



“The Story of Our Roots”
Sermon by Eric Liu • Civic Saturday
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I’ve been reading a novel this summer by Richard Powers called *The Overstory*. An overstory is the canopy layer of foliage in a forest. It also is the kind of word a child might make up to mean the story that contains all other stories. This novel is both. It is about trees more than people. And if that sounds odd to you, it is worth remembering, as one reviewer put it, that “trees do most of the things you do, only more slowly.”

Trees communicate, warn each other of dangers, and collaborate to pool resources. They look out for kin. They seek out opportunity and reckon with tragedy. Another recent and very popular book, *The Hidden Life of Trees*, by the German forester Peter Wohlleben, became both a global bestseller and a topic of scientific controversy because of the way the author spoke of trees as having wishes and thoughts.

But whether you literally or only figuratively think of forests and trees as social creatures with intention and agency and desire, what is surprising about this thesis is that so many people still find it surprising. Even we who live in the evergreen Northwest easily forget what Chief Sealth spoke of, how webbed and interdependent life is. Even card-carrying tree-huggers, when we get caught up in the marketplace and saturated in commercial messages of hyperindividualism, even we start to imagine that everything and everyone is autonomous and disconnected and self-made and brand-new.

The overarching narrative of our times, though we may not see it or acknowledge it, is that for better and for worse our fates are bound together in a complex collective latticework of choice and consequence. That is the story of *The Overstory*.

My only quarrel with the concept of the overstory is that it draws our attention too much upward, toward the canopy. To me, the understory matters most. The brush, the ground cover, the fallen trees that have become nurse logs. Most of all, the roots. It is from the understory in all its decay and untidiness that all other stories emerge. And it is the understory that most exemplifies our true interdependence.

Richard Powers writes about aspen groves and their vast, region-wide networks of roots, through which a herd, a tribe, a *nation* of trees will move hundreds of miles over hundreds of years to seek a better life. I can tell you about two azalea trees and a plum tree in our yard that have collapsed over the years, their trunks hollowed out and unable

to withstand a heavy snowfall or a parched summer, leaving a hole in the apparent scheme of life, only then, months later, to yield new life and new suckers and aspiring bushes that spring from resilient roots beneath. We brought some plums today from a root system whose tree fell nineteen years ago.

Not every root network is healthy. Some yield beautiful, fruitful vegetation. Others propagate noxious weeds. In a forest, as Powers writes, the living and dying that happen on the ground and under it are what make possible the majesty of what's on high. So it is in a garden. So it is in a democracy.

We are gardeners, of our democracy and community. When we work in the backyard or in a community garden like the Beacon Food Forest down the way, we don't just sit back with a laissez-faire attitude and see what happens. We tend. We seed, feed, and weed. We have a point of view about what should and shouldn't be there. We learn that what's visible and seemingly the product of our handiwork is only the final expression of a far more extensive reality that does not meet the eye or need our hands.

We ought to pay more attention to roots and root systems – in our lives as general lovers of nature and especially in our lives as citizens. This morning I'd like to explore three conceptions of roots that are playing out today in civic life: first, where we come from; second, the root causes of our problems; and finally, the nature of radicalism.

1.

Every Asian American can tell you about a time, maybe in childhood or maybe ten minutes ago, when a non-Asian (usually white) person asked, "Where are you from?"

Whenever I was asked that, I would play with the questioner. I'd say, "I'm from Poughkeepsie." And they'd say, "No, where are you *really* from?" And I'd smile with mock understanding and say, "Oh, yes. I'm actually from Wappingers Falls, just outside of Poughkeepsie." And if they persisted with some awkward or utterly unabashed version of, "No, I mean where are your ancestors from, because they sure as heck don't look like they're from here?" then, depending on whether I detected malice or innocent curiosity in the question, I might finally say, "My parents were born in China and raised in Taiwan before they came to the United States, where I was born."

I am tired of telling this story. I'm tired of this clichéd conversation, and tired of the fact that it's cliché only to people of color and not yet to all white people. I'm tired of the nonwhite man's burden of reciting a catechism to prove non-foreignness.

