



## A Thanksgiving Recipe

Sermon by Eric Liu • Civic Saturday

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It's five days before Thanksgiving and already I am so full. I am full of gratitude for our team and this community and my family. A year ago, we gathered here for the first-ever Civic Saturday. Together, through times of shock and awfulness, we have found power in persistence and resistance but also in affirmative, collective purpose and joy.

I am also overstuffed with impressions and new ideas. Over the last five weeks I have traveled for work to St. Paul, Minnesota. Camden, Maine. Paris, France. Then Chicago, Memphis, Austin, New Haven, DC, San Francisco, San Diego. Jená and I have met so many remarkable people, hundreds of them, most of whom you've never heard of, who are changing the frame of the possible in civic life.

My sermon today is an effort to make sense of all this learning and experience. And I've boiled it down to five simple notions I'd like to share with you.

1. Remembering requires forgetting.
2. Yearning requires yielding.
3. Seeing requires unseeing.
4. Believing requires skepticism.
5. And finally, persuading requires being persuadable.

Let's start with **remembering requires forgetting**, about which I have the most to say.

At the start of my travels, at the PopTech conference in the old opera house of Camden, I heard a talk by Stephanie Coontz. She's a cultural historian at Evergreen State and author of books like *The Way We Never Were*, which blows up the "Leave it to Beaver" image of the American nuclear family and the 1950's suburban mythology. Stephanie's theme was nostalgia, but she surprised me. She didn't just criticize the politics of looking backward or mock "Make America Great Again." She instead distinguished between two kinds of nostalgia: a fruitless, unhealthy kind that tries to recreate a lost *environment*; and a potentially fruitful, healthy one that tries to recreate a lost *feeling*.

I say “potentially” because it all depends on the feeling. If the feeling is one of unchallenged privilege and unearned dominance, then wanting that feeling back – as millions of white men do today – is not healthy. But if the feeling is one of integrity and usefulness – if what you remember fondly is a time when you felt purposeful and whole – then that kind of nostalgia can be a prod to invention and creation.

My friend Jim Fallows grew up in Redlands, California, a small town in the Central Valley where people knew and trusted each other, where the Rotary and Optimists clubs were strong, where his dad was an esteemed doctor, where community pride was high. Jim has worked in the Carter White House, he’s lived in Japan and China, he’s been for years a national correspondent for The Atlantic and now is based in Europe. Throughout, he’s remained attuned to that old Redlands feeling. In a new book he and his wife Deb are writing, Jim chronicles small towns across modern-day America where people are cultivating civic and economic renewal.

But in all these travels Jim is not trying to go back to Redlands. And he’s not blind to the fact that Redlands then and now, ensconced in the heart of orange country, has only fitfully included Hispanic migrant workers in its “story of us.” He’s just trying to rekindle a feeling, of people knowing your name and your family and looking out for you, in constructive ways, in new and inclusive ways.

This kind of remembering requires a certain kind of forgetting. What you’ve got to forget, paradoxically, are the specific circumstances that you so fondly recall. You’ve got to recognize that environment not as universal but as particular. The Redlands of Jim’s youth was not the Redlands of the nonwhite kid or even of the white kid whose dad wasn’t town doctor. You’ve got to name this trick of memory – then release it. And preserve only the animating core of it, which was the feeling.

The feeling *is* universal; or, at least, universally desired. I went to Redlands recently. I got it. I felt it. The question is how to make a place where *everyone* gets that feeling. Where everyone feels seen and welcome.

When I was in Memphis, I stayed in the Peabody Hotel. I’d been told this was the place to stay; it was historic Memphis. Well, it was. A grand old Southern building with a longstanding tradition every morning in which an African American bellman walks a group of ducklings from a nearby pond into the magnificent lobby and back out. A family-friendly spectacle. But upon second glance, the hotel was a bit frayed at the edges, sticky on the surfaces, a place past its prime. And when a fire alarm went off, forcing everyone to evacuate and huddle on the humid sidewalk in various states of dress, all the studied gentility and charm evaporated. And that bellman’s face was tired.

