



Time and Citizenship
Sermon by Eric Liu • Civic Saturday
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Welcome to the Impact Hub. It's great to have you all here in our living room. Citizen University's offices are in this space, which is both a co-working space and an ecosystem of civic innovators in Seattle. City Club Seattle is here, Puget Sound Sage, Seattle Neighborhood Greenways, Yes! Magazine, Social Venture Partners, and many others. The Hub is a both a new and an old idea. Like Pioneer Square or Seattle or anyplace that prides itself on having a history of newness, it meshes time frames.

The topic of time is on my mind this time of year – how quickly time flies, how slowly it passes, how hard it is to have a consistent sense of time in these times. That's partly because I've been on the road so much this year, zigzagging between time zones and eras, meeting people who are innovating for the 22nd century while few miles away their neighbors are living in conditions from the 19th century. It's partly because each day brings a new scientific warning that time is running out even more rapidly than we thought to avoid the most catastrophic consequences of climate change.

What a time to be alive.

Earlier this week I sat in on a talk about a forthcoming business book called *The Real-Time Revolution*. Its message was that customers now demand everything in real time and so companies need to respond accordingly. There was no examination about whether this was good or bad. And no sense of irony that a slow-moving technology called a book was being used to persuade people that a slow-moving habit like reading books was becoming obsolete.

But the reason I was glad I went to this talk is that it got me thinking about time and *citizenship*, and how this consumer expectation of instantaneity is killing our capacity to govern ourselves in a democracy. At Citizen University, we encourage people to serve others, to understand issues, to start clubs, to gather in common rituals, to argue with more heart and wisdom. But underlying all these collective actions is the fabric of time.

To be a great citizen – a truly useful contributor to the life of the whole community – each of us must do more than learn power and cultivate character. Each of us must also master time. We've got to develop an awareness of how to use time and become alert to the game-riggers who want to manipulate our sense of time. We've got to understand

where we sit in time and how to distinguish our now from another's now. Today I want to explore three aspects of time that shape our civic lives: tempo, horizons, and patterns.

TEMPO

Let's start with tempo. American life is fast and getting faster. We move and consume and react and judge at ever accelerating speeds. But who is composing this ubiquitous soundtrack and who is conducting it?

Social media and technology in general – everything from 1-click ordering to urgent email fundraising pleas to the “Breaking News” chyron on CNN to the Pavlovian notification number on Facebook – make us crave ever more rapid response and ever more fleeting ways to satisfy the craving. Psychologists call it the hedonic treadmill.

In both the economic and civic spheres, these systems of accelerated time are in a very real sense rigged. Algorithms rewire our body rhythms. They're designed for addictive effect. And if you pay close attention, in both realms the people who design the rigging are unlike most of us: they don't yield to the addiction.

Did you ever notice that Jeff Bezos and Sheryl Sandberg and Jeff Zucker and Steve Bannon don't seem to be hunched over their smartphones tapping for updates every fifteen seconds? Did you ever notice that very powerful people never run from one meeting to the next? They are the puppeteers. We are the puppets. They turn on the music and crank up the treadmill. We run and run faster – and we pay for the privilege.

The one seeming exception to this rule happens to be Donald Trump. But in his own surrender to Twitter time and the metabolism of social media he is in fact the greatest puppeteer of them all. He dictates the tempo of American politics to a degree greater than any previous president. He is also, as David Shields points out in his new incisive book *Nobody Hates Trump More Than Trump*, more deeply representative of the American people's lack of self-control and of the chopped-up rhythms of American culture than any president in modern memory. *No puppet, you're the puppet.*

Our first responsibility in civic life, then, is to move at our own tempos. To be intentional. That doesn't mean simply slowing down. Always moving slowly is as stupid as always moving quickly. Stupidest of all, though, is moving to a cadence you have no hand in setting. In classical music, concertos and symphonies have three or four movements, usually alternating between fast and slow. If they were only one or the other, no one would listen all the way through. But when we perceive a design, a deliberate alternation of tempos, we give not just our attention but our respect: here is someone who can play with time. A composer, a conductor. Not just an audience member.

And we remember that we too have this power. To conduct and compose our selves.

Let me remind you how Emma Gonzales, one of the Parkland High School students behind the March for Our Lives, opened her speech at the rally in Washington. [hold silence] She opened with six minutes and twenty seconds of silence, the amount of time it took for the Parkland massacre to unfold. All I gave you just now was six seconds, and it was enough to slow your pulses and re-center you.

