



The Morals in Our Stories
Sermon by Eric Liu • Civic Saturday
YouTube Live from Seattle, WA • March 28, 2020

Once upon a time, a prosperous but divided nation was beset by a great pandemic. Fear became as contagious as the actual virus, creating a second crisis. The economy had a heart attack. The government was paralyzed. And then

And then ... what?

We tell stories. We have so many narrative templates in our heads and hearts. All these fables have morals. We tell and retell them, we work and worry them, because they reinforce our sense of rightness or victimhood or destiny or duty. We tote these tales with us as we live our lives. In fact, we live our lives *by* them, *of* them, *for* them.

That's as true for the society as it is for the self. Some of these tales come from history, or a version of history we have received. Some come from the atmosphere of culture that surrounds us: folk stories, mass entertainment, myths and legends. Through our stories and the metaphors we make of them, we interpret the present.

Is this now the story of 1929 and the Great Depression? Or is it late 2008 and the Great Recession? Is it the 1918 flu? The 1957 flu? Is it 9/11? The answer, of course, is that it is none of these though it echoes all. Covid-19 is its own terror, arriving in its own time.

And the fables and morals from those prior episodes are of only limited use for sense-making. Indeed, they can blind us to the facts in front of us. At Internet speed we are *especially* prone to forget a timeless truth: that even as we burrow like earthworms through the soil of old stories, we are producing new ones of our own.

Today I want to help us reflect on the stories we've started to tell about this crisis, by unpacking three phrases that have become omnipresent since the virus bloomed: *We're all in it together. Flatten the curve. Back to normal.* Together, they don't yet add up to a coherent fable. But each one contains an implicit moral question and moral choice.

1.

Let's start with the first phrase: **We're all in it together.** On the one hand, I love that this has become the mantra and tagline for so many American institutions over the last month, from banks and colleges to sports teams and phone companies. On the other hand: Are we? I mean, are we really all in it together?

The honest answer is, not yet.

As someone who lives in Seattle, whose wife's siblings and nieces and nephews are in South Louisiana, whose childhood buddies are in the New York metro area, I have an acute awareness of the magnitude of the crisis. And acute irritation at how many people across our land, even in these communities, are not yet taking it fully seriously.

Do I wish for the cataclysm to hit everywhere as hard as it's hit Seattle and New York and New Orleans? Hell, no. That might boost solidarity. But it would be bad for the people of the United States. If rural areas and heartland cities were to be as overwhelmed as King County or Queens, then maybe some of the red-blue divide would narrow. But it would be bad for the people of the United States. If cavalier young people were to die at rates like those of the elderly, then maybe intergenerational scorn would evaporate. If we were to take a utilitarian turn and say let the epidemic rage unchecked so it can sift out the unfit and allow the survivors to get on with it, then maybe the economic recovery would begin sooner. But this would be bad for the people of the United States. Not just for our material well-being but for our spirit and civic cohesion.

What we need is not for every community to suffer intensely. What we need is for every community to commit to joint defense. It's the NATO principle, brought home: an attack on one is an attack on all, and necessitates a response from all. The United States, thanks to accidents of geography and history, had never been under nationwide attack – that is, an attack that simultaneously hit the entirety of the nation. But then came the 2016 Russian interference in our federal elections and now comes coronavirus – both passing through the defenses of our oceans and our armies. We're under attack now, like it or not, feel it yet or not, and we need to come together.

Now, if you don't like war metaphors, try the metaphor of a civic immune system. The body politic has a systemic infection. We cannot amputate the infected parts. So, we must unleash antibodies of shared responsibility and mutual aid. It's time to remember that in a crisis of contagion, we're all better off if we're all better off. That in a collapse of public health, the community is only as secure as its least healthy members.

Implicit in the claim that we're all in it together is this moral question: **How can I be useful?** If you aren't asking yourself that question every day, I submit to you that you don't yet fully believe that we're all in this together.

Last week, our team at Citizen University gathered up on Zoom the members of our Youth Collaboratory program, high school and college students from across the land who are catalysts for civic action. That call was a pure injection of hope and can-do spirit. They are the antidote to the Gen Z kids still partying on Miami Beach or the Tennessee Millennial who hoarded hand sanitizer to sell at an extortive profit. *These* youth are translating Covid-19 information into the languages their immigrant parents and neighbors speak. They're setting up peer tutoring exchanges and sharing class notes for students falling behind – not just their own schoolmates but students they never met, from other states. They're delivering food to food banks. They're creating text-based peer mental health services. They're getting student governments to support

classmates stranded by campus closures. They're creating Google-doc mutual-aid boards in the chat function of the Zoom call as they are talking to each other and to me.

