



**“A Test of Our Citizenship”
Sermon by Eric Liu • Civic Saturday
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I am the son of immigrants. I am the great-grandson of a farmer. His son – my paternal grandfather – left the farm to become a fighter pilot in the new air force of the new Republic of China eighty years ago. His name was Liu Guo-yun, meaning “deliverance of the nation.” (No pressure). My maternal grandfather was a history professor, on the move from university to university across a China wracked by war and revolution.

So, I feel particularly at home here at Grand View, at this university founded by Danish Lutheran immigrants 122 years ago to make morally sound citizens who could deliver their new nation from darkness.

We together are part of an emerging phenomenon. These gatherings that we call Civic Saturday began in Seattle four days after the last presidential election and have been spreading across the country ever since. We’ve held Civic Saturdays this year in New York and Nashville, and after Des Moines we will be in Atlanta and Detroit and Portland, Maine and Los Angeles and Omaha and Oakland. We’ve also launched a Civic Seminary to train two dozen people from towns small and large how to lead their own Civic Saturdays. In one hour, a Civic Saturday will begin in Phoenix.

The concept is simple. This is a civic equivalent to church. It’s not church, of course, or mosque or synagogue. But in Citizen University’s work to build a culture of powerful citizenship, we realized that folks in faith communities have figured a few things out over the millennia about how to invite strangers to meet, how to use timeless texts to examine the choices we face today, how to cultivate a sense of shared purpose that brings people out of pure self-centeredness. Civic Saturday is about taking seriously our country’s creed of liberty and equal justice under law. It is about forming each other’s values and skills so we can live like big citizens.

What does it mean to live like a citizen? In our work, and in the name of our organization, we don’t only or even primarily mean documentation status under U.S. immigration laws. We’re talking about a more capacious ethical notion of being a member of the body, a contributor to the health of the community. A non-sociopath.

It's worth saying that these days. Because sociopathy is contagious. It trickles down. But decency is contagious too. It emerges from the middle out. From our hearts to those nearby. From neighbor to neighbor, congregation to congregation, campus to campus.

I am of course stating something self-evident in this part of the country, with its reputation for decency. But just as New Englanders tire of Puritan stereotypes, and Californians tire of their reputation for New Age flakiness, maybe you here in the heartland tire of the very word "heartland" and all its virtuous connotations. I, a Yankee of the New York suburbs and eighteen years a Seattleite, am not here to pander or puff you up. I don't think everyone in Des Moines is decent. I don't think all Midwesterners are nice. I don't assume that being rooted to the land makes Iowans inherently more responsible or virtuous than anyone else. I believe you are simply human: a kind of human called American and a kind of American called Iowan.

The true measure of a person's moral and civic worth in American life is not what region's label you carry or even what nation's passport. It is whether you live up to the ideals upon which the American experiment has been constructed and reconstructed.

I've been thinking about this topic, the content of our citizenship and how to measure it, because in our culture today there is a lot of anxiety over who deserves to belong. You hear it of course in the debates about immigration, if you can call them debates, and how people like Iowa's own Steve King proudly stir up nativist fears about drug-running rapists and murderers from Mexico overrunning your corn fields. You also hear it in proposals in several states, including Iowa, to require high school students to pass the citizenship exam that immigrants take to become naturalized citizens.

The idea seems at first to be unobjectionable. But then you realize what it says about the state of civic education in America. The citizenship exam, consisting of 100 questions, most at the level of "Who is the president?" and "How many branches of government are there?" sets a pretty low bar. Yet large numbers of students, and equally large numbers of their parents, could not pass it today. Only a third of Americans can name even one branch of the federal government. More than a third have no idea what rights the First Amendment protects.

When people aren't prepared to get over a low bar, the problem isn't with the bar; it's with the preparation. Across the country there's been a disinvestment in the teaching of civics over the last four decades. Only an idiot would be surprised by the idiocracy that follows. Making students memorize answers to 100 questions won't solve that.

But there's a deeper problem with the proposal to use the citizenship test as a graduation requirement. It exposes our hypocrisy about who belongs in America. If you are an immigrant, failing the test is enough to keep you out of the circle of U.S. citizenship. But if you are an Iowa-born 18-year-old with the lifelong benefit of being

steeped in American institutions, failing the same test would deprive you at most of a diploma. No one is going to grab your citizenship papers. No one is going to deport you.

To be clear, I'm not proposing deportation for dummies. But I am suggesting that we who had the dumb luck to be born here shouldn't get off easy when it comes to being citizens. So this morning I'd like to explore three questions from the actual naturalization test. I've picked what I think are the hardest three – questions that have straightforward official answers but that are in fact surprisingly complex, even profound.

