



**“Which Dream Do You Dream?”
Sermon by Eric Liu • Civic Saturday
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Thank you for joining us today. I want to thank the Seattle Channel for being here to film us for the show that we’ve created together called Citizen University TV. And I especially want to acknowledge our hosts here at the Hillman City Collaboratory.

Civic Saturday is a regular gathering that’s a civic analogue to church or mosque or synagogue. We’ve been holding these gatherings all across Seattle since November 2016, and now we are taking them to communities around the country. Two weeks ago, we were in New York City’s Public Theater, the place that incubated the great immigrant revolutionary musical *Hamilton*. Later this year we’ll be going to Des Moines, Atlanta, Dallas, Los Angeles, Nashville, Portland, Maine, and elsewhere.

And one week ago, we launched our brand-new Civic Seminary. We brought in a cohort of eleven leaders from Illinois, Florida, North Carolina, Texas, Oregon, Rhode Island, Arizona, DC, Missouri, and Indiana. We steeped them in the principles and practice of American civic religion and trained them to lead Civic Saturdays in their own communities, which range from a small town deep in the heart of Texas to the Back of the Yards neighborhood in Chicago’s South Side to a very Southern golf retirement community outside Raleigh to the hungry new America that is Arizona State’s campus.

In short, you are part of something greater than yourselves – and something that is spreading rapidly across the land. And it’s fitting that we gather today in a new-economy co-working space located in an old, proud South Seattle neighborhood that often gets overlooked. Hillman City, in its diversity, its traditions of mutual aid, its advancing gentrification, and its palpable tension between competing dreams of what life in Seattle can be – in all these ways, Hillman City is the whole of our city in microcosm.

This idea of competing dreams has been on my mind a lot lately. It’s also clearly on the mind of the current occupant of the presidency. So, in my sermon today, I want first to explore who really is a dreamer in America. Second, I want to show how at every stage of this country’s history and in every part of its territory now, two dreams have been competing for priority, for recognition, for the life force to bloom into reality. And finally, I want to make clear it’s time to choose again between these dreams.

WHO'S A DREAMER?

Let me start with the question, "Who's a dreamer?"

On Tuesday, the day of Donald Trump's first State of the Union address, I did two notable things. First, I deleted Twitter and Facebook from my phone. Second, I watched the MLB Network instead of CNN during the speech. This was healthy on several levels. For one thing, with less than two weeks before pitchers and catchers report to spring training, I got a pretty good overview of the most promising young players in the game today. (If you're a Mariners fan, keep watching CNN. It'll be less depressing).

More importantly, this choice of channels enabled me to regain something that some of you may remember, this thing people used to have and use all the time, called "perspective." With just one day's perspective, I managed to bypass all the microreactions that Trump triggered in real time and by Wednesday I could see that there was only one important line in his 80 minutes of Teleprompting.

The line was this: "Americans are dreamers too."

As a former White House speechwriter, I must say this was a very effective line. And it brings me no pleasure to say that.

What Trump was referring to are the young undocumented immigrants, blamelessly brought here as children, who remember only life in this country, who have been students and soldiers and contributors to this country, who under the DREAM Act would have been able to achieve a pathway to citizenship, and who have stepped out of the shadows, come out openly, and named themselves into existence as the Dreamers.

For all these many years of nativist, racist provocations on social media and elsewhere, Trump has rarely called these young people "Dreamers." He's called them "DACA," which of course is the administrative program President Obama created to exempt them temporarily from deportation. Trump intuited correctly that to call them Dreamers would be to legitimize their cause, to embed them in the iconography of the American Dream. It bugged him that the debate had been framed such that immigration restrictionists like him had to be against dreams and dreamers.

So on Tuesday he did in rhetoric what his followers want to do in real life: he grabbed back the American Dream. When Trump said those four words, "Americans are Dreamers too," he did three big things. He re-alienized the young undocumented Dreamers, defining them as something other than American. He showed his base how to dress up resentment and scapegoating in the appealing garb of aspiration and fair play. And he gave permission to anyone feeling sympathy for the undocumented to care a bit less about them because, well, "America for Americans" and "America First."

Within minutes, white nationalists were making memes on social media with his four potent words and in every meme the image is of a clean-cut, smiling white family. They heard him loud and clear. To be fair, though, it's not just white supremacists and bigots who are motivated by the moral impulse to punish perceived line-cutters. The New York Times had a piece recently about legal immigrants from all over the world, people of color, who are fiercely opposed to any deal that would reward undocumented people for coming here illegally.