"Go back to where you came from." Now that the president of the United States has made that sentiment a part of public discourse again, it is worth considering what on earth the phrase means. Where is any of us *from*?

Consider my mother, Julia Liu. Her birth certificate says she is from Nanking, China. She was born ten months before the notorious Rape of Nanking by Japanese soldiers in December 1937. But by then she and her parents had already moved, to the interior provinces where her father could still find a teaching job. They moved all around China during the years of war, civil war, and revolution. When she was eleven, she moved to Taipei. That's where she went to middle school, high school, and college before she came to the U.S. in 1959. Then she lived and worked in Manhattan, Boston, Ann Arbor, and eventually, in the mid-1960s, to Poughkeepsie and Wappingers Falls. That's where she and my father raised me and my sister. And when my father died suddenly in 1991, she moved down to the suburbs of Washington DC, where I was at the time. She's been there ever since, through work and retirement. She's lived in Bethesda, Maryland longer than anywhere else in her life. This is where she created deep social networks, consisting of fellow alumni of her middle school, high school, and college in Taipei. And because she is now dealing with some major health challenges, she is leaving Bethesda in a couple of weeks to move here to Seattle. At least for a while, To be closer to me and Jená. It's a move – an uprooting – that she is understandably nervous about.

So: where is my mother really from? Where do we locate the origins of who she is now?

The answer to the question, for any of us humans, is as entangled and disorderly as a network of roots for any kind of flora. But when Donald Trump and his rallygoers ask the question, with malice, or propose to send people back to where they came from, it's really quite simple. They mean "your roots are not in tribe of European Christians."

They mean that real Americans, the ones with the greatest standing, *are* white and Christian. They mean that Americanness and whiteness should be understood as one and the same, now and forever. Never mind that Americanness and whiteness began bifurcating the day Thomas Jefferson entwined his DNA with that of Sally Hemings. Or the day 400 years ago in Jamestown, which Trump recently commemorated in a speech he recited like homework, when the seeds of self-government and enslavement were planted simultaneously in the soil of Virginia. Or the day just a few years ago when a majority of new births in the United States became nonwhite.

James Baldwin, whose birthday was yesterday and who understood better than most that the more entangled our origins, the more some of us would pine for purity, wrote in 1953, six years before my mother arrived in the port of Baltimore in the steerage cabin of a cargo ship, that "America is white no longer and it will never be white again."

Baldwin's prophecy is coming to pass and that phase shift has activated the race-based fear and overcompensating nationalism of so many of Trump's white followers. Among progressives, this nostalgic white supremacy seems like such an obviously backwards and benighted world view. But good multicultural progressives have a blind spot the size of Trump's Electoral College victory. There is a hole in their righteous superiority through which the practitioners of white identity politics can ride to victory.

That hole, that blind spot, is called having no roots story of your own. You can't beat something with nothing. And too many progressives today have nothing. This was notable in the recent Democratic Party presidential debates. None of these candidates knows yet how to tell an overstory or an understory about what this nation is and what it stands for and why we should love it.

It is not enough to say you are not the racist in the race. It is necessary to offer a substitute story of us. A bigger story of us. But too many progressives reflexively recoil at us-and-them language. In that vacuum, Trump and his ilk get to define Democrats and progressives as wanting open borders, no nation, no clear identity as Americans, just special recognition for every subgroup. Some of you are thinking, *that sounds pretty good to me*. Well, it's great for a John Lennon song. It is no way to win a national election. And it is no way to lead a mass multiracial democratic republic.

The taproot of a substitute story is this: Our nation is founded on ideals and promises rather than bloodline or birthplace – and because those ideals are achievable by anyone, we create mixtures and combinations that the rest of the world can't and won't. To love this country is to live up to the ideals of liberty and justice for all – and to welcome the new blood and new energy that enable us to do so. To love this country is to have confidence that impurity and mixing make us more resilient and adaptive. In botany, it's called hybrid vigor. We've got it. China and Russia don't. Advantage: us.