Here's the first one: "What does the Constitution do?"

The approved answers are: "sets up the government," "defines the government," or "protects basic rights of Americans." Naturalizing citizens studying for the test learn to memorize one of those three responses.

My answer is different. My answer is, "Nothing." The Constitution by itself does nothing. My longer answer is, "It does nothing but challenge us to make it mean something."

In 1965, Mary Beth Tinker was a 13-year-old student at Warren Harding Junior High School here in Des Moines. She and her siblings decided to wear black armbands to school to protest the Vietnam War. They were suspended. Their family got death threats. The ACLU took up their case and helped Mary Beth sue the school district for infringing her First Amendment rights. Four years later, in *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent School District*, the Supreme Court ruled in her favor and severely curtailed the ability of schools to punish student speech. You can mark a straight line from Mary Beth Tinker to the March for our Lives led by a new generation of students. Tinker, by the way, is still advocating and teaching the meaning of her youthful act.

But what the *Tinker* case teaches us is that the words of the Constitution are not self-executing. We enact them by confronting injustice, by electing people who will uphold the spirit of the words, and by exercising power – people power, ideas power, money power, reputational power – to make the words take form in policy and institutional practice. Until we do, it's just words. Unless we do, it's just words.

And I don't say "just words" casually. I'm in the word business, after all. I know that words are powerful tools of action, words shape the stories that shape our sense of who we are. But when we are flooded by fake news and when politicians think they should be called honest because they lie so brazenly, we realize words untethered from values are worse than useless. They are useful to the worst kind of people.

What does the Constitution do? It warns us to keep up our institutions. It mocks us when we don't. It challenges to practice power. It stands mute when we betray it.

My friend Mark Meckler, one of the original founders of the Tea Party Patriots and now head of an organization called Citizens for Self-Governance, believes fervently in the Second and the Tenth Amendments. We all know what the Second Amendment is about: the right to bear arms. But few of us remember the Tenth. It says, “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.”

Mark and I don't agree on many policy questions or on the necessity of a strong federal government but we do agree that the words of the Tenth Amendment come to life only to the extent that we breathe life into them. In his case, he's organizing people patiently and relentlessly to get enough state legislatures to call a new constitutional convention – a convention of states, provided for in Article V of the Constitution – that would curtail the scope of the federal government and restore the spirit of the Tenth Amendment.

If that were ever to happen, we would have to reckon with what we are willing to give up to live up to the rhetoric about less government. Crop insurance, anyone? Ethanol subsidies? As some of Mark's own followers said during the health care debates, *Get your government hands off my Medicare!* We would also receive a vivid reminder that constitutions depend upon conventions, in another meaning of the word “convention,” which is *norms*: what we think is normal and conventional.

What seems normal is determined, for better and worse, by you and me. Is it normal to attack a free press? Is it normal to threaten to lock up your political opponents? Is it normal to undermine the integrity of the judiciary or to call FBI agents Storm Troopers?

All laws – including constitutions, which are just laws about laws – rest on a foundation of social norms. When that foundation is weak, the laws are wobbly and can be knocked aside by a single strong man. By a strongman. Russia today has a constitution. So does the People's Republic of China. So does Turkey. Those constitutions are filled with words and nods to due process that we Americans would recognize. But none of those autocratic nations has a deep enough foundation of norms – social practices, habits of the heart, political traditions, civic clubs – to sustain democratic self-government.

If I had to choose between constitutions and democratic norms I'd choose the norms every time. Consider our friends in England. They don't have a written constitution. They lack a single document to organize their government or protect their rights. What they have is centuries of history of conflicts between monarchs and citizens that led to an accumulation of settlements that incrementally institutionalized self-government and protected citizens against arbitrary state power.

Those settlements took various forms along the way, like the Magna Carta in 1215, in which irritated noblemen reined in an abusive monarch, and the Declaration of Rights after the 1688 Glorious Revolution in which Parliament booted out one king and invited

in a new one from the Netherlands. A century later ornery American colonists, using the 1689 Declaration of Rights as their model, started publishing local declarations of independence from Great Britain and it was those town- and county- and colony-level declarations that provided the seed for Thomas Jefferson's nation-birthing masterpiece. The recent British prime minister Gordon Brown summed it up nicely: "In establishing the rule of law," he said, "the first 500 years are always the hardest."

