



**“A Divided Heart” – Sermon by Eric Liu  
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We have come together this morning not to affirm a faith but to question it – and, if we are lucky, to renew it.

This week’s election result can be understood as an earthquake. It certainly was seismic. But an actual earthquake brings people together, wiping away differences and distinctions and forcing them to help one another. As Rebecca Solnit writes in her book *A Paradise Built in Hell*, natural disasters create spontaneous utopias of fellow-feeling and joyful, even euphoric mutual aid. A political earthquake is different, though. This one in particular leaves us more divided and isolated and disoriented than ever. Many of you feel not just shocked but betrayed. Not just sad but grief-stricken.

So we gather today in search of a spirit of fellowship and common purpose.

We’ve called Civic Saturday an analogue to church but I wish to be clear: this is about *civic* religion, not church or synagogue or mosque religion.

What do I mean by *civic* religion? I mean that the United States has a creed, contained in foundational documents and given life in fateful collective acts. Devotion to that creed – and the mystic memory of such devotion – is what makes us American. The *creed* defines American. Not whiteness or Christianity or birth on these shores or certain documents. That creed is found in the Preamble to the Constitution and the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, in the Gettysburg Address and the I Have A Dream Speech, in the Declaration and in the Seneca Falls Declaration. And it is only made real by what we *do*. Words are just words until they become *works*.

My spirit is an American hybrid. I’m the son of immigrants from China and I wasn’t raised in any faith tradition. But I’ve found inspiration from the Puritans, the preachers of the Second Great Awakening, the Jews, the Jesuits, Zen Buddhists. But mainly my civic faith been shaped by a pantheon of great Americans, some known to us like Lincoln and King, some not so widely known but in this very room.

Lincoln and King fought to make the Union more than words. They had moral clarity and an abiding sense of moral responsibility. They took the Founders and Framers at their word and held them unrelentingly, unflinchingly to account, whatever the cost.

Most of all, they *felt*; they felt the pain of a nation divided against itself. They understood the convoluted knots of denial that form like a thicket around fragile, unearned privilege. They knew the way that despised people create stories to endure their status and then

stay within those stories. They knew that true liberation liberates the oppressor as much the oppressed. They recognized that you can fight and love the same people at the same time.

I've looked to them both as I've tried to feel my way through this week. And I've asked three questions that I'd like to explore with you today.

What do I do with my divided heart? What is the threat we now face? And how do we know what to do next?

## WHAT DO I DO WITH MY DIVIDED HEART?

Let me confess: My heart has been divided, not just since November 8 but throughout this election season. Sometimes I've wanted to understand the people who supported Trump, other times I've wanted to vanquish and isolate them. Sometimes I empathize with their yearnings; other times I want to shame and judge them harshly. Do we owe him, as Hillary Clinton said this week, an open mind? Do we owe him a closed fist?

When Trump won, one of the many emotions I felt, besides fear and shock and disgust and sadness, was awe. This was one of the most stunning demonstrations of bottom-up citizen power in American history. It was also, alas, the greatest and most candid national legitimization of bigotry since Redemption, which is what people in the South like to call the end of Reconstruction.

The morning after the election, while my progressive friends were still in shock, one of the first phone calls I got came from my friend Mark. Mark was a founder of the Tea Party. And though he did not support Trump – in fact, he's very wary of Trump – he was calling to say, if I may paraphrase, *This is what I've been trying to tell you. Millions of Americans have felt left out and put down, told that they're deplorable racists and bigots and sexists if they challenge the elites and insiders who are tolerant of everyone but them. They're tired of it, and with Trump they found a way to say so.*

What struck me about Mark's call was first of all that he called. He felt the need to say this to me. Why? It wasn't a gloating *I told you so*. It was partly a plea for understanding, but it was an angry plea. He still feels beleaguered. He is still feeling persecuted – in his case, specifically, because he was one of the people the IRS targeted in the Tea Party case that became a scandal. He chided me and people on the left I've introduced him to for not coming to his aid then. He felt let down.