From the hotel, I went to the local offices of Facing History and Ourselves, the great educational nonprofit that teaches high schoolers moral decision-making through curricula about the Holocaust and the Civil Rights Movement. The Memphis chapter of Facing History is located on the corner of Mulberry and Huling, and as I pulled up, I noticed across the street a sign I recognized: The Lorraine Hotel. And as I turned the corner, what I saw took my breath away. A two-story 1950s motel, where the rooms of the second story were for some reason numbered in the 300s. And a giant fresh flower wreath tied to the balcony railing in front of Room 306.

It was on this balcony that Martin Luther King, Jr took his last breath. It was from across the street, through a warehouse window, that James Earl Ray took King's life with a rifle shot. Today the Lorraine Hotel has been remade into the National Civil Rights Museum. I confess I did not know this before I walked right up to its front door. Standing on that sacred desecrated ground, the weight of our past came upon me heavily and suddenly.

The National Civil Rights Museum empowers remembrance but also forces a forgetting: it demands that we *discard* the narrative in which one man, MLK, was killed by another, James Earl Ray. It demands that we *replace* it with the narrative in which this assassin was birthed by America, was but one product of a centuries-old system of weaponized white supremacy and terror. Ida B. Wells, the fearless anti-lynching crusader, demanded that the country face this basic fact of its existence. That we set aside the creed and re-center the deed. Facing History and Ourselves has a new slogan: "People make choices. Choices make history." It is profoundly true. But so is the reverse. *History makes choices*: the past defines the set of options we think we have. *And choices make people*: we are, in the end, what we choose.

That evening in Memphis we went over to Kingsbury High School, where the student body was once predominantly black but where immigration from Yemen has now made the school a quarter Muslim. The principal told me he had gone into education to serve young African Americans and now he had the blessing and opportunity to stretch himself. We were there for the What Every American Should Know project that I run out of the Aspen Institute, and what was beautiful was that the evening was student-led.

Young people trained by Facing History facilitated workshops with parents, teachers, elders about American identity. No one here was an expert or an historian. But they chose to show up because their children had asked them to. The workshops revolved around three texts. One was a passage from my book *The Accidental Asian*, about being a child of immigrants hungry for a place to belong. A shy young woman in a hijab, not knowing I was the author of the passage, said four words that night: "I feel like him." And I wondered: What will she choose to do with that feeling in all her years to come?

That brings me to the second thing I learned on my travels:

## Yearning requires yielding.

Pete Peterson is dean of the public policy school at Pepperdine University. He's a California Republican who has been beyond dismayed at Donald Trump's political pyromania. And he has decided to get other reform conservatives to get, well, *beyond dismay*. A couple of weeks ago they issued a manifesto called "A Way Forward," and because he's my collaborator on several projects, Pete asked me what I thought of it. I'll tell you what I told him: he's on to something profound.

The document contains plenty of things I quarrel with, like a broad caricature of the left as obsessed with ever-splintering identity politics and unable to think of bigger things. But it also excoriates the modern right for ignoring the deepest ailment of the body politic: an epidemic of alienation and social isolation, fed by unrestrained market thinking, that has made the people ripe for exploitation by hucksters. Pete and his co-authors call for a "conservatism of connection" – a philosophy that isn't about hating government but is about building community, about answering the yearning in so many people to be something other than involuntarily rugged individualists.

America is the land of the lonely. And loneliness is bad not just for the body politic but for the body. The former surgeon general Vivek Murthy has said that loneliness has the same effect on us as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. The isolation, the stress of always trying to salve it, the temporariness of our distractions, the persistence of the isolation. All of it is wearing, and all of it is increasing in the United States. We yearn for company.

If we are to answer that yearning – and now I mean people of the left, right, and center – then we must give in to it. We must give up the pride that masks our aloneness. We must make friends. At the CityLab conference in Paris, I met a civic entrepreneur from Britain named Laura Alcock-Ferguson, who has launched something there called the Campaign to End Loneliness. It started by asking policymakers to do more to combat loneliness, especially among seniors, to destigmatize it. Now they're launching a public campaign of ads and events that can open more paths to friendship.