When the adults we work with in our Civic Seminary program – librarians and park rangers and teachers and poets and musicians who we're training to lead Civic Saturday gatherings – when they heard about these kids, they realized they needed to raise their game. As did I. It feels good to be awed by young people. *How can I be useful?* The question in its fullest form is: *How can I be useful to people who aren't already in my circle of affinity?* I know too many people with skills, gifts, ideas, connections, capital of every kind who have not yet answered or asked that question.

That's because they're still in the hoarding phase of their response to the crisis. They still believe that scarcity isn't a problem if it's not a problem for them. This is not because they are sociopaths. Most would like to call themselves good citizens. But they hoard because they do not yet realize that true self-interest is mutual interest.

It is up to you to remind them: by your example, by your words, by your invitation to join you in defense of all that we wish for: peace, security, dignity, safety, health.

2.

This brings me to the second chunk of story that's floating out there: **Flatten the curve.** We've all heard this now. We've all seen the iconic graphs.

What I love about how widespread this phrase has become is that an entire society has embraced what my political scientist friend Scott Page calls "model thinking." People are zooming past personal experience – the fear of illness and death – to look at things systemically. They are modeling different possible outcomes and seeing how individual acts and omissions roll up into institutional and society-wide consequences over time.

In other words, we're getting a crash course not just in epidemiology and infectious disease. We're getting a crash course in civics and systems of power.

And with this newfound insight and understanding, we need to not stop with the coronavirus. There are other curves, after all, that impact our ability to flatten *this* curve: curves of income inequality and wealth concentration; curves of inequitable access to health care and healthy food; curves of incarceration; curves of pollution.

While we're flattening one curve, how about we start flattening all of them? Let's take this ability to see in systems and think in models and apply it to the other ways that health depends on a culture of inclusion, participation, dignity, agency – of *civic* health.

The moral question that comes with flattening the curve is not just whether I'll do my part to stand six feet away or stay at home. The deeper moral question is: **How can I change at least one system of power around me?** You don't need to change everything at once, and you can't. But if in this period of awakening, you realize that our

system of education could be dramatically changed, our reliance on cars and commutes, our systems for imprisoning or employing people could be dramatically changed – because the virus now forces such change – then just pick one such system and join with others to change it further. Map it. Learn it. Do your part to reorder it.

This is a time for solutions to what were seen only a minute ago as forever problems. Seattle has been mired in homelessness. Then comes coronavirus and – *bam* – King County is buying motels to shelter infected patients. So that's now an option. Medicare for All a month ago was a fantasy because where would you ever find trillions of dollars lying around? *Bam*. Carbon emissions seemed to be on an unstoppable trajectory to planetary upheaval. *Bam*. What if...?

Yes, yes, after the emergency. But this twin crisis of pandemic and economic shock is without precedent – and it invites civic imagination without precedent. That means not just more government but also more *citizenship*. We already were in an emergency, undeclared; already in a disaster, unproclaimed.

If you ever read *Hard Times*, the great oral history of the Great Depression compiled by Studs Terkel, you will hear two refrains: one, the common belief in the 1930s that an economic depression was like the weather, an act of God beyond man's control. The Depression showed folks that depressions were quite man-made. Just as the climate crisis shows us today that extreme weather is quite man-made. And can be unmade.

The second refrain in *Hard Times* is that there were plenty of Americans to whom the Great Depression didn't mean that much. They were black, Mexican, Chinese. They'd been born into depression, assigned by color into the lowest caste. To them, the Great Depression only became official when it hit the white man. And after the New Deal and the war they were not unhappy to leave behind the good ol' days.

3.

That brings me to the final slice of story today: **Getting back to normal**. How many times a day do you say it? When things are back to normal, we can make plans for ... meetings, trips, projects, promises.

But what if normal isn't good enough – is, in fact, unjust? What if normal is silently soul-crushing? One of my favorite books is Rebecca Solnit's *A Paradise Built in Hell*, which tells of the way disasters like the 1906 San Francisco earthquake give rise to a surge of fellow-feeling, mutual aid, sacrifice, and responsibility-taking – a great civic awakening – that participants yearn for later, when things are “back to normal.” What's revealed in disaster, she believes, is not the exception but the rule. It is our nature to be mutualistic, compassionate, and interdependent. Modern markets and the privatization of common life alienate us from that truth. But we can reclaim paradise because it is in our hearts.