But sometimes faster is better. The way Lin-Manuel Miranda taught the American Revolution and the Federalist Papers works for more people than the way AP History textbooks do it. *Hamilton's* fast hip-hop is sticky. It plays. It provokes. Yet sometimes faster is better and still it's not enough. The way Lin-Manuel Miranda taught wouldn't enable you to pass an AP History exam or to make informed, nuanced judgments about how to regard the Founders who were enslavers or what to do about a monument to such a man. That takes slow study and more silent contemplation.

Can you compose a civic life that alternates between fast and slow? Seattle is moving both too quickly and too slowly to deal with growth. That's why local politics is turbulent right now. But how do you sift the too quick from the too slow? Too quick to yield to builders, too slow to listen to neighbors? Or vice versa? Is it your neighbors who have been too slow to accept change? Is it you? Think it through, honestly.

In a couple of weeks most of us, if we are lucky, will get to slow down. That's what the holidays are for. But outside of the enforced and societally accepted blocs of time when we get to step off the treadmill and reset our pace for a day, we as citizens must remind each other how to perceive and use time in democracy. How to listen, how to learn, when to respond at once and when to respond not at all. How to know when speed saves and when speed kills. Most of all, how to take control of how you spend your time and your attention, which are currencies of your civic power.

I am by nature an impatient person. That has served me well in many ways. It has limited me in others. And today's environment of instantaneity is becoming, I think, net-harmful to me. That's why as I grow older I seek to lash myself to the mast more often, to resist the siren song of speed. I've developed a corny habit that grew out of a time when Jená was, shall we say, encouraging me to be less impatient. I said, "What do you mean? Patience is my middle name!" Which was a joke both because I'm not patient and because my actual middle name is P, just the letter P with a period. When I am sitting on the tarmac in a delayed flight, or listening to a long-winded colleague at a board meeting, I now say a little mantra to myself: *Eric Patience Liu. Eric Patience Liu.*

It's as close to Buddhist meditation as I am going to get this year. But next year and the year after that and for the rest of my lengthening or shortening life (depending on your viewpoint), I hope to do better. And that brings me to the second dimension of time I want to explore today, the horizons of time.

HORIZONS

Let's pause for a moment and go back to that term "in real time." We know that it means *now*, simultaneous with the saying of it. But why does it mean that? What makes the immediate, the instant, the say-it-and-it's-done any more "real" than any other conception of time and of the duration of human experience?

What does a farmer in Chelan think real time is?

What does a scientist at the University of Washington who is untangling the human genome or extracting Arctic ice cores think real time is?

What does a teacher in Tacoma or a pastor in Wenatchee think real time is?

The farmer, the scientist, the teacher, and the pastor all know other conceptions of time: seasonal, genomic, geologic, epochal, and scriptural time.

They have horizons that vary in length but that are all longer than the perpetual now. This is a matter not just of patience, and it's certainly not a matter of saying that patience is always a virtue. It's simply an acknowledgment that these people in their professional lives must be able to take a long view backward and forward even as they are doing what is before them in the moment.

So must we all in our civic lives.

Having a sense of the horizon is a matter of both knowing history and imagining future history. The horizon encircles you from Christmases past to Christmases yet to come. Our second responsibility in managing civic time, then, is to be able to locate ourselves in relation to past and future. If tempo was about regulating pace, then horizons is about understanding place: where we stand in time.

And fewer of us can do this. I saw a news item recently that history majors are declining in American colleges and university. The trend is of a piece with the decline in all the humanities, subjects like English and art that seem to technology- and career-minded students to be of less practical use than, say, coding. But history as a discipline has recorded the steepest declines. That worries me. Not just because I was a history major but because coding will be automated while history and its interpretations can never be.

Consider the issue of birthright citizenship. A few days before the midterm elections, as an increasingly worried Donald Trump was rummaging through his toy chest of white supremacist dog whistles, he tweeted out that he planned soon to repeal birthright citizenship by executive order.

Now, there are a few problems with that. First, of course, it was a white-supremacist dog whistle – or more like a George Wallace bullhorn – announcing his nativist intentions. Second problem is that's not how it's done. By "it," I mean "amend the Constitution of the United States." Which is what you'd have to do if you were to repeal birthright citizenship.