The day Pete asked me to read "A Way Forward" I was headed to a symposium in DC that was co-convened by the George W. Bush Institute. One of my jobs there was to interview Pete Wehner, who was a speechwriter and strategist for President Bush and is now a New York Times contributing columnist and, like Pete Peterson, a #NeverTrump conservative. The topic of our onstage conversation was "Civility in a Fractured Age," and Wehner ended up focusing on the "fractured" part. He spoke movingly about the friends he's lost by standing for principle against Trump and Trumpism. He spoke of how his faith has sustained him during these disorienting times. And he spoke of C.S. Lewis' beautiful notion of "first friends and second friends."

First friends are those who share your worldview completely, who are of your tribe and with whom things can be unspoken. Second friends are those with whom you argue on everything, who may share your interests but comes at them from a different vantage. We need more second friends today, even if we might risk losing some first friends. We must yield to the truth that we see so very little of the truth and could benefit so very much from another's eyes.

Which brings me to the third takeaway from my travels: **Seeing requires unseeing.**

When Jená and I were in France last month, we spent a few days in Aix-en-Provence, where my favorite painter, Paul Cézanne, lived the last years of his life. His studio was a kilometer or two up a gradual hill from the center of town. A few hundred meters further up you come to a plateau from which you can see Mont Sainte-Victoire, off in the distance. If you know Cezanne, you know this mountain. It was his muse. He painted it over sixty times. And those sixty paintings are like a time-lapse series of his career, a window into the evolution of his sight. In the beginning, he saw like an Impressionist. By the end – and he *died* painting – he saw in the Cubism he was inventing. The planes flattened. The borders between trees and rocks were patched over by color. Some paintings consisted only of a few intersections, like the folds between two foothills, suggestions of continuing shapes, and otherwise just white space.

Cézanne cultivated a kind of blindness to see through to the essence of things. The less meticulously he tried to represent reality, the more truly he depicted it.

The modernist poet William Carlos Williams understood this. He wrote a generation after Cézanne died. Unlike Cézanne, Williams did not give his entire existence to art. He was a country doctor who wrote when he could. Maybe that binocular vision helped. His strange revolutionary volume *Spring and All*, of which we heard a piece, captures the essence of how best to depict reality: don't try to depict it literally. Break convention and cliché. Break lazy inherited scripts. Break prior modes of representation. Break the fake linearity of narrative. All that breaking cracks opens a deeper truth. In this sense, Donald Trump, catastrophic president, isn't a half-bad performance artist.

I recently met a young African American high school teacher from Evanston, Illinois, which is a prosperous largely white college town. We were talking about how polarized and uncivil our politics has become, about the disappearance of the center, and then he asked a powerfully disarming question: "Was there *ever* a center?"

In other words, what we thought was the vital center, to use the phrase coined by the historian Arthur Schlesinger after World War II, was perhaps just an illusion. It is true that American public life in the initial postwar years was notable for a broad moderate

consensus. But it is also true that public life in those years excluded people who would have challenged that broad consensus: this teacher's parents and grandparents, who'd been redlined and Crowbarred out of opportunity; Asian Americans perceived as foreign; closeted gay and lesbian Americans, and so on. Once those people began to step frankly into the square, to force themselves into visibility and recognition, the illusion of consensus dissolved. Reality, in its full complexity, emerged.

We are still struggling today to depict and to process that full complexity. If we are to make sense of that cacophonous, unordered reality, we must learn to see anew, which means we must unsee some things.

Two weeks ago, I practiced this kind of rewiring in a workshop I took with the celebrated illustrator Wendy MacNaughton. This was at the inaugural Obama Foundation Summit, where I was speaking, and where I had many extraordinary moments. But her workshop on how to see as citizens was perhaps the most useful part of my summit experience.

