions are best, to admit that the argument must never end. And we are called also to this: to attain and renew the core knowledge of our common history as Americans, the familiarity with the principles and contradictions that undergird our republic.

The words of our civic scripture, from our official oaths to our hallowed speeches to our charter documents to our most farsighted dissents, are just words. They are brought to life by our behavior. But there is crucial bridge between the word and the act, between the creed and the deed. That bridge is belief. And belief, in a democracy unlike in a totalitarian dictatorship, must be earned by being tested and challenged.

This is the spirit behind a new program we at Citizen University are developing this year called Civic Confirmation. If Civic Saturday is a civic analogue to a faith gathering and our Civic Seminary is where we train catalytic leaders from all over the United States to lead such gatherings, then Civic Confirmation is the next extension of this approach to American civic religion. It will be a program like religious confirmation, in which circles of young people led by elders, will study civic scripture over weeks and months, learn the context in which those words were composed, face our history in its glory and hypocrisy, and figure out how to be useful to others here and now. To do right. Not, perhaps, as God gives us to see the right. But as we the people, properly formed as citizens with a moral sense and a habit of discernment, give each other to see the right.

#### **4.**

What do we do now? In these times? With our ideals?

We stick to our knitting, we cultivate ourselves as citizens, we remember how to argue and test our beliefs. The thread that ties together my answers to these questions is a spirit of commitment. We commit. We re-commit. We do not give up on this experiment.

I want to close with something remarkable that I learned from Karen Armstrong. I had long known and have often said at Civic Saturday that it's no accident that democracy and theater emerged at the same time in ancient Greece. Both require a getting out of oneself, a surrender of the ego, a ritualized merging with a public who shares a story and can contest the interpretation of that story.

But I didn't realize a deeper dimension of this co-emergence. "In Greece," Armstrong writes, "tragic drama had developed in response to the new legal system of the polis, which was based on the concept of personal responsibility and distinguished an "intentional" crime from one that was "excusable." Athenian men – women, of course, did not figure in Athenian law – were therefore required to regard themselves as masters of their own actions, no longer prey to the influence of the gods."

She goes on to explain that this shift in consciousness was seismic and disorienting –the Greeks didn't even have a word for will or responsibility. The law had secularized human nature and psychology. And the Greeks tried to make sense of their newfound, not wholly welcome sense of free will through the genre of tragedy, which depicted characters torn between the human and the divine, between agency and pawnhood, culpability and innocence.

Theater taught Athenians, in short, how to be citizens: how to be responsible for their actions in a community and for each other. In a Greek tragedy, those watching the people onstage are not a mere audience; they are part of the shared ritual and the collective performance. Their reactions, their stirrings, give the words of the play life and purpose that will endure beyond the performance.

There are many in America today who feel they are but the playthings of the gods. Gods who globalized the economy and sent good jobs elsewhere. Gods who rigged the system to enrich the already rich and privilege the already privileged. Gods who made our consumer gratification instant and who surveil our every move online. Gods who have warmed the planet and made our oceans acidic and our climate severely unstable. Gods who train the have-nots to fight amongst themselves rather than unite to challenge the haves.

But there are no such gods. There is only us. We, the frail fallible people who conjured a country out of promises we still haven't kept. Only we are responsible for our actions and procrastinations and their consequences. Only we can cultivate, or let go to seed, our capacity to distinguish between the intentional and the excusable, the impeachable and the merely deplorable, between good and evil and the mess in-between.

We began with four oaths and we'll close with one more. This one Citizen University created for a ceremony we made called Sworn-Again America. Inspired by the naturalization oath for immigrants, it is a way for every one of us to experience the urgency, the solemnity, yet also the utter joy of choosing citizenship actively.

I won't ask you to rise or repeat after me. I'll ask you to close your eyes and listen hard:

I pledge to be an active American.  
To show up for others.  
To govern myself,  
To help govern my community.  
I recommit myself to my country's creed:  
To cherish liberty as a responsibility.

I pledge to serve and to push my country:  
When right, to be kept right; when wrong, to be set right.  
Wherever my ancestors and I were born,  
I claim America  
And I pledge to live like a citizen.

Now open your eyes – and see our community and our country anew.

# Readings to Precede the Sermon

*January 25, 2020*

## **Naturalization Oath of Allegiance**

*8 U.S. Code 1440*

"I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God."

## **Oath of Office for Federal Workers**

*5 U.S. Code 3331*

An individual, except the President, elected or appointed to an office of honor or profit in the civil service or [uniformed services](#), shall take the following oath:

"I, \_\_\_\_, do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United [States](#) against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter. So help me God."

## **Oath of Office for the President of the United States**

*U.S. Constitution, Article 2, Section 1*

Before he enter on the Execution of his Office, he shall take the following Oath or Affirmation: "I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States."

## **Oath Sworn by United States Senators**

*Impeachment Trial*

**January 16, 2020**

"Do you solemnly swear that in all things appertaining to the trial of the impeachment of Donald John Trump, president of the United States, now pending, you will do impartial justice according to the Constitution and laws, so help you God?"