Why? Because birthright citizenship was encoded into Section 1 of the Fourteenth Amendment 150 years ago to ensure that freed slaves born here would become citizens of the United States. And then the principle was applied to all people born here, by the U.S. Supreme Court in the 1898 case *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, a case that arose while the Chinese Exclusion Act was in force.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 marked the first time that a group was barred by race from entering the territory. It was the birth of the concept of illegal immigration: before that, anyone from anywhere could come any time. It was the culmination of decades of what we'd now call Bannanite or Trumpian agitation against Chinese laborers. Although that law had been in effect for over 15 years, the Court had to agree that the plain language of Section 1 of the Fourteenth Amendment meant that Wong Kim Ark, a cook born in San Francisco who went to visit relatives in China, could not be barred from re-entering the U.S. Because he was American by birth.

If you don't know that that's how this issue was decided, and you don't know the history of how we came to have birthright citizenship and how it became enshrined in law, then you may be tempted to think that repeal or not repeal is not your problem. You might think it's a problem just for brown people crossing the border without authorization.

You'd be wrong. It's my problem, as a Chinese American son of immigrants who has birthright citizenship only because another Chinese American son of immigrants forced the question in 1890. His story and mine are tied to the stories of formerly enslaved African Americans and all their descendants born here and to all undocumented immigrants ever since Chinese people defined the category. It's your problem if you're African American because birthright citizenship is one of the central triumphs of the black experience in America. As Johns Hopkins historian Martha Jones writes in her revelatory book *Birthright Citizens*, the Fourteenth Amendment arose from decades of unheralded, patient, persistent advocacy by free blacks in the antebellum South who asserted and exercised rights of citizenship in courtrooms and at the ballot box.

It's your problem if you're white because the president is testing you. He is always probing to see how many white people he can manipulate into being scared of a future that's less white – and how much of that fear he can convert into hate. So, if you are white you have a responsibility to declare yourself either scared or not scared, and if scared, either succumbing to hate or rejecting it.

But all of this for all of us requires a view of the past that goes farther back than what's visible on your phone as you scroll down. Put down your damned phone. Look up. Look ahead. The other part of a citizen's responsibility to see the full horizon is of course to look to the future. And here we come up against that pernicious American narcissism of the now that has led every generation since the Greatest Generation to want to be young forever, to want to extend adolescence, to never grow up.

My dear friend Marc Freedman has a new book out called *How to Live Forever*. But it's not about skin creams or fad diets or putting your name on buildings. It's about the only way that we can in fact live forever and that is to pass on our knowledge to, and circulate our capital with, the younger generations behind us. That's it. Full stop. Mentor, teach, share, serve, and build relationships of caring from generation to generation. Gen2Gen is the name of a campaign that Marc's organization, Encore.org, is running. It is the only path to immortality: immortality of character and wisdom.

Marc – with whom, by the way, I'll be in conversation at Phinney Neighborhood Center Monday night – is my sibling in countercultural activism. As is everyone in this room today. The dominant culture in our country – what we are all pushing back against – has no time horizon. It reduces history and the future to a single point. We in the counterculture are stretching that point out into a line, into a circle, into a weave of chords that binds generation to generation and each of us to one another. That's the only way to make time real – to make it not about now. And to see, over time, that the great American weave tells its own stories that are truer than yours or mine alone.

That brings me to the third and final aspect of civic time that I want to discuss today: the patterns that emerge from our choices and judgments.

PATTERNS

To some people this is called the holiday season but to a diehard baseball fan like me it's what's called "hot stove" season, the quarter between November and February when there are no games but only chatter and gossip over an imaginary hot winter stove about offseason deals and trades.

One of the many ways that baseball is life's best teaching tool is the way baseball plays with time. It is a game that concentrates all action on the contest between a pitcher, who controls the tempo, and a batter, who responds to the pitch he is dealt. Each such confrontation is packed with revelation. Out of hundreds of thousands of those pitch-by-pitch confrontations emerge patterns. And what separates a good player from a great one is the ability to see those patterns over time and to adjust to them continuously.

In other words, a true baseball player has got to be able to focus on the now, the instant a pitch is released, *and at the same time* be able to zoom out and be guided by what happened before *and at the same time* recognize that what happened before may no longer be relevant and in fact may be misleading.

A true citizen must do each of those things as well. See patterns, make judgments, adjust. See patterns, make judgments, adjust.

In American civic life today the word "judgment" is usually associated with righteous put-downs of someone deemed morally subpar. That, again, is a result of our too-fast tempo and our too-short horizons. Every offense is a volume-ten outrage. But

citizenship cannot sustain that pace or that intensity. Citizenship requires discernment and modulation. It requires judgment in the other, deeper sense: an ability to make distinctions and to weigh evidence past and present and make the best calls we can.