Wendy said that when most of us draw a face we draw not a face but an icon of a face: a circle with dots and a curved line that's a reflex. But when we draw from life, as she puts it, by actually looking at a face, we capture and express the true *feeling*. Especially if we commit to the act by using pens. ("Pencils suck" is one of her rules). She had us pair up and draw blind contour drawings of our partner – no looking at your work and no lifting the pen off the page. You should have heard the laughter in that room, both as we were struggling to truly perceive the person across from us and then as we finally looked at our work products, which were unintentionally Picasso-esque in their distortions yet essentially accurate. Not looking had enabled us to see.

What does this art stuff have to do with real life? The poet Claudia Rankine told me recently about a comment by the African American scholar Fred Moten, who was addressing would-be white allies about how ending white supremacy would liberate not just him but *them*. Here's the Moten quote: "The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've already recognized that it's fucked up for us. I don't need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker."

Claudia quoted Moten perfectly in her calm, measured resonant voice and when she was done we both guffawed. Don't see what you believe. Don't see what you already think our roles are. What you think you are. Unsee it. Blind yourself to it. Then see anew. You will realize then that the helper and the helped, the savior and the saved, the innocent and the culpable, are interchangeable parts of the same uninterrupted contour.

The fourth idea that struck me on my journey was this: **Believing requires skepticism.**

At Logan Airport in Boston, as we were preparing to fly to Paris, I came upon an unlikely volume in the airport bookstore: Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract*. I hadn't read this since college, and I didn't know where that copy was, so I bought it.

Over the ensuing days, I read it and was reminded of two things: one, how revolutionary was Rousseau's notion of a social contract between the people and those who rule; and two, how his argument for the idea that the state always represents the "general will" of the people would pave the way not to democracy but to totalitarian dictatorships.

During the same trip, during the train ride to Provence, I read George Orwell's 1942 essay "The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius." Again, I was struck by two things: first, how incisive and perceptive and subtle he was about the failings of England's ruling class in the interwar years; and two, how shockingly and clumsily naïve and wrong he was in predicting that socialism and the abolishment of private property would be humanity's salvation.

What my encounters on the page with Jean-Jacques and George taught me is be careful what you believe. Be careful of certainty. Skepticism about your own belief system is one of the citizen's highest obligations. Even someone as logical as Rousseau and as sophisticated as Orwell could not always muster the skepticism they so valued and thus could not foresee where their beliefs, put into practice, might lead.

The best thing about the Obama summit, frankly, was escaping for a few days from the toxic air of Trumpistan. It was a few days in an alternate universe, where the decent people led us and where creative, idealistic activists were not the underground but the vanguard. We literally were in a bubble – an enclosed, secured two floors of a new Chicago hotel. Man, it was nice.

And it took me a few days to regain my skeptical faculties. To remember Obama's shortcomings. To be reminded of his failures of imagination and execution. To remember that things hadn't been as great for everyone during the Obama years as I like to imagine – because if they had, we wouldn't be in the Trump years now.

Some might think that skepticism is the opposite of belief but it is not. It is its handmaiden. It is the resistance that makes the flame. Cynicism, on the other hand, is dangerous. And cynicism, even more than belief in an empirically failed ideology like trickle-down economics or state ownership of the means of production, is corrosive because it makes *all* beliefs fungible and it reduces a belief's worth to the question of whether it is, for the moment, espoused by people with power.

The white evangelical Alabamans whose support for Roy Moore has only *increased* since his apparent penchant for pedophilia became public – they are not believers in any sense

of the word. They are cynics. And they, far more than their defrocked judge, are a danger to democracy. They also embody a core vulnerability of democracy, which Facebook fed and Putin's digital army exploited: tribal confirmation bias. Taking in only the evidence that reinforces the righteousness of your group's prior worldview.

And if you think only white Alabama evangelicals do this, you must be from Seattle.

This brings me to the fifth and final idea I want to share: **Persuading requires being persuadable.**

At that symposium on civility in a fractured age where I met Pete Wehner, the dinner speaker was Stephen Carter of Yale Law School. Carter is a hard man to pigeonhole politically, and I say that as praise. His first book, over a quarter century ago, was called *Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby*, and his candor about both the necessity of affirmative action and the psychic price one pays for it showed a mind at peace with non-binaries. Many years earlier, he had clerked for Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and he was later entrusted by Justice Marshall to organize the oral history of his career and his catalytic role in the civil rights movement.