Which brings us to the second sample question from the U.S. citizenship exam. It's another doozy: "What is the rule of law?"

In uneventful times, most Americans would have a hard time answering this. But even in tumultuous times like these, when many more people are worrying about the fragility of the rule of law, many of us would have at best a fuzzy reply to the question.

The approved answers, according to the government exam-makers, are:

- Everyone must follow the law
- Leaders must obey the law
- Government must obey the law
- No one is above the law

One way to summarize these four approved answers is to say we are a government of laws and not of men. The exercise of public power should follow neutral rules to be applied in all cases, not the arbitrary whims and appetites of a single leader. It is necessary – more necessary than it's been since Watergate – to say this.

But it's not sufficient. The enslavement of Africans, and then the segregation of their descendants who were free citizens of the United States, all occurred under color of law, according to neutrally worded rules. Those systems of degradation had not only statute but also constitutional precedent behind them. The suspension of the German constitution to make Hitler chancellor in 1933 and grant him emergency powers – that too was done in strict observance of required legal procedure. And the Nazis, once in power, studied the American system of Jim Crow to learn how to build a perfectly legal system to turn some groups into second-class subhuman outcasts.

To put it simply, just because something is legal does not make it just. And just because something is unjust does not make it illegal.

In Jane Smiley's tragic novel *A Thousand Acres*, which she modeled after Shakespeare's *King Lear*, a patriarchal Iowa farmer decides impulsively to divvy up his farm among his three daughters, who eventually go to war with each other and with him.

In the end, the entire patrimony – the legacy of a thousand acres that were tilled and drained and tilled and planted over the course of generations, during which the wealth of the land compounded – all of it was squandered and cast to the winds. And worst of all – the patriarch’s crime at the heart of the whole saga (I won’t spoil it for those of you who haven’t read it yet) – that crime is never named and never punished.

“No one is above the law. Leaders must obey the law.” Do we mean it? We may be tested soon. We are being tested now.

When Richard Nixon abused the powers of his office to cover up a petty burglary, the tenets of the rule of law were upheld by a press that was trusted, a judiciary that was unassailable, a Congress in which the president’s party was willing to put country above party, and a citizenry that paid attention and watched a single unifying television screen.

If Donald Trump forces a constitutional crisis – by firing the special counsel investigating him, say – few of those conditions will obtain. He will face a press that is mistrusted, a judiciary he has maligned, a Congress in which his own party’s leaders will not stand up to him, and a citizenry that is fragmented, distracted, and unable to look up from the phone to get any perspective.

Yet if I sound pessimistic, I am not. The reason why is that there is another dimension to the rule of law that is timeless and that can make itself felt even in times of great dysfunction. That is the dimension of conscience. The conscience of a citizen is what actually makes or breaks a republic.

Let me quote another Iowa writer, Marilynne Robinson, who in addition to her great novels like *Gilead* and *Home*, about the quiet tensions of rural ministers and their flocks, has also published essays that express her deep Calvinist faith and her desire to rehabilitate the Puritans not as dour witch-burners but as the original idealistic reformers who gave every American afterward the DNA of idealism and reformism.

In her recent book *What Are We Doing Here?* Robinson tells us “the center of Puritan individualism was the conscience, so sacred that it was the foundation of their definition of freedom.” Conscience was an internalized voice of God, with the irresistible power of the will of God. To disregard conscience was to sin. She adds, drily: “To bring such seriousness to the negotiations of one’s moral and ethical life might interfere with good times as currently defined.” But this notion of conscience was at the heart of what Robinson calls “the strenuous drama of Puritan life.”

When I read that line, I thought of Teddy Roosevelt and his obsession with “the strenuous life” and its virtues. I also thought of *Finding Nemo*. Remember when the amnesiac Dory is in the pitch-black sea and hears Nemo telling her what to do? She asks: “Are you my conscience?” I am here today not to preach Puritan or Pixar notions of faith. I am here to say that just as the Puritans and their descendants put great stock

in a godly notion of conscience, we today must put great vigor and rigor into a *civic* notion of conscience.

When you see someone berate a woman on the bus for wearing a head scarf or speaking Arabic, your civic conscience is awakened. When you learn that neo-Nazis are meeting in your town, your civic conscience stirs. When you notice that the cops have swooped into Starbucks to arrest two customers for waiting while black, your civic conscience speaks. We gather like this to make sure that after our conscience speaks, we say out loud that no one is above the law. After it stirs, we act. After it awakens, we move. Together. As citizens responsible for rule of law. Conscience precedes institutions; it then becomes the magnetism binding the atoms of those institutions.