Dorothy Day was a child during that 1906 quake and the experience, as we heard in civic scripture today, helped make her one of history's most devoted, radical, relentless

practitioners of what I call civic love. Some of her principles were communist, some were Catholic, some were libertarian-anarchist. She opposed the New Deal because she feared it would sap away that spontaneous distributed sense of mutual aid and responsibility and civic love that made miracles of community regeneration possible. Her decades of activism for the dispossessed were all in search of the answer to one moral question: **How can I sustain this spirit of love and make it the *new norm*?**

Start planning now for that new norm: a social norm of civic love. Make plans for this the way you've been taught to make plans for stocking your pantry and separating sick people inside your dwelling and preparing for an eldercare emergency. Plan for the day after the epidemic is over, the day after the stock market reaches an all-time high. And consider: What will it take for me to sustain the joy of singing on balconies and banging pots on front porches? To teach yoga or drawing or otherwise share my gifts with total strangers? What will it take to remember why paid sick leave for someone I don't know is good for me? To remember that circulating your power doesn't make you a sucker? To recall the purposeful joy of shared sacrifice?

The answer begins with how we tell the story.

4.

Once upon a time, a prosperous but divided nation was beset by a great pandemic. Fear became as contagious as the actual virus, creating a second crisis. The economy had a heart attack. The government was paralyzed. And then

How do you want to end this story? Here's my way:

And then people began to turn on each other. They sensed they had permission to stifle their better angels. To be bigots and hoarders and to dismiss authority of any stripe. But just when it appeared that the pandemic would tear asunder this divided nation, a few stepped in to fill the void of moral courage. They were faith leaders reaching new flocks. They were neighbors meeting each other for the first time. They were nurses and doctors fashioning their own drive-through testing centers. They were machinists who volunteered to make ventilators and quilters who volunteered to make masks. They were owners of empty restaurants who decided to use their kitchens to feed caregivers and delivery drivers. They were warehouse workers organizing for safer working conditions. And their initiative shamed their elected leaders. The leaders began to follow. They asked the people what they needed and the people asked the government for truth, tools, loans, grants, know-how, and fair rules. And with those in hand, the people of this country tamed the virus, remade the economy to be more just, reinvented the democracy to be more inclusive, and broke the fevers of hyperindividualism and hyperpartisanship and hyperinequaility. THE END. (For now).

Maybe you'd write a different ending. Maybe yours is a happy capitalist parable of how markets solved it all, or a happy socialist parable of how we all came to terms with a

commanding state, or a happy libertarian parable about how we didn't need the state at all because self-organizing citizens were enough.

That's fine. But the point is, none of us can get our preferred happy ending unless we show up as neighbors and citizens and voters to imagine and animate a better future.

These coming weeks and months will test us severely. We are not ready. But remember: neither were the Americans weary of the First World War when influenza ravaged the planet. Neither were the ill-fed, ill-clothed, ill-housed third of a nation in the depths of the Depression when the next World War came. No one is ever truly ready to hold together this shambolic, contradictory mess of a nation and all its beautiful broken promises. We hold it together anyway. Not every generation gets an FDR to spread calm and confidence and steel us for the trials ahead. We find calm and steel anyway.

When this is over, here is what I want to have learned: that we are all in it together – and so I've got to be useful; that we can flatten the curves that might shatter our union – and so I've got to change at least one system around me; and that the only normal worth having is a normal that everyone would want to return to.

When we are asked years from now *What did you do during the pandemic?* I want to be able to say, like many of those immortalized in *Hard Times*, *I did all I could to save my country. I helped deliver it to a better normal. I was part of a great story.*

Hold on to this feeling you have right now. It is precious. It's the spirit of a democracy that's going to survive.

Reading to Precede the Sermon
March 28, 2020

Dorothy Day
Excerpt from her memoir *From Union Square to Rome*
1938

What I remember most plainly about the earthquake was the human warmth and kindness of everyone afterward. For days refugees poured out of burning San Francisco and camped in Idora Park and the race track in Oakland. People came in their night clothes; there were new-born babies. Mother and all our neighbors were busy from morning to night cooking hot meals. They gave away every extra garment they possessed. They stripped themselves to the bone in giving, forgetful of the morrow. While the crisis lasted, people loved each other.