What Carter learned in that project, and shared with me, so that I might share with you, was this: in the depths of state-sanctioned segregation, amidst suffocating white customs of scorn that denied him social standing in the courtroom even though he had legal standing, young NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall never dehumanized the people who dehumanized him. He talked to them. He listened to them. He tried to persuade them, whether on the streets or in the jury box. He learned from them. Carter told this story to put the overheated fears today that speech is violence, that unfriendly ideas must be banned or banished, into proper perspective.

If Thurgood Marshall, who patiently built the legal foundation for his triumph in *Brown v. Board of Education*, could handle hearing from Jim Crow's finest in some very unsafe spaces, then we should toughen up and remember what it is *we* are trying to build.

Of course, it's more than a matter of toughening and being not fragile in the face of opposition. It's also a matter of loosening and being not closed in the face of the unfamiliar. And then making that openness reciprocal. As Carter put it: If I'm going to have a chance to change your mind, you've got to have a chance to change mine.

When I was in Austin recently, I spoke at the University of Texas to college and high school students who'd come in from across the state to learn about citizen power. There were liberals from Houston and conservatives from Abilene and many others from all points between who did not yet know their own minds. What I loved about my day with them was that they were practicing. Trying on stances. Removing them. Not being too

quick to judge or to justify. In short: they changed each other. At the base of the Union Building on the UT campus is a great inscription: THE EYES OF TEXAS ARE ON YOU. I wish the adults of Texas had been able to watch their children at this symposium.

Not all persuasion, of course, is by argument. In fact, most of it is not. It is by example. Let me tell you about Christian Picciolini, whom I met last week in San Francisco at the Anti-Defamation League's summit on fighting anti-Semitism. Christian was fourteen when he was recruited into a white supremacist gang. He did not have an unhappy home life he was trying to escape. He was simply hungry for a tribe and for recognition. He rose in the neo-Nazi ranks as he became an adult. He opened a record store to sell white power heavy metal music.

And then his conversion began. He needed to expand his offerings to keep the store open and so he started selling hip-hop and other kinds of music. He began to be changed, he said, by his customers. Not by anything they said but by their presence. They knew who he was and who he associated with. They, like young Thurgood Marshall, chose not to dehumanize the dehumanizer. They didn't break his windows. They bought the music that they liked. They talked to him about it. And gradually, he let himself be persuaded by them. When he became a father, that opening expanded. Looking at his baby daughter, he faced anew the question that had first put him on this path: How can I find meaning and pride in a group? Now he had a different answer.

He needed to belong to a circle of decency. Today Christian's work is to turn Nazis into ex-Nazis. He is a recruiter for decency. I interpret the election results last week in this same spirit. This was a national referendum on the gross indecency of Trumpism. Not just in Virginia, where the tiki torches of Charlottesville served only to burn down a Republican legislative majority. But in Edison, New Jersey, where anonymous racist flyers against a Chinese American and Indian American school board candidate did not prevent them from being the top two votegetters. And in our own town of Buriem, where an anti-immigrant group called Respect Washington had sent out fliers purportedly listing the names and addresses of undocumented immigrants, and where the voters just elected the city's first two Latino city council members.

In towns across the land last Tuesday we saw a populism of the decent: a surge of everyday Americans who have no special connections or clout but who are now ready to elevate decency and dignity and who have persuaded others to do the same. Not by badgering or demonizing but by inviting. By example. And then by voting.

As you head to Thanksgiving, take these five ideas – that remembering requires forgetting, yearning requires yielding, seeing requires unseeing, believing requires skepticism, persuading requires being persuadable – as ingredients for the repast you are about to make with friends and family. Combine them in whatever proportions you see fit. Try

different sequences. Make your own recipe for awakened citizenship. And make something *juicy*. Experience the joy of civic cooking.