He then went on to say of most progressives everything I've heard progressives say of most people on the right: They don't want to understand the other side; they just want to hate. They are insanely ideological and can't see the humanity of their opponents. They don't just disagree with you; they say you're a bad person – that *all* people on your side

are bad if one person is.

I listened. I told him I appreciated his call, which I did. I agreed with much of his analysis of what Trump voters were saying. But I pointed out that a significant part of the Trump base is in fact deplorably bigoted and sexist and anti-Semitic and Islamophobic. And I asked him to consider that the feeling of persecution he's had is now something that millions of people who are immigrants or gay or Muslim or people of color now are contending with in a newly poisonous way.

Mark said – and I believe him – that he would be the first to call out someone on the right who's being hateful or intolerant. But then he turned back to the idea that he shouldn't be lumped in with them. And he got amped up again about all the terrible ways the left has behaved in this era.

If this were someone I did not already know, I would have suited up for a talking-points war and my temperature would have risen until perhaps I did indeed come to despise him. But I know this man. I think he's right in part and very wrong in part. And he's complicated all around. As we all are. Jena has siblings and in-laws and nephews and nieces in south Louisiana who are Trump supporters. They love their kin and they have deep endurance for the hard parts of life. She cannot excise them or deny what she shares with them, which is more than blood. And she doesn't want to.

After my call with Mark I had a meeting with my team and other colleagues. The feeling in these progressive rooms was what many of you have felt, which is grief, even betrayal. And the real fear of becoming the objects of hate. But because I'd so recently heard Mark, I realized something about *all* of us. We live in the bubbles of our dreams, unaware that we share so many fears.

And we all have to wake up.

This moment feels to many progressives like sudden death but what has died is only ignorance about people who have been our countrymen all this time. Not just poor whites in Appalachia. Educated whites in exurban office parks or suburban soccer fields. What has died is an illusion of security – economic or physical or psychic – and a delusion about how inclusive America was becoming and how ready the new American electorate was to claim its potential power. So this moment now demands awakening: a readiness to fight hate, and a willingness to see who we really are.

To many others, this moment feels like vindication and victory, or at least satisfying comeuppance for an arrogant, insular cosmopolitan establishment elite. But what really has been won here? “Make America White Again” cannot win in the long term: among babies being born today that cause is already lost. And a vision of walls will not in the long term prevail either because, as King said in his Letter from Birmingham Jail, the very goal of America is freedom. This moment is not a permanent triumph for nativism

or closedness; it is a rebalancing, and it won't cure the status anxiety that brought us here – anxiety shared by Sanders supporters as much as by Trump supporters.

There's been a lot of talk about reconciliation now. But we should think about the process in South Africa after the end of apartheid called Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. The key thing there is that truth must precede reconciliation. There must be reckoning before there is reconciling.

If I am honest, my enthusiasm for the work of reconciliation followed the needle on the New York Times website that tracked Hillary Clinton's chances of winning. As that needle sank over the course of hours, so did my appetite for such work. Once it became clear she was going to lose, my mind went not to reconciliation but to resistance. If Trump follows through on half of his campaign threats, there is danger in the land of deeply un-American action. So I had a real-time look at how my own heart is split between ideals of Union and facing facts.

What I've come to think about my divided heart is this: let it be divided. But remember that blood flows between the chambers. Fight when you must, love when you can. Find in yourself all that you hate in others. Know that *everyone* is operating out of fear. Remember that everyone wants to be the hero of their own story, to justify their place in the world, and that revolutions are made of such yearnings. Use that knowledge as skillfully as, well, Donald Trump has.

To say that is not to engage in moral equivalence or relativism. The white man's fear created by the diminishing returns to being white and male is not the moral equivalent of the woman of color's fear created by the rise of Trump and the alt-right. Your liberty to discriminate against me is not the same as my liberty to be secure from discrimination.