Yet I am reminded of a conversation I recently had with an immigrant in Minnesota whose whole family – him, his wife, his children – were in the United States illegally. He was describing hard conversations with white friends and neighbors who were adamant about deporting “all the illegals.” When he reminded them that he was one of those “illegals,” they replied, “Well, of course we don't mean people like you.”

Did I mention he's from Iceland?

Let's get real. We are all dreamers. We all dream. Working class whites without college degrees dream of a time when being white and high school educated was enough to get a ticket to prosperity. Prosperous whites who tolerate Trump's degradation of our republic as the price to pay for a big tax cut – they also dream. Of their own innocence.

African Americans dream too, of a day (not necessarily in February) when all Americans understand that you can't know American history without embracing African American history. I, the son of immigrants who by coming here made citizenship my birthright, I also dream. I dream of a day when everyone lucky enough to be born a citizen thinks about what it would take to *earn* it.

And you know who else is a dreamer? A Dreamer. I think of a member of our Youth Power Project, a high school senior named Esmerelda who is undocumented and came to the United States as a child, who kept her undocumented status private until she could no longer stand the silence and secrecy and felt she had to speak out – not only for herself but for others in her position.

When Trump says, “Americans are dreamers too,” I reply that “Dreamers are Americans too.” Young undocumented immigrants are of course not citizens of the United States. But what are they if not Americans? Raised on American popular culture, schooled in American schools, serving American public institutions, buying and selling in the American economy, loving and being loved by their friends and neighbors and co-workers and classmates who are, in the most everyday sense, their fellow Americans.

These two statements – “Americans are dreamers too” and “Dreamers are Americans too” – capture the perpetual tension and interplay between two dreams that have shaped and warped this country from the start. That's what I'd like to turn to next.

INSIDER AND OUTSIDER DREAMS

When we talk about the American Dream, we ought to be more precise. There are in fact two variants of the dream: one for the insider and one for the outsider.

The insider is someone already in the circle, already a member of the society who holds some relative social standing and has a desire for more. He dreams of preserving and extending the status he currently holds. He prizes security. He is loss-sensitive and risk-averse. He sees things in a zero-sum way, and believes that an influx of newcomers threatens to dilute his relative power and standing.

The outsider stands on the other side of the circle. She dreams of entering it, of attaining the recognition and respect that comes with being included. She hungers for equal standing and because of that hunger and the promise of great gain she is willing to take risks and to challenge the status quo. She sees things in a positive-sum way, and believes that her arrival and her presence will make the whole stronger.

Now, you might think I'm stacking the deck. And it's true that one way to see the difference and the relationship between the insider and outsider dreams is to say that immigration restrictionists and white supremacists and male chauvinists and anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic scapegoaters dream the insider dream, while immigrants and people of color and women and religious minorities dream the outsider dream.

But that's too easy.

For one thing, think about those immigrants I mentioned earlier who came to the U.S. legally, often through arduous processes and dangerous circumstances. They see themselves as having earned insider status the hard way, the proper way. It would be foolish morally and politically to dismiss their point of view.

And let's bring it home. It's not just Trumpist right-wingers who dream the insider dream. It's liberal Seattleites too, people in Hillman City or Columbia City or the Central District or Ballard. People who have progressive beliefs but resent the flood of tech newcomers who are upsetting the equilibrium of relationships and customs and relative clout. It's also people of color who resent the gentrification of what had been their neighborhoods and who resist displacement and the loss of place and identity.

On the other side, meanwhile, the outsider dream is not per se praiseworthy or wise. Trump himself came to power selling an outsider dream against establishment insiders of both parties, and his assault on the norms of democracy and the rule of law has been marked by the sense of righteous grievance that powers every outsider movement. And left-wing outsiders sometimes issue utopian calls for an end to borders and nations altogether, forgetting that nation-states, for all their failings, are the only institutions with the moral agency and capacity to defend the weak and the outsider. And forgetting too that if you owe the same duty of care to *everyone* you will in the end be useful to *no one*. Nations do matter, and they have a right to decide who's in them.

The question is, on what basis? On the basis of whiteness or some other inherited characteristic? Or on the basis of proven fidelity to universal values and proven contribution? Here in the United States, at least for the time being, we get to decide.

Let's recognize that we are all at various times, and often at the *same* time, acting as insiders and outsiders. Trump, in fact, is proof that these two dreams are inseparable: from the start of his national political career, he has made white insiders feel like they had been made into outsiders by bad trade deals and bad immigration deals and so he was able to activate both their desire to protect the advantages and entitlements of being white American citizens and yet, while doing so, to feel like innocent victims.