I'll close with one last tidbit I was delighted to learn recently. The years before the Civil War saw the rise of the Know-Nothings, the nativist populist anti-immigrant anti-slavery thugs who were the proto-Klan and lineal ancestors of today's alt-right. We've all read about the Know-Nothings in our American history classes. What I didn't know about this week was the counter-group of young radical Republicans who organized a youth civic brigade to champion Abraham Lincoln and to take on the Know-Nothings. They used events, comic books, festive competitions. You know what they were called? The Wide-Awakes.

That is freaking awesome. Wokeness has been with us as long as slumber. Social justice warriors are as old as injustice.

So let's choose to be the new Wide-Awakes. Let's be eager to do every possible kind of non-violent battle with the Know-Nothings of our day. Deploy history. Deploy decency. Deploy open-mindedness. Deploy the humility of the half-blind. Deploy an appropriate measure of doubt. Deploy love. And deploy a persistent and joyful faith that our cause is the cause that caused this country to be.

Then, my friends, let us give thanks that we are home.

## Readings to Accompany the Sermon

**Irma S. Rombauer**  
**“Classic Meat Loaf”**  
**From *Joy of Cooking***  
**Published 1931**

A good meat loaf should be both firm and juicy; it should not crumble or fall apart when sliced. This meat loaf is cooked in a bread pan, which gives a juicier result; it can also be molded into a freeform loaf on a baking sheet.

Position a rack in the center of the oven. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease a 9 x 5-inch (8-cup) loaf pan.

Combine in one large bowl:

- 12 ounces ground beef chuck
- 12 ounces ground beef round
- 1½ cups cups finely chopped onions
- 1 cup quick-cooking rolled oats or breadcrumbs
- 2/3 cup ketchup
- 2/3 cup finely chopped fresh parsley
- 3 large eggs, lightly beaten
- 1 teaspoon ground thyme
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon ground black pepper

Knead the mixture with your hands until everything is well blended. Do not overmix.

Fill the loaf pan with the meat mixture, mounding the top. Place the pan on a baking sheet and bake until the meat is firm to the touch and has shrunk from the sides of the pan or until an instant-read thermometer inserted in the center of the loaf reads 160 degrees. 1 to 1¼ hours. Pour off the excess fat and let stand for 15 minutes.

**William Carlos Williams**  
**From *Spring and All***  
**Published 1923**

Today where everything is being brought into sight the realism of art has bewildered us, confused us and forced us to re-invent in order to retain that which the older generations had without that effort.

Cézanne –

The only realism in art is of the imagination. It is only thus that the work escapes plagiarism after nature and becomes a creation

Invention of new forms to embody this reality of art, the one thing which art is, must occupy all serious minds concerned.

From the time of Poe in the U.S. – the first American poet had to be a man of great separation – with close identity with life. Poe could not have written a word without the violence of expulsive emotion combined with in-driving force of a crudely repressive environment. Between the two his imagination was forced into being to keep him to that reality, completeness, sense of escape which is felt in his work – his topics. Typically American – accurately, even inevitably set in his time.

**Ida B. Wells**  
**From “Lynch Law in All Its Phases”**  
**Address at Tremont Temple, Boston, Massachusetts**  
**February 13, 1893**

I am before the American people today through no inclination of my own, but because of a deep-seated conviction that the country at large does not know the extent to which lynch law prevails in parts of the Republic, nor the conditions which force into exile those who speak the truth. I cannot believe that the apathy and indifference which so largely obtains regarding mob rule is other than the result of ignorance of the true situation. And yet, the observing and thoughtful must know that in one section, at least, of our common country, a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, means a government by the mob; where the land of the free and home of the brave means a land of lawlessness, murder and outrage; and where liberty of speech means the license of might to destroy the business and drive from home those who exercise the privilege contrary to the will of the mob. Repeated attacks on the life, liberty and happiness of any citizen or class of citizens are attacks on distinctive American institutions; such attacks imperiling as they do the

foundation of government, law and order, merit the thoughtful consideration of far-sighted Americans; not from a standpoint of sentiment, not even so much from a standpoint of justice to a weak race, as from a desire to preserve our institutions.