A similar dynamic is at work in city politics. In the crowded city council races, who's telling a deeper story of what Seattle stands for? We know there is anger and there is resignation as our community incorporates a great wave of wealthy newcomers and deals with the dislocations that have followed. Who calls us to feel something more? To believe in something more? As you make your decisions and mail in your ballots by next Tuesday, listen for that story of our roots and origins. Listen for how inclusive the "we" in that story is – and for whether there is a theory of action that doesn't just celebrate inclusion but says what we can do with it.

Any roots story is in part a fairy tale, as much aspiration as description. And I know civic life is about more than storytelling. But leadership without storytelling is just managerial technique. In times of great transitions, people want leaders more than technicians. We want FDR or Reagan, not Dukakis or Romney. We want to understand what caused this phase shift and why we can come out of it all right.

Which brings me to the second dimension of roots to explore this morning: root causes.

2.

What are the root causes of poverty and inequality?

Much of our politics today is an indirect proxy argument about this question.

And what each part of the political spectrum offers by way of answers reveals why politics is so unsatisfying to so many citizens, especially those who don't know the code words or approved worldview of each ideological camp but live by common sense.

What causes poverty? Structure and culture. Structure means systems, institutions, and policy choices. Culture means norms, values, virtues, and behavior. Too often, structure is missing from the right's account while culture is missing from the left's. The left does not want to see spirit and values. The right does not want to see collective institutional legacies. But both are part of the root system of any society. Some problems are more about structure than culture, or vice versa, but no problem is about only one.

People on the American left today love talking about structural change. Senator Elizabeth Warren used that very phrase during the debate this week. And I know many progressives have thrilled to Warren's "I have a plan for that" refrain, in which she has been detailing her policy proposals on a wide range of issues.

Now, I happen to agree that we need major structural change in a tax code and policy framework that are built upside-down to feed benefits and privileges to big corporations and the already affluent. I believe we need structural change in economic incentives to prevent a climate catastrophe. I believe we need structural change to remake a health care system that leaves so many people without their health or any economic security.

But for one thing, if I were running for president, I would not call it "structural change." That is the academic language of a technocrat and a social engineer. The more Warren says "I have a plan for that" the more she reinforces what will be a core Republican line of attack against her if she's the nominee: that she is an ivory-tower, top-down, I-know-better-than-you controlling centralizer *who has plans for you*. Nevertheless, that's campaign tactics, and that's for another day and another setting.

My real reservation about overemphasizing structural change is that it leaves unaddressed the cultural change that is already underway and that is also at the root of our social challenges today. Opioid addiction and homelessness have been caused in great measure by *structure*: rules and incentives that steer people who are in distress or in pain toward situations that become disastrous for them and for the whole community.

But opioid addiction and homelessness are also the product of *culture*: a culture in which we don't address our shared responsibility for individual pain and distress, in which we are taught it's everyone for themselves and get yours while you can, in which we are taught to express insecurity by punching downward at the people with less than us rather than upward at the people hoarding opportunity, in which the shame of being an insufficiently rugged individualist is greater than the shame of being an insufficiently loving neighbor, in which we shrug nihilistically at someone else's problem.

Slavery and Jim Crow segregation were products of state action and money power. But what sustained them for so long and what ultimately undermined them both was social norms. Religion and civic religion were used to justify slavery and Jim Crow, all the way

up to the point when religion and civic religion were used to condemn and dismantle them. As much as addiction and concentration of wealth and homelessness are material crises, they are in the first place cultural and spiritual crises. Culture is upstream of law. Spirit is upstream of policy. The soul is upstream of the state. We can't unpollute civic life if we clean only downstream. We must get to the source.

The source is our values. We are gathered here at Civic Saturday to rekindle the values of being a prosocial contributor to community, a person who recognizes that we are all better off when we're all better off. Spread such a belief widely enough and policies that embody it will be easier to enact.

Again, I am not suggesting that we focus *only* on culture. I am saying that a citizen has got to be able to walk and chew gum at the same time: to change norms *and* to change policy. At Citizen University we often use a simple equation to convey both dimensions of the root cause of anything: Power + character = citizenship.

Being fluent in power means understanding structures of racism, class advantage, and sexism and how to re-make those structures. But being grounded in civic character means knowing how to lead other people, by example and by story, toward habits that foster a culture of mutual aid and shared responsibility.

A society is not a mechanical puzzle to solve or a pile of Lego pieces to turn into structures of your preferred shape and dimension. A society is a garden. A perpetually circulating overstory and understory of fears and hopes and wants that can grow in either healthy or unhealthy ways. If you want to radically change a society, especially a democracy, remember that it is made not only of systems but of humans. And that brings me to the final aspect of my reflection on roots: the meaning of radicalism today.

3.

This "both-and" talk I am using, this language of culture *and* structure, might sound to some ears "moderate" or "centrist." But it is not. It is not a mere middle tone between a high and a low note. It's a *chord*, the sounding of multiple notes simultaneously.

In today's politics, *radical* is used to mean extreme or undiluted. Trump and Stephen Miller are said to have a radical approach to immigration that's oriented toward making America more white. Medicare For All is called radical because it would extend government involvement in the provision of health insurance to its extreme.

But when I say it is radical to insist that culture matters as much as structure and structure as much as culture, I don't mean that my belief is extreme. I mean that it is a *root-level truth*. The nature of things is never purely one thing or the other. Purity tests may be useful tools for getting power – whether litmus tests by the religious right or cancel culture on the woke left or scare tactics by socialists and capitalists about each other – but they betray the underlying truth of our hybridity.

Last night, I took a journey to an unfamiliar and faraway realm whose mores and customs I do not know well. It is called Bellevue. I was in Bellevue City Hall for a conference organized by a group called the Pathway Foundation. Pathway was founded by Conrad Lee, a Chinese immigrant who has served on Bellevue's city council since 1994 and was its first Asian American mayor. Conrad is 80 with the vitality of someone decades younger. But it is people far younger than he who organized the conference: high school students, mainly Chinese American, led by Edwin Ong, a regular participant here at Civic Saturday. The room was filled with students and their parents.

I tell you about this gathering because it was an unlikely but fertile seedbed for radicalism. Unlikely, because Conrad is a Republican former stockbroker and small business owner. Many of the parents in the room were temperamentally if not politically conservative. The students were polite and everyone's style was modest.

And yet the point of the conference *was* radical: to activate young people to claim their power and place in the civic and political life of their city, state, and country – and to do so in ways consistent with their cultural styles and habits and norms.

The cultural style of so many Asian immigrant households centers on family and respect and relational obligation and not drawing undue attention to oneself. The imperatives of power in white- and male-dominated environments like city halls or corporate meeting rooms reward self-aggrandizement and adversarial posturing. How, asked one student, can I be myself while also infiltrating that power structure? The first thing I told her was not to use the word “infiltrate” – that's the word incumbent power-holders would use about you, a young Asian woman in their midst. You are entering, claiming, integrating that power structure by walking in the door. More than that, you are changing it.

You have to know what you believe and why. Know the roots of your worldview and the origins of your story. My message to her and all the students – and in some ways, perhaps most pointedly, to their parents – was that American civic life could use more of a Confucian sense of propriety and memory; more of a Chinese spirit of duty and the long view. And our prime duty now is not just to kin and clan but to community and country. America needs Chinese Americans to be fully ourselves, and Native Americans and transgender Americans and evangelical Christian Americans and so on. To claim America and argue America so we can be and become America.

Is what I've just said right or left? The answer is yes. If we have binocular vision then we can blend each eye's image, the left and the right, into something with greater depth and detail. We can look for and ask for more in our politics.