We all have felt both these impulses: to achieve an American Dream of a house with a yard with a fence that other people can't climb over; and to achieve an American Dream of hustling your way from being a nobody to being a somebody. One focuses on accumulating and protecting your gains; the other, on having nothing to lose.

But the oldest American story is that of outsiders who do manage to hustle their way into becoming insiders and then *almost immediately* turn around to keep out the next wave of outsiders. Every generation of immigrants after the Mayflower has tried to pull this trick. And I'll go further. The very idea of being American has from the start been defined negatively, by who could be defined as not-American.

Twenty-seven years ago, a Harvard professor of government named Judith Shklar wrote a slim book called *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion*. Don't let the dry title deceive you. It is one of the most electrifying volumes I've ever read. And what it says is this: citizenship in America has never been about the Constitution first; it's been about social standing and the social recognition that citizenship confers upon a person – and about how the value of what is conferred arises from how it is denied.

What has haunted and driven this quest for standing and recognition is the presence of slavery and the descendants of the enslaved. The poor white Virginian farmer in the 1700s, the poor white New York factory worker in the 1800s, the unlettered immigrant cobbler from Italy in the 1900s: all of them lived in fear of falling to the social status of a slave. And so for them, earning the right to vote and earning the right to earn, as a free laborer, was not about fulfilling the ideals of virtuous Athenian republican citizenship. It was about earning a badge that a black person (and, for a long stretch, a Chinese person) could never earn: the badge of citizen, first-class.

Shklar puts it well: "It was the denial of suffrage to large groups of Americans," she wrote, "that made the right to vote such a mark of social standing. To be refused the right was to be almost a slave, but once one possessed the right, it conferred no other personal advantages. Not the exercise, only the right, conferred deeply."

Not the exercise, only the right. This is key, and it is the same psychological dynamic at play in the minds and hearts of those who oppose so-called "amnesty" and who don't want a DREAM Act and who would be happy to deport eleven million of our neighbors.

The people who want to kick out or keep down the undocumented aren't primarily interested in developing their own skills and capacities as citizens, in serving more or voting more or learning more; they are primarily interested in maintaining their relative status by devaluing others. In fact, if you told them that since they are special enough to be citizens of the United States, they ought to serve more or vote more or learn more or contribute more, they'd likely reply with a profanity-laced version of "Don't tread on me."

As I've said often, there are many in this country who lack the documents but live like citizens – and many who have the documents but don't. In that latter category are plenty of people who are not hard-core anti-immigrant but are what I call interested bystanders. These interested bystanders are in the 80 percent who say in polls that they support a pathway to citizenship for the Dreamers. But when that 80 percent drops to 53 percent in a hypothetical where the choice is either a DREAM Act or a government shutdown, they are among the large numbers whose support for Dreamers evaporates. They want to signal support for the outsider, until there's a trade-off. Then not so much.

I don't mean to make fun of these people of squishy principle. These interested bystanders may be the most politically important group of Americans today. If they stand by silently while nativist authoritarians take control of the machinery of state, we're done. If they stand up for decency and inclusive democracy, we still have a shot.

And so what we are called to do is to understand how the insider dream and the outsider dream are at war in their hearts – and in our own. For only by starting there can we do what I want to talk about in my final segment today, and that is to move our country toward a healthy combination of dreams and a new basis for civic status.

WHO IS US?

I've long believed that one of the core American questions is "Who is us?" We are a nation that on paper is defined by a set of creedal values available to all, but that in practice is defined by our origins in whiteness and the original sins of slavery and genocide. So who is us *today*? All American politics is a contest over that question and is about defining circles of us that have the potency to win elections and change culture.

If Judith Shklar is right that citizenship is a form of currency in the economy of status – and I believe she is – then the question is whether we can imagine – whether we can *dream up* – a different basis for social standing and identity.

There are two ways to do this, two habits of mind and heart that we all can practice as members of the community. The first is to look at what we deem to be good as if it were bad, and vice versa.

Last weekend, when we were with the first cohort of our Civic Seminary, we had them do a simple exercise. There were two maps of the United States side by side. On one,

we asked them to put Post-Its with their hopes and aspirations for America. On the other, their fears and concerns. As the Post-Its on both maps were being read aloud, one seminarian asked a simple question. What if we swapped headers?