Our republic is a little like that thousand-acre farm in Jane Smiley's novel. Claimed and tamed long ago by some hard-hearted SOBs who never owned up to the misdeeds that fertilized the fields; populated next by their childish descendants who didn't realize how much they were taking for granted as they wasted their inheritance; then appropriated by numbers people who don't know or care about what came before but just want to maximize the yield and treat the place as a monetizable asset to be worked not just *by* machines but *as* a machine.

Here's the thing, though: a farm is not a machine. It is a kind of garden. And a democracy is not a machine. It too is a kind of garden. Machines operate by rules that are programmed to perpetuate themselves. Gardens unfold as chaos in chaos. Gardens require gardeners: to weed, to seed, to feed, to notice at all times the emerging patterns of erosion or overuse or neglect or overgrowth.

What is the rule of law? It is you and me tending the garden of democracy. More than that, it is you and me knowing that we *owe* it to each other to tend the garden. The rule of law is civic conscience, activated collectively.

So now let's explore the third and final sample question from the citizenship exam: "What is one promise we make when you become a United States citizen?"

Well, this is sort of a trick question. Most of you didn't have to promise anything to become a citizen because most of you were born here. But it's in the trick that a larger truth comes out. The correct answer, according to the Citizenship and Immigration Services, is any of the following six:

- give up loyalty to other countries
- defend the Constitution and laws of the United States
- obey the laws of the United States
- serve in the U.S. military (if needed)

- serve (do important work for) the nation (if needed)
- be loyal to the United States

All six of these promises are drawn from the oath that naturalizing citizens must take to make it official. That oath, as you heard, is a clunky old-fashioned thing that drains the poetry and inspiration out of the moment. But it means something. I've been to many naturalization ceremonies. If you haven't gone to one, I urge you to go. It's one of the most moving civic experiences you can have. All the immigrants, who have already passed the test, stand up as a roll of their native countries is called, and then they are told: *The next time you sit down, you will be Americans.* Goosebumps.

After we'd been to several of these naturalization ceremonies, my wife Jená, the co-founder of Citizen University, had a brilliant idea. What if we created something like that, but for everyone? Not just immigrants becoming citizens but people born here too, folks who never have been asked to reflect on the content of their citizenship. It would be like renewing their vows. And because she has a theater background, she started sketching a stage and a revival tent and said, *We'll call it a Sworn-Again American ceremony.*

So we did. We created a template for a ceremony, with a script and readings and of course our own Sworn-Again American oath. It goes like this:

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.

People have taken this oath and held Sworn-Again American ceremonies in towns all across the United States – on campuses and military bases, public libraries and convention halls, theaters and parks, from Alabama to Arizona. You can do it too. The template is on our website. Doing it makes you notice the everyday heroes around you.

In Seattle, our Mary Beth Tinker is named is Gordon Hirabayashi. In 1942 Gordon was a student at the University of Washington. He, like all Japanese American citizens in the

aftermath of Pearl Harbor, had been made subject to curfew and incarceration under FDR's Executive Order 9066. He, unlike most Japanese Americans, resisted the order. He violated the curfew, refused induction into the armed services, turned himself in to the FBI, and sued the United States with a little help from his friends – literally: the Quakers' Friends Service Committee took up his case. He lost – in *Hirabayashi v. United States* the Supreme Court ruled that the internment order was constitutional in a time of emergency – and he spent over a year in federal prison.

We wrote the Sworn-Again American oath with people like Gordon Hirabayashi and Mary Beth Tinker in mind. They cherished liberty as a responsibility. They knew their own minds and knew how to govern themselves. They didn't say *My country, right or wrong*. They pushed their country, when wrong, to be set right.

If you measure Hirabayashi against the six promises of the actual citizenship oath, he went four for six. He did not serve in the military when called. He did not obey the laws of the United States. But the reason why was he was too busy living up to the other four tenets: it was by challenging the U.S. government that he showed his loyalty to the U.S., renounced any other loyalty, served his nation, and upheld the Constitution.

Forty-five years after his trial, his conviction was overturned and the Court of Appeals disavowed the *Hirabayashi* decision. Twenty-five years after that, President Obama awarded Gordon Hirabayashi the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

What is one promise you make to become a United States citizen? What I love about the question is that it implies that citizenship isn't just a status or a bundle of rights and privileges. It is a covenant. To be a citizen is to live an implied promise and others may act in reliance of the expectation that you will keep the promise. If you are faithful to the nation's creed, you can demand that the nation keep faith with you.