That is a habit of mind. If we perceive something like the coming automation of the economy as merely a structure problem with policy solutions, we might support Andrew Yang's idea of a thousand bucks of monthly guaranteed income – his so-called “Freedom Dividend.” If we see it also as a culture and spiritual problem, we will remember that the dividends of freedom can never be fully earned or paid by a basic

income but also require mutual aid and people coming together to create clubs and associations and opportunities for creativity that can give them new purpose even as robots take their jobs. You cannot be a radical if you attend to only one side.

To put it another way: you can only be a radical if you attend to both.

In recent months, I've become a regular reader of Jacobin magazine, the smart, unapologetic journal of the new socialists of our time. The young writers and editors of this magazine are very good at asking long neglected questions of first principle, like why adequate housing isn't guaranteed for every single person, and offering bracing answers that expand the frame of the possible.

I've also become a regular reader of Imprimis, a monthly newsletter published by the very conservative Hillsdale College in Iowa. It too contains provocative ideas that challenge my baseline assumptions about what's normal in our society. That these ideas come from the right, whether nationalist or traditionalist or libertarian, doesn't to my mind make them inherently wrong – even if I find many of them in fact wrong.

In this either-or age of partisan tribalism and ideological warfare, the truly radical thing for you to do as a citizen is use both eyes. To resist the temptation to call me an enabler of the enemy just because I read both these publications and have been influenced by friends who read both these publications. I am not triangulating. I am identifying two strands of DNA and reweaving them. I am unearthing roots and replanting them. I am seeing that the ideological origins of the American revolution and the American idea are not exclusively left or right and neither is the redemption of that revolution and that idea.

We are a hybrid nation, root and branch. We are a mixed, intermingled group of gardeners tending a mixed, intermingled plot. We are the trustees of a republic in which every one of us can be said to come from the same place: a few words scribbled on paper a long time ago, a grammar and a logic of freedom and equality, a centuries-old habit of splicing our own roots into the roots of that language. The American overstory is *E pluribus unum*. The American understory is as complicated as your own heart and mind. Admit the complexity. Let it lead you to new forms of responsibility. Let it lead you to honor the living and the dead alike by living like a citizen.

Dead, did I say? There is no death, only a change of worlds. Maybe Chief Seattle said those words and maybe they are a hybrid of his voice and a white man's imagination. Either way, they are part of our inheritance and collective memory. And they express a sense of roots, root causes, and true radicalism that our city and nation need today more than ever.

Readings to Precede the Sermon
August 3, 2019

James Baldwin
From *Notes of a Native Son*
Published 1955

The time has come to realize that the interracial drama acted out on the American continent has not only created a new black man, it has created a new white man, too. No road whatever will lead Americans back to the simplicity of this European Village where white men still have the luxury of looking on me as a stranger. I am not, really, a stranger any longer for any American alive. One of the things that distinguishes Americans from other people is that no other people has ever been so deeply involved in the loves of black men, and vice versa. This fact faced, with all its implications, it can be seen that the history of the American Negro problem is not merely shameful, it is also something of an achievement. For even when the worst has been said, it must also be added that the perpetual challenge posed by this problem was always, somehow, perpetually met. It is precisely this black-white experience which may prove of indispensable value to us in the world we face today. The world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.

Excerpt from Chief Seattle's 1854 Oration
As recorded by Henry A. Smith
Published October 29, 1887 in the *Seattle Sunday Star*

Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove, has been hallowed by some sad or happy event in days long vanished. Even the rocks, which seem to be dumb and dead as they swelter in the sun along the silent shore, thrill with memories of stirring events connected with the lives of my people, and the very dust upon which you now stand responds more lovingly to their footsteps than to yours, because it is rich with the blood of our ancestors and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch.... And when the last Red Man shall have perished, and the memory of my tribe shall have become a myth among the White Men, these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe, and when your children's children think themselves alone in the field, the store, the shop, upon the highway, or in the silence of the pathless woods, they will not be alone. In all the earth there is no place dedicated to solitude.... Let him be just and deal kindly with my people, for the dead are not powerless. Dead, did I say? There is no death, only a change of worlds.