What I'm saying is simply this: we must rehumanize our politics. That means not seeing our adversaries or ourselves as either-or beings. We are all subject to the same pressures to oversimplify each other. We must listen and see anew. I must see Mark or my sister-in-law Sally in my mind's eye before I indulge the impulse to demonize the right. At the same time, I must name and *judge* and combat injustice with all my soul when I encounter it, even if Mark or Sally are the agents of that injustice.

The most famous part of Lincoln's Second Inaugural, delivered in the final year of the Civil War, comes at the end: "With malice toward none, with charity for all," he seeks to "bind up the nation's wounds." There is the echo of Jesus here. But we forget the part that precedes it, which has more of the Old Testament: "Fondly do we hope – fervently do we pray – that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bonds-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be repaid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.'"

Lincoln was both Old and New Testament. So are we all. The goal of rehumanization isn't false reconciliation or fake consensus. We have deep divides, within us as well as between us. The goal is to be able to take responsibility for where we are, how we got here, and how to preserve this Union. Which brings me to the second question:

## HOW GREAT IS THE THREAT NOW?

Let me offer another confession: I've always wished I could have been alive (and allowed to participate in politics) in the 1930s or the 1850s – periods of peril and disunion. I've always been drawn in my history readings to books like *The Impending Crisis*, by David Potter, about the slow-motion unfolding of secession in the decades before the Civil War. I've always been drawn to novels like Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*, a counterfactual work that imagines what this country would've been like if Lindbergh had run and beaten FDR, then made peace with the Nazis, then dispersed American Jews across the corn-fed Midwest and de-Judified them.

Well, be careful what you wish for. To any student of history or of such fiction, these times are frighteningly familiar. Times of peril and potential disunion.

Last month, Jená and I took a trip to Germany. The occasion was a ceremony in a little town in the former East Germany, called Aschersleben. This is where Jena's great-grand aunt lived until she was 76 years old, in the year 1942, when she was deported to a concentration camp called Theresienstadt and killed by the Nazis. Jena's father and uncle and grandparents had lived there too but had fled to the US in 1936.

Here a group of citizens, amateur local historians from 18 to 80 years old, had researched the lives of Jews who had once lived in this town. They'd worked with an artist to create these brass cobblestones – *stopersteine*, or stumble-stones – placed in front of the last place that someone had lived before fleeing Germany or being murdered. And that's what it says: "murdered." This artist has created 60,000 of these stones, all across the country and continent. They have reckoned with their past.

On that same trip we also went to Berlin. There's a place there called the Topography of Terrors. It is a museum set on the several square blocks where the SS, Gestapo, and Reich Main Security headquarters once stood. The nerve center of the Nazi leviathan. Those buildings were reduced to rubble at the end of WWII. But the museum documents, with unflinching honesty and detail, how the people of Germany made Hitler and how he then remade the people of Germany.

What struck me when I was there was not the later Nazi history, which popular culture has made all too familiar: the Schindler's List scenes of deportation and the camps. What struck me was the early history, the way the German parliament, following the

mechanisms of democracy, voted to ban parties. Voted to allow Hitler to suspend the Constitution as needed. All under the color of law, with every “i” dotted and “t” crossed.

What the people of Germany in the 1930s wanted was freedom *from* freedom. As Eric Hoffer writes in *The True Believer*, his classic study of how people fall into mass movements, freedom had become unbearable for the average German who could not make sense of how to navigate a crushingly unequal economy, a marketplace of choices that made him feel like he wasn’t keeping up, a sense of national drift. The average German wanted someone to come and take care of things. To make order.

This was all too familiar. I posted on Facebook at the time about the parallels between Hitler’s rise and Trump’s, and one of Jena’s sisters commented, “Come on – isn’t that a stretch?” I said, yes, a bit but the echoes are real. John Adams once noted that there was not a democracy yet that had not committed suicide. And that’s what I thought when I was in the Topography of Terrors.

Of course, Trump lacks the discipline or the conviction of Hitler, and that’s one thing we have going for us. But Americans today lack the coherence and moral clarity and civic self-possession to resist a *real* Hitler, and that’s one thing we’d better work on.