Another reason I love baseball, as the documentarian Ken Burns reminds us, is that it is one of the few shared experiences threaded through the past 170 years, one of the few constants between agrarian white pre-Civil War America and post-industrial multiracial America today. It gives fans a consistent set of statistics and metrics by which to judge and compare players across different eras. It also gives rise to debates about the nature of judgment and comparison. Is it fair to compare hitters from the dead-ball era at the turn of the 20th century with hitters of the steroid era? More pointedly, should every record from the era before Jackie Robinson integrated the game in 1947 be considered a less than legitimate measure of greatness?

I was thinking about this when I saw a picture of the 1948 Yale baseball captain, George H.W. Bush, who played first base and led the Bulldogs to the College World Series twice. This, of course, was after he had flown dozens of combat missions in World War II as the Navy's second youngest aviator. Most of the rest of his crowded life was in public. So, from the moment Bush's death was announced, there was a flood of commentary about whether he should be respected or resented, celebrated or scorned.

Bush is not a figure to whom I would apply absolutes. Part of it is his genuinely complex record: ending the Cold War, bucking his party on taxes, exercising strength and restraint in Iraq – good; Willie Horton, AIDS neglect – bad. Part of it is the refraction of present circumstance. Next to Trump, every recent president looks relatively better, especially one who was skydiving and witnessing gay marriages when he was 90. But a great part of my reluctance to issue binary good-evil judgment on the elder Bush is the larger trend of judging leaders of the past by the standards or modes of the present.

You see this among progressives who, for instance, cannot abide Winston Churchill because he was racist, imperialist, and sexist. Historians call this the fallacy of anachronism or presentism. Churchill did have racist views about Indians and others. He was an unapologetic champion of Empire and its brutal ways. But he was not exceptional in that; such views were the norm. He was exceptional in his vision and gifts of leadership. Let me put it plainly: no Churchill, no us. Had he not been on the scene, the Nazis would have commanded all Europe and threatened the United States directly. The American Century would have been stillborn.

I know – I myself have committed the fallacy of causation. We cannot truly know, we can only imagine, what might have been had one key person been subtracted from the equation. There's a great *Star Trek* episode about that, "City on the Edge of Forever," about a social worker in the 1930s. Captain Kirk, dropped into her time, falls in love with her but must let her die in a car accident he knows will happen because if she lives she will lead a pacifist movement that will delay American entry into the war long enough for Hitler to get the atom bomb. No Allied victory, no Federation of Planets, no Starfleet.

But that's science fiction. It is not science fiction to say that Churchill saved the free world long enough for Franklin Roosevelt to really save it. How then do we judge Churchill? How do we judge FDR, who cheated on his wife, lied to the press, tried to pack the Court and, in his greatest act of infamy, incarcerated American *citizens* of Japanese descent on a trumped-up case of military necessity? The answer must be: we judge with both moral clarity and humility and with a willingness to calibrate our judgments. Franklin Roosevelt was, on balance, the greatest president of the 20th century and behind only Washington and Lincoln in saving the nation from destruction.

George Bush's generation is just about gone now and so maybe our judgments of them will become less gauzy and soft. More honest, more complicated. It's been 150 years since the Fourteenth Amendment, a century since the slaughter of the Great War, 50 years since the chaotic bloodshed of MLK and RFK and Chicago and the Tet Offensive.

How will we be judged in 50, 100, and 150 years? That depends, in part, on whether society as we know it will exist in any of those timescales. Climate scientists tell us in boldface all-caps what the patterns of the last two centuries and especially the last five decades suggest about our future. They suggest peril. They suggest that we will be judged harshly for not having done more during the planet's greatest hour of peril – for, in fact, choosing to do even *less* precisely at that hour, when you consider that American oil production and carbon emissions and SUV sales hit new highs this year.

How shall we break the pattern?

If you are a climate activist you should like Churchill, warts and all, because the man wrote the book (literally) on how to persist in pushing a cause for decades even when people think you're a one-note crackpot, all the while using every tool of power at your disposal, from lectures and essays to service in government, to advance your cause. Churchill's cause was containing fascists. The closest that environmentalists have to a Churchill today is Al Gore. And there's no doubt that *An Inconvenient Truth*, with its computer-modeled images of coastal flooding and rampant wildfires, was prophetic.