That is, what if we moved the Hopes & Aspirations sign above the map with all the fears and concerns, and moved the Fears & Concerns sign above the map with all the hopes and aspirations? This was mind-blowing. Because it forced us to stretch our conception of the good and the bad and the us for whom anything would be good or bad.

Under Hopes & Aspirations had been posted ideas like:

- The “Common Good” becomes a common idea.
- Confronting our collective addiction to racism, sexism, and classism.
- Accountability for the impact of our choices and actions on others and the environment.

Seeing these ideas now as things to fear, as reasons for concern, made us step into the shoes of those who might see it that way. What was potentially oppressive about talk of the common good? How did people feel misunderstood, even attacked by very the premise that society is addicted to racism, sexism, and classism?

Conversely, under Fears & Concerns had been posted ideas like:

- Not being able to bring diverse voices to the table
- Historical amnesia
- Climate catastrophe

And here it wasn't just about trying to empathize with those who might actively welcome such things but also about seeing why, even believing these things to be threats, you too could reframe them as opportunities. A climate catastrophe, for example, might be the only thing that forces the widespread changes in policy and behavior that are needed to protect humanity.

What made the experiment of swapping our dreams and nightmares so useful was that it opened up possible ways to bring others into a sense of belonging and recognition. It opened up the possibility of asking the interested bystander who wants to be seen as inclusive but is also drawn to the politics of exclusion: What are you afraid will happen if we go down the path of inclusion? What do you mistrust about the outsider's dream? We can ask this at the level of our city and the level of our country.

From there it is possible to say to this other American dreamer: *We share a fear about not being respected. We share a fear of being taken advantage of. We share a fear about being isolated and picked off by those who have organized to exploit us.* And as we share fears so can we share hopes. The combination of your hope and mine diminishes neither. That was the message of Frederick Douglass's astonishing and little-appreciated speech in defense of Chinese immigration. “Right wrongs no man.”

And this brings me to the second way to change the basis for standing and identity in America, and that is to acknowledge the universal reflex to define oneself against others – but to channel that impulse in a more constructive direction. To put it simply, my message for people who want to scapegoat Mexican immigrants or Muslims for their troubles isn't "Stop scapegoating." It's "You've got the wrong scapegoat."

Massive corporations and monopolies that have punished local labor by globalizing capital, while rigging the compensation game for executives into a heads-I-win-tails-you-lose proposition – *that's* your scapegoat. Ten or eleven corporations and the members of Congress they own have done more damage to the American worker in the last few decades than 10 or 11 million undocumented immigrants, the great bulk of whom are doing the work that most white and black Americans think is beneath them.

I don't see the former machinists of the Rust Belt or the former coal miners of Appalachia rushing to the Central Valley of California to pick the crops that are rotting on the vine now, thanks to a post-Trump shortage of migrant workers. Nor do I see them organizing at scale in labor unions or other worker-power associations to push back against organized corporate money.

You want standing and recognition? You don't get it on the cheap with a fraud like Trump promising walls built of bullshit. You earn it. It's time for any American who feels disenfranchised to stop acting like you are entitled by birth to be an insider and to bring an outsider's hustle to claim your place and to overcome the game-riggers. The game-rigging elites who preach trickle-down economics but practice upward distribution of wealth – *that's* your scapegoat. That's the proper focus for your fury.

Once we get the scapegoat right, it is possible to build a bigger, more inclusive circle of *us*. This *us* is made of people who work for a living, as against those who move capital around and treat people as costs to be cut. This *us* is made of people who won't be divided and conquered by the old playbook of stoking white fear or zero-sum resentments among people of color. This *us* is also made of people who get out of the posture of learned helplessness and who choose to become literate in power – who understand how to move and change political and economic systems – and who take responsibility for building cross-racial coalitions of countervailing people power.

When Trump first started saying "Make America Great Again" people assumed he was looking back to the 1950s, before globalization, before the civil rights movement and feminism and gay rights, before the apex of the American empire. But it turns out we had the decade wrong. His most malevolent advisers and allies admire the 1920s. It was in the 1920s – after mass immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, after a cataclysmic World War that highlighted the dangers of global engagement, after a surge of socialist and anarchist and revolutionary activism in the United States – it was then that the Klan came back strong, that nativists took over the United States government, and that a nakedly racist system of immigration quotas and exclusion became the law.

But cultural protectionism, like economic protectionism, buys its beneficiaries only a temporary and artificial sense that they've become better off. Then it collapses on itself. Walls will always get bypassed – from above, from below, from all around. In the Twenties, everyone built a wall, from the domino sequence of national tariffs to the French folly of the Maginot Line, which Germany sidestepped by rolling through the Low Countries. By the Thirties and Forties, the entire world was on fire.