With so much unknown as the transition unfolds, it’s tempting to say “we’ll see.” We will now see just how much of a stretch it is. But it’s not enough to say that. We are not just spectators or audience, awaiting the action in the next scene, held in suspense. We are the authors too of what happens next. *We* will decide.

If you want proof of that remember that we are the authors of Donald Trump. We made him. He did not take power. We gave it to him. Even those of us who opposed and detested him. We gave it to him with our attention, which craven media companies knew could be converted into revenue, and so they gave us more and so we gave him more and he gave us more excuses to give him more. We gave it to him by not voting, as half the electorate chose to do, because there truly is no such thing as not voting.

Power is a gift. Remember that. Power is a gift that resides within us, and every day we give it away. Those who opposed Trump but did not vote are a case in point. There is no such thing as not voting.

But there’s another scenario besides the mini-Hitler strongman who forces a sudden and violent break with the norms of American civic religion. The other scenario is creeping, seeping, and ultimately fatal corruption. The early days of this transition are full of what I find to be still unbelievable and revolting reports that people like Steve Bannon of Breitbart, tribune of the alt-right, might become White House chief of staff.

The analogue here is the period after Reconstruction. After the Civil War, the North undertook a great effort to remake the polity of the South. Black citizens were

encouraged to vote and to run for office. Freedmen's Bureaus were created to help the once enslaved make the transition to civic life. But ten years in, white society was tired. The South was tired of being led around by Northern Republicans. And the North, preoccupied with the emerging opportunities of what would become the Gilded Age, the chance to make money, were tired of policing the South. So they agreed to stop, in a corrupt bargain that allowed the robber barons to take over Washington and Jim Crow to reign in the South. White supremacy was enshrined in a vulgar, racist democracy.

In counterfactual spirit, I sometimes wonder how things would've gone had Lincoln not been assassinated. Had he been succeeded not by Andrew Johnson, who sympathized with the South and lost appetite for Reconstruction, but by someone else. Then I have to stop daydreaming. And wake up. Remember, in the world we did have, the cycle turned. The People's Party, the populists of that age who would have more in common with Sanders than with Trump, came along. Then the Progressives came on the scene. The social reformers from Jane Addams to Jacob Riis to Teddy Roosevelt to Bob La Follette came and laid the groundwork for reform and helped heal this very sick body politic. It took a generation, but this country did rejuvenate itself. We did not commit suicide then, and there's no reason to assume we will now.

So now let's consider the final question:

## HOW CAN WE KNOW WHAT TO DO NEXT?

In the depths of the Great Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt had a simple strategy: Try everything. He cooked up recovery and relief programs and initiatives at a dizzying rate. Many of them flopped or failed to make an appreciable difference. But it was the totality of the effort – the message of the energy – that pulled citizens out of their passivity and created an upward spiral of confidence.

But we are a long way from the New Deal now and, God knows, a long way from President Roosevelt. We have to flip the roles now. Citizens today have to be the ones who try everything. We have to cook up recovery and relief and defense and justice and compassion initiatives at a dizzying rate. It's already starting to happen, as we get woke.

We have to find ways to create together, serve together, sing together, make together. And the one thing all these efforts have to have in common, whether they come from cities or rural areas, red or blue states, is this: they have to give citizens a sense of being the boss of their own lives. A sense of agency and not just spectatordom.

It's no accident that in the Brexit, in the nationalism that's spreading across Europe and Asia, and in the Trump victory, one throughline is a deep-seated fear of the loss of *sovereignty*. People fear loss of control of borders. That's not just the US-Mexico border. That's the realization that in this age the borders between genders, between

men's rooms and women's rooms, have been blurred. The borders between the Chinese and the Scotch-Irish-Jewish parts of my daughter. You hear this refrain that our nation will soon cease to exist. That we cannot govern ourselves. This fear is not about public policy only, or even primarily. It is primal. Vast global economic forces, distant bureaucrats, unseen political game-riggers: all these we can feel have eroded our integrity – our wholeness – and feed a sense that we've lost control of our own lives. That's what the loss-of-sovereignty fear is about on a deeper level.

I think all of us can relate to this. All of us. It won't do to mock or look down on people who feel so strongly this way that they vote for someone like Trump. And we have to keep this in mind and in our hearts. In a way, the question of what we do next is simple. You know already:

First: Push back against the bigotry and hatred that's been normalized. Not just on major national issues but in every moment of everyday life. What you see someone saying at work. Or on the Number 2 bus. Or in your kid's lunch line at school.

Second: Organize. Organize at every level. Organize like there is no point to life except organizing. We've come together today in that spirit, not even sure what will come of it but sure that showing up will matter. That can be protests or it can be plans for legislative action or it can be meetings like this. Exercise that citizen muscle with others.

Third: Learn to read and write power, to understand its dynamics and flow. To be literate in power isn't just about understanding the workings of Washington DC. I bet half of this room wouldn't know how to move a piece of legislation through the Seattle City Council. And that's just formal government. Then you've got to learn the informal dimension, the power structure of who really runs this town. You voted on ballot measures, and that's good. But do you know how those measures got on the ballot? Do you know how you could put on the ballot yourself? Get literate in power. Get literate by practicing.

Fourth: Claim the American creed and language. My friend Nick Hanauer and I wrote a book called *The True Patriot* eight years ago in which we noted that progressives often have an ambivalent, arms-length relationship to patriotism. Our message, in short, was *get over it*. Claim this language. Frame your fights in the context of American antecedents and American values and our creed. That's how you win.

Fifth: Make it local. I would be saying this even if Trump had not won. In our time, Washington DC is not the locus of action and reform. It starts here and radiates outward. Our city and state have been innovating on the minimum wage, marijuana, gun responsibility, marriage equality, democracy vouchers. We show the way by achieving reform and justice here.

And then most of all, learn to see your fellow citizens this yearning for a sense of being in charge of something again. Channel it to constructive and inclusive ends even as

Trump and his followers may channel it to division and scapegoating. And tell a new story of us that is about *us* – not isolated rugged individuals scavenging the landscape but groups coming together to build and unite.

This is why we are all here. This is Black Lives Matter. It is Standing Rock. It is \$15 Now. It was Feel the Bern. But it was also the Tea Party. And now it's the Trump Train. This is the age of citizen power, and even if we don't like all the directions that power is flowing, there's no question that the general direction is from the bottom up and the middle out. Not the top down. That's the moment we are in and this moment demands that we be ready and *woke*.

So listen to your complex and divided heart. Understand where we sit in history. Act as if you could change the course of American democracy just by showing up. You can. It may take a generation still. But we have to have faith in things unseen, in just the way that religions teach, and in just the way every generation of Americans has done.

You are the authors of what comes next. You're more powerful than you think.



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**(Readings that preceded the Sermon continue on page 10)**

## Readings that Preceded the Sermon

### **SUSAN B. ANTHONY**

*Statement at her trial in June 1873 for the crime of attempting to vote*

“The preamble of the Federal Constitution says:

We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

“It was we the people, not we, the white male citizens, nor we, the male citizens, but we, the whole people, who formed this Union. We formed it not to give the blessings of liberty but to secure them, not to the half of ourselves and our posterity, but to the whole people – women as well as men.”

### **JUDGE LEARNED HAND**

*Speech in Central Park on the occasion of “I Am An American Day,” May 21, 1944*

“I often wonder whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws and upon courts. These are false hopes; believe me, these are false hopes. Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it...What is the spirit of liberty? I cannot define it; I can only tell you my own faith. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias; the spirit of liberty remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded; ...that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered side by side with the greatest.”

### **LANGSTON HUGHES**

*Poem entitled “Refugee in America,” published in the Saturday Evening Post, 1943*

There are words like *Freedom*  
sweet and wonderful to say  
On my heart-strings freedom sings  
All day everyday

There are words like *Liberty*  
That almost make me cry.  
If you had known what I knew  
You would know why.