If I were a student again – if I were doing my history thesis here – I'd want to do it on the topic of oaths. I would recount how Americans once put great stock in oaths and were afraid to take them if they weren't sure they could live up to them; and I would examine how and when it became OK to not really mean it. Or to mean it at the time but not later, when inconvenient, which is of course the same as not really meaning it.

Then I remember: I *am* a student. So are you, whether you are enrolled at Grand View or not. We are called to learn and practice the art of powerful citizenship. For most of us, the tests of citizenship will not be pen and paper quizzes or oral exams. They won't even be the obvious occasions like Election Day. They will be small moments that sneak up on you without warning like a tap on the shoulder or a tweet in the dark. When suddenly a passerby or a president forces you to be more than a bystander.

Are you ready to live up to your promises?

I said at the outset I wasn't going to pander to you lowans. But as I close, I can't resist. You know how much the rest of the country hates the outsized role your caucuses play in picking presidents. Folks say the caucus is an outmoded, unrepresentative format. They say that white rural Iowa is an outmoded, unrepresentative state. Well, I say they're wrong. I love the caucus, because it's a school of citizenship open to all. And I believe Iowa is representative of the Union in two deep and important ways.

First, this state contains all the polarized contradictions of the rest of the country. What is Iowa? Is it the land of right-wing nativist Steve King or the land of left-wing Calvinist Marilynne Robinson? Is it where state legislators eviscerate health care coverage for the poor or where the *Des Moines Register* wins a Pulitzer Prize for exposing that act? Is it a place where young people are feeling powerless or a place where groups like the Iowa Student Learning Initiative are teaching a new generation to find their voice? The answer, of course, is yes. To live here is to live with that complexity and contradiction.

This state reflects the United States in one other respect: character. Herman Melville wrote in *Moby-Dick* that only being at sea made a man a man. "In landlessness alone," he wrote, "resides the highest truth, shoreless, indefinite as God." I think that's pretty much crap. But like Melville, you know that the appearance of stasis and stability is always a mirage. You know better than to think that you can just sail back in time and make everything great again. You know, as Jane Smiley put it in *A Thousand Acres*, that "the seemingly stationary fields are always flowing toward one farmer and away from another." And you know that the grown-up thing to do is prepare, and face the changes and the storms that are as relentless as if you were at sea.

That's what a citizen would do. In these tumultuous times, that is what a citizen must do. Serve. Listen. Forgive. Organize. Advocate. Vote. *Tend the garden*. My friends – my fellow descendants of farmers and immigrants – let's recommit to our country's creed. Let's live like Sworn-Again Americans.

Readings to Precede the Sermon
May 5, 2018

Jane Smiley
From the novel *A Thousand Acres*
Published 1991

There was no way to tell by looking that the land beneath my childish feet wasn't the primeval mold I read about at school, but it was new, created by magic lines of tile my father would talk about with pleasure and reverence. Tile "drew" the water, warmed the soil, and made it easy to work, enabled him to get into the fields with his machinery a mere twenty-four hours after the heaviest storm. Most magically, tile produced prosperity – more bushels per acre of a better crop, year after year, wet or dry. I knew what the tile looked like but for years I imagined a floor beneath the topsoil, checkered aqua and yellow like the floor in the girls' bathroom at the elementary school, a hard shiny floor you could not sink beneath, better than a trust fund, more reliable than crop insurance, a farmer's best patrimony. It took John and Sam and, at the end, my father, a generation, twenty-five years, to lay the tile lines and dig the drainage wells and cisterns. I in my Sunday dress and hat, driving in the Buick to church, was a beneficiary of this grand effort, someone who would always have a floor to walk on. However much these acres looked like a gift of nature, or of God, they were not. We went to church to pay our respects, not to give thanks.

Marilynne Robinson
From *What Are We Doing Here?*
Published 2018

Our sample of existence – that is, the growing sum of whatever we can observe, test, describe, derive, or know in any meaningful sense – is too small and untypical, too contaminated with error and assumption, too prejudiced by accident and limitation to yield a metaphysics. Yet we need a metaphysics, an uncomfortable parallel reality able to support such essential concepts as mind, conscience, and soul, if we are to sustain the civilization culture and history created for us. To quote Flavel, "The soul of the poorest child is of equal dignity with the soul of Adam." All men are created equal. Nothing about these statements is self-evident. Yet they can shape and create institutions, and they can testify against them when they fail. They have only their own beauty and the beauty of their influence to affirm them.

Naturalization Oath of Allegiance to the United States of America

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.