The 1820s teach us the same lesson. John C. Calhoun didn't live to see the fire but fire surely consumed his beloved slaveholding South. His views are repugnant and they are deeply American. Calhoun, whom the historian Richard Hofstadter dubbed "the Marx of the master class," perceived with Marxist acuity that the material and psychological stability of the South was dependent entirely on its peculiar solution to the problem of labor costs. But Calhoun had fooled himself into thinking this was actual stability and that it could last forever. It wasn't, and it couldn't. It was disturbed not by the interference of outsiders but by its own internal contradictions.

If we don't want the 2020s to look like the 1920s or 1820s, we'd better build a bigger story of us – one that combines the insider's dream of *security* and the outsider's dream of *opportunity* and both their desires for *dignity*. Where a populism of the left can counter a populism of the right and yield a populism of the decent, of the striving contributor, of those willing to earn their citizenship in every sense.

Let me close with another passage from Douglass's "Composite Nation" speech:

We shall spread the network of our science and civilization over all who seek their shelter whether from Asia, Africa, or the Isles of the sea. We shall mold them all, each after his kind, into Americans; Indian and Celt; negro and Saxon; Latin and Teuton; Mongolian and Caucasian; Jew and Gentile; all shall here bow to the same law, speak the same language, support the same Government, enjoy the same liberty, vibrate with the same national enthusiasm, and seek the same national ends.

Imagine an America where a fair shot has replaced a white face as the standard for participation, where contribution rather than consumption is the measure of civic status, and where the only individuals we treat as second-class are those who want to treat entire groups as second-class.

Or, in the alternative, imagine an America that is basically contemporary Russia or the old Confederacy: an oligarchy, with a thin crust of stolen wealth at the top and the deep rot of surrendered hopes and habituated obedience beneath.

Which nation do you dream of belonging to? Which kind of Dreamer do you want to be? Decide. Declare yourself. And with the people sitting around you now, and those you know who still stand on the sidelines, bring that country into being.

Readings to Precede the Sermon
February 3, 2018

Judith Shklar
From *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion*
Published 1991

There is nothing equal about social standing in general. Nothing is more unequally distributed than social respect and prestige. It is only citizenship perceived as a natural right that bears a promise of equal political standing in a democracy.

Frederick Douglass
From “The Composite Nation”
Speech Delivered in Boston, 1869

I have said that the Chinese will come, and have given some reasons why we may expect them in very large numbers in no very distant future. [Yo]u ask, if I favor such immigration. I answer I would. Would you have them naturalized, and have them invested with all the rights of American citizenship? I would. Would you allow them to vote? I would. Would you allow them to hold office? I would.

But are there not reasons against all this? Is there not such a law or principle as that of self-preservation? Does not every race owe something to itself? Should it not attend to the dictates of common sense? Should not a superior race protect itself from contact with inferior ones? Are not the white people the owners of this continent? Have they not the right to say, what kind of people shall be allowed to come here and settle? Is there not such a thing as being more generous than wise? In the effort to promote civilization may we not corrupt and destroy what we have? Is it best to take on board more passengers than the ship will carry?

To all of this and more I have one among many answers, together satisfactory to me, though I cannot promise that it will be so to you....

I want a home here not only for the Negro, the mulatto and the Latin races; but I want the Asiatic to find a home here in the United States, and feel at home here, both for his sake and for ours. Right wrongs no man. If respect is had to majorities, the fact that only one fifth of the population of the globe is white, the other four fifths are colored, ought to have some weight and influence in disposing of this and similar questions. It would be a sad reflection upon the laws of nature and upon the idea of justice, to say nothing of a common Creator, if four fifths of mankind were deprived of the rights of migration to make room for the one fifth....

John C. Calhoun
From "Slavery A Positive Good"
Speech Delivered February 6, 1837

I fearlessly assert that the existing relation between the two races in the South, against which these blind fanatics are waging war, forms the most solid and durable foundation on which to rear free and stable political institutions. It is useless to disguise the fact. There is and always has been in an advanced stage of wealth and civilization, a conflict between labor and capital. The condition of society in the South exempts us from the disorders and dangers resulting from this conflict; and explains why it is that the political condition of the slaveholding States has been so much more stable and quiet than that of the North.... The experience of the next generation will fully test how vastly more favorable our condition of society is to that of other sections for free and stable institutions, provided we are not disturbed by the interference of others.