But Churchill had the benefit, if I can put it this way, of Hitler. Hitler forced action and events in such a way that proved Churchill right and brought his nation and eventually ours onto his side. Gore today has only the reports of scientists and large multinational meetings and agreements. There is no single archvillain to awaken the conscience.

There's just us, in a thousand points of selfishness and short-term hoarding. The villain is nowism. The villain is human nature, which, absent leadership and a strong social norm to the contrary, will always discount future benefit to avoid present pain. But as Bush reminded us, there's also in human nature a thousand points of light: an innate willingness to serve, sacrifice, and act for others for benefits you can't yet imagine. The leadership can come from us, not from a president or prime minister. It must.

The yellow-vest protestors in France, like the voters on Initiative 1631 in every Washington county outside King, Jefferson, and San Juan, think that the choice is

between paying higher taxes and having more money in your pocket. The real choice, however, is between higher taxes now and system collapse soon.

To quote Yogi Berra: “It gets late early out here.” We can relate to that as winter solstice approaches in Seattle. But it’s not too late for us to organize, to educate, to tell a different story, to listen to why people in Pierce and Snohomish, much less Spokane or Ferry County, resist this green story, and to respond to the patterns we notice. To use every channel at our disposal, to bring to bear that Churchillian spirit of tireless mobilization of every craft at our disposal and to inspire with a confident relentlessness that borders on the insane. It was nearly insane to think that England would prevail in 1938. It’s not insane to think that American democracy or human civilization can survive in 2018. It just requires imagination – and action.

DIRECTING TIME

Let me close with a nod to the great theater artist Anne Bogart. She has developed a system of directing actors that focuses on what she calls “viewpoints” – dimensions of time and space that a performer must be aware of as she moves across a stage. Bogart talks about tempo and duration in a way that lines up with the dimensions of tempo, horizon, and pattern that I talked about today. But the main point of her teachings is that there is never any single tempo or duration, no single form of repetition or response, that is inherently and inalterably correct. The point of developing one’s craft onstage is to have a full repertoire of moves and viewpoints on time – and then full command of that repertoire to use as the situation demands and inspires.

As it is in theater so it is in citizenship.

How do we as members of civic life develop that repertoire and that command? In the first place, by naming the phenomenon. Time matters. In the second place, by practicing. Think about the tempo, the horizons, and the patterns of time as they play out in your neighborhood, in our city, and in our country. Consider how to adjust your viewpoints of time and space so that someone who does not share them can see you.

Each of us as citizens is both director and actor, responding kinesthetically, as Bogart would say, to each others’ moves and motives and sense of time. No president, even after this one is gone, can save us from our own inattention or indifference. Citizen Wong Kim Ark did not submit to the injustice of circumstance and the threat of deportation when he was detained at San Francisco harbor in 1890. He fought. He gained allies, in and out of court. He won, after eight long years. Others noticed. Still others remember. Time since has been both cruel and kind to other Chinese Americans, Asian Americans, people of color, immigrants, refugees, children of immigrants and refugees, descendants of slaves, and to plenty of white people in pain.

Only we will save each other. A strong democracy requires strong citizens. Strong citizens believe that we can make change happen – and that we have the responsibility to try. It's time to believe. It's time to make that belief contagious.

Reading to Precede the Sermon
December 8, 2018

Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S Constitution
Ratified July 9, 1868

Section 1. All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside. No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws....

Excerpt from Chinese Exclusion Act
Signed by President Chester Arthur
May 6, 1882

An Act to execute certain treaty stipulations relating to Chinese.

Whereas in the opinion of the Government of the United States the coming of Chinese laborers to this country endangers the good order of certain localities within the territory thereof: Therefore,

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That from and after the expiration of ninety days next after the passage of this act, and until the expiration of ten years next after the passage of this act, the coming of Chinese laborers to the United States be, and the same is hereby, suspended; and during such suspension it shall not be lawful for any Chinese laborer to come, or having so come after the expiration of said ninety days to remain within the United States....

... SEC. 14. That hereafter no State court or court of the United States shall admit Chinese to citizenship; and all laws in conflict with this act are hereby repealed.

Excerpt from U.S. Supreme Court Ruling
Wong Kim Ark v. United States
Decided March 28, 1898

A child born in the United States, of parents of Chinese descent, who, at the time of his birth, are subjects of the Emperor of China, but have a permanent domicile and residence in the United States, and are there carrying on business, and are not employed in any diplomatic or official capacity under the Emperor of China, becomes at

the time of his birth a citizen of the United States, by virtue of the first clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution....