



“Gratitude, Luck, Risk” – Sermon by Eric Liu
Civic Saturday – October 1, 2017
Washington Hall – Seattle, WA

I’m grateful so many of you have come today to our first Civic Sunday! As you know, our team created Civic Saturdays to provide a regular ritual with the arc of a faith gathering but a focus on the moral dimensions of our politics today. We didn’t meet yesterday because it was Yom Kippur. So to our friends here today who observed this day of atonement, I say “G'mar Hatima Tova.” May you be sealed in the Book of Life.

I think it’s rather fitting that we should be meeting on a Sunday, on the day and at the time when many others are watching the NFL. Because on any given Sunday, as they say in pro football, anything can happen. Especially when the president of the United States is on Twitter. What I hope happens today is that we’ll make a little sense out of all the nonsense, and a bit of hope out of the raw cynical hypocrisy of our times.

I’d like to reflect on three simple ideas this afternoon: gratitude, luck, and risk.

Let’s start with gratitude.

My friend C. Terry Warner is an 80-something retired professor of philosophy at Brigham Young University. Some of you have heard me talk about his classic book *Bonds That Make Us Free*. Its core insight is that at every scale of relationship, we fall into a cycle of collusion, in which I accuse *you* in order to excuse *me*. When in my heart I know I’ve done something wrong, I avoid blame by casting blame on you for something else. You then return the favor. Warner’s book explains so much about our politics today. It explains almost all of Twitter, especially Twitter commentary about, say, the flag. And its core prescription is that the only way to break this cycle is to break it: to set in motion a counter-cycle of responsibility-taking rather than responsibility-shirking.

Well, earlier this year I decided, after quoting Terry Warner seemingly every other day, that I should reach out to him. I emailed him, told him how much my work and life have been shaped by his book, and asked if we could have a call. We did. It was nice. Then I sent him my new book on citizen power, which he read and sent me a letter about. Then this summer Jená and I were in Utah to visit Arches and Canyonlands National Parks and so we arranged to meet Terry and his wife Susan at their home in Provo.

A devout Mormon couple married for several decades, with ten kids and fifty-plus grandkids, he a former teacher of Mitt Romney, sat with an irreligious Seattle couple married three years, each with a daughter from a prior marriage, I a former speechwriter for Bill Clinton. We got on famously. We ate cookies and ice cream that Susan had made. We talked about art, acting, phenomenology, political philosophy, German and French intellectual history, missions and legacies both secular and spiritual.

We were there for just 90 minutes. But that face-to-face visit opened something up for which I am profoundly grateful. It has made Terry and me much more frequent correspondents. It has also made us mutual mentors. What a gift it is to learn from an elder – and to be told that he is learning from you. That is priceless.

Our friendship has gotten me thinking about the nature of gifts, and the meaning of gratitude. Gifts, properly understood, are not transactions. They are an exchange, a perpetual exchange, if you're lucky. In this sense, *power* is a gift. Every form of power we have as citizens – our voice, our presence, our ideas, our wealth, our beliefs, our creativity, our vote – exists not so that it can sit idle and inert but so that it can be circulated. Exchanged. Given – not thrown away heedlessly. And returned – gratefully.

In a healthy community, the circulation and exchange of power generates gratitude all around. In a healthy society, people remember that we're all better off when we're all better off. We give to get and we get to give. But in a sick society, it's not that way. In fact, one clear symptom of sickness is a corruption of the language and spirit of gift exchange and gratitude.

Let's go back to the NFL and black athletes taking a knee during the anthem. One of the most striking things about the media firestorm that followed Trump's tweets last weekend was how many white so-called conservatives, on cable shows and talk radio, brought up the topic of gratitude. They did so in a peculiar way. What they said was, "These millionaire athletes – instead of grandstanding, they should be *grateful* they get to play a game for a living. They should be *grateful* to the country that lets them do that."

This idea – that black people shouldn't protest racial injustice or dissent in the public arena because they are just lucky to be here and for some of them to be millionaires – is, in a word, un-American. It's as un-American as a U.S. president getting elected with the help of Russian disinformation. More than that, it's a weaponization of gratitude. It's a case of the entitled and privileged expecting, not getting, then eventually *demanding* tribute from those for whom they think they've done a favor. Colin Kaepernick may indeed feel blessed to live in the United States and to do what he is doing to push the United States closer to its stated creed of justice for all. But he owes no expression of gratitude to anyone but those who have taken a knee with him.

When gratitude is expected, it is no longer a gift. It becomes a tax. This spirit of smug oblivious entitlement animates the Trump proposal to cut income and estate and corporate taxes for the very wealthy. It's odd that white heirs to vast fortunes aren't subjected to lectures on Fox News about how grateful they should be just to be here, and how perhaps they might express that gratitude by being willing to pay a higher rate. Instead, we get from the trickle-down crowd this line: *I'm a job creator. You're lucky just to be in my presence: don't make demands of me. Don't ask me what I will do for others. Just thank me. Send me your tribute, your tax breaks, your bundled dollars.*

Well, I have no such gratitude to offer. Maybe the GOP will win this round, will apply their tools and sources of power effectively enough to enact unnecessary tax cuts for the rich. But they will not be able to compel me to be thankful for it. I will feel lucky, though – lucky that I'm in a society where I can mobilize countervailing power – people power – to remedy the damage wrought by selfish, self-dealing plutocrats.

So now let's consider this topic of luck.

The white-privileged and the trickle-downers have a strange blindness when it comes to luck. Then again, we all do. Our profoundly unequal society, with meritocratic gold-star-collectors like so many of us here today, conditions us to believe that what we have is what we earned. That individual hard work and virtue, or the lack thereof, explains our place in the world.

That's a bunch of crap.

Let me take inventory of my luck: I had the dumb luck to be born here in the latter third of the twentieth century, and to grow up in a time of peace and prosperity. I had the dumb luck of parents who, while immigrants, had social capital and education. I had the dumb luck that when my father became unlucky, and was diagnosed in 1977 with end-stage kidney disease, he lived in the land of Medicare and therefore could get equipment and training for home dialysis. He lived another 14 years and we were not bankrupted by those years. I had the dumb luck of being in an IBM family in an IBM company town when IBM was at its very peak: summer jobs for children of employees, college scholarships as well, health and dental insurance, pensions.

Yes, I worked hard. I worked hard enough to get into a college that then compounded my good fortune by opening the entire world to me, a world of unending dumb luck and connections. But countless others worked just as hard who didn't have the deck stacked in their favor this way. Some are teenagers in Tukwila today. Or single moms in Ohio. Or old men in Yemen. Talented but not connected. Talented but unlucky. I'm talented but stupidly lucky. I'd be an idiot if I didn't admit that – or if I were to resent you for pointing it out. And by that measure (among others), we are governed today by idiots.

During the so-called debate last week over the so-called plan to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, one Trump aide said to the media that he was offended that healthy people should have to subsidize sick people they didn't know. In other words, he was offended by the very moral and operational principle of insurance itself. The great thing was that this set off a cascade of commentary on social media in which everyday Americans began their tweets, "I was a healthy person subsidizing sick people until..." Until I broke my leg. Until my husband got diagnosed with cancer. Until my son was in a car accident. Until, in short, bad luck struck.

My dad loved the old 1930s comedian W.C. Fields. He loved to quote a piece of dialogue from a W.C. Fields movie called *My Little Chickadee*. "Is this a game of chance?" asks a newcomer. "Not the way I play it," answers the con man. We laugh at that, but that's the way it feels to most people today. Luck seems in short supply to the many. Education and health insurance are more costly and contingent. The line between holding on and falling apart is thin and ever-shifting. There are no IBMs anymore, not in the sense of a social contract and safety net. You don't get a fair chance anymore. The game of social and economic opportunity, from tax breaks to college admissions, is rigged to favor those who already have opportunity.

So when I take inventory of my luck, am I agreeing with those righteous dog-whistling Fox News commentators who tell us Kaepernick and LeBron James should shut up and count their blessings? No. The reason I detest those dog-whistlers is that they do not see their own luck. They do not count their own blessings – their own unearned parcels of power, as subpar white men hired by a TV network to make subpar white men feel great again. They only want, in scolding the NFL players who take a knee, to pretend to be the source of *other* people's luck. They know nothing of true gratitude.

Robert Frank, in his book *Success and Luck*, describes a variety of social psychology studies that show that the more self-aware you are about how chance and randomness have shaped your successes and opportunities, the more likely you are to find lasting happiness and purpose. And the more likely you are to support and promote the common good, even at some personal cost.

Which brings me to the final topic for today, which is risk.

We heard a piece of Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience* among the readings. He wrote this speech in 1848 after having spent a night in jail in Concord, Massachusetts for refusing to pay a poll tax. He had refused to pay because he believed that to pay was to support a national government that tolerated and sustained slavery, and that had just gone to war in Mexico to build an empire. He could not abide complicity in such sins. The Civil War was still 13 years away but the impending crisis of disunion was visible to anyone who cared to look. Thoreau looked, unflinchingly. He was fussy, self-righteous, cranky,

inconvenient. But he was definitely woke. I want to share a passage in his talk about the push for abolitionism and reform in the late 1840s:

“Practically speaking, the opponents to a reform in Massachusetts are not a hundred thousand politicians at the South, but a hundred thousand merchants and farmers here, who are more interested in commerce and agriculture than they are in humanity, and are not prepared to do justice to the slave and to Mexico, *cost what it may.*”

“Cost what it may.” Those are four big words. Let them sink in. Ask yourself: What are you willing to spend for justice? What are you willing to risk?

Perhaps it is true that the United States today does not face as foundational a moral evil as slavery. But we do face a living legacy of white supremacy. I’m talking about the white supremacists who *don’t* carry torches. Those who perpetuate the positioning of whiteness as the social default: in medicine, in law, in education, in art, in philanthropy, in health care, in media.

You may, if you are white, agree that the unearned and compounding advantages of being called white should eventually be wound down and dismantled. But imagine that “eventually” is now. What are you willing to give up? A promotion? An internship for your kid? A low marginal tax rate? The dividends from the family wealth that began to accumulate with your grandfather’s GI Bill? A personal comfort level on your street?

But maybe “what are you willing to give up” is the wrong question. Or only half the question. The other half is this: What can you imagine gaining? How can you imagine advancing by yielding? Because a system of white supremacy that must unrelentingly dehumanize nonwhites also unrelentingly dehumanizes *whites*. You have nothing but this emptiness to lose. You have your entire humanity to gain. The ending of whiteness as the default setting in America is not zero-sum. It is a positive-sum proposition.

“Cast your whole vote,” Thoreau wrote, “not a strip of paper merely but your whole influence.” Let me ask you: what is your whole influence? It is your art, your friendships, your privilege, your comfort, your assumptions, your reputation, your connections. Cast *that* vote for economic and social justice. Cost what it may.

Real justice is not cheap. We can argue about the pros and cons of Kaepernick’s choice to kneel. But we cannot argue the fact that he has paid a price for his choice. He has been willing to risk his reputation, his wealth, his prospects for employment.

True gratitude costs something. Saying “Thank you for your service” to one of the million people who’ve done 16 years of warfighting for us is gratitude on the cheap. So is letting them board the plane first or applauding them during the seventh inning stretch. True gratitude means calling for a draft, or demanding higher taxes to pay for

the “war on terror,” or pushing as GOP Senator Rand Paul did two weeks ago in a lonely gesture on the Senate floor, for an end to the open-ended authorization of military force enacted after 9/11. For an actual debate about what we’re willing to spend in blood, treasure, and legitimacy for an endless war against an uneradicable tactic.

If you’ve been watching the engrossing, heartbreaking Ken Burns and Lynn Novick documentary *The Vietnam War* on PBS, you realize how the absence of such a reckoning can be corrosive to a country. In that era, both the young people who answered the call to fight and those who organized protests against the war were willing to take great risks to uphold their ideas of true patriotism.

So what are we willing to risk?

The reason I believe in progressive taxation is not because I love taxes but because I believe in a higher principle of progressive *contribution*. Of time and talent. The more you have, the greater a share you should share. But unlike the taxman, I don’t compel you. I *invite* you. And I want to let you in on a little secret: To pay your share is not a burden. It is a liberation. This is one of the many things I’ve learned from Terry Warner.

I was not raised in a church or in any faith tradition. And Terry and I have never spoken of his faith and his eldership in the Mormon Church. Except for this: when we were having ice cream and cookies, he and Susan described at length the missions they *still* go on, all over the world, serving and building and circulating their power and their know-how and relationships to benefit others. Not as charity but as responsibility. Not as a duty but as a *right*. As a form of *freedom*, properly understood. And he has pressed me since then to examine my own work in the world more closely. More intensely. He has done this so that he might press himself to do the same.

Let’s make three commitments then, together, so that we can all navigate the game of chance we call life. To exchange gratitude like a gift. To circulate good luck rather than hoard it. To take a risk with your own capital so that it may help another prosper.

These are the acts of grown men and women. These are the choices *citizens* make. These are the bonds that make us free.

Readings to Precede the Sermon

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

From “The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life”

Sermon at Friendship Baptist Church, Pasadena, California. February 28, 1960

“And so there are three dimensions of any complete life to which we can fitly give the words of our text: length, breadth, and height. Now, the *length* of life, as we shall use it here, is not its duration, not how long it lasts, not how long you live, but it is the push of a life forward to achieve its inner powers and ambitions. It is the inward concern for one’s own welfare. The *breadth* of life is the outreach, the outward concern for the welfare of others. And the *height* of life is the upward reach for God. If life is to be complete, these three must be together. In other words, life at its best is something of a triangle. At one angle stands the individual person, at the other stands the other persons, and the tip top stands the supreme infinite person – God. If your life is to be complete, all three must work harmoniously together and be properly cultivated, for the complete life is the three-dimensional life....

“‘Is your faith in organized religion?’ Not totally. Yes, my faith is in the church, within the church, that spiritual church, but sometimes I get worried about our particular churches. We are busy warring amongst ourselves, caught up in narrow sectarianism, giving out sanction to the status quo. Slavery couldn’t have survived in America if the church hadn’t sanctioned it. Segregation would be dead as a doornail in the South today if the Southern white church took a stand against it. So today I say to you that my ultimate faith is not in organized religion, but I have a faith. ‘What is that faith?’ I say to you this morning that my faith is in the eternal *God*, whose purpose changes not.”

Henry David Thoreau

From his lecture “Civil Disobedience”

First delivered in Concord, Massachusetts, 1848

“I meet this American government, or its representatives, the state government, directly, and face to face, once a year – no more – in the person of its tax-gatherer; this is the only mode in which a man situated as I am necessarily meets it; and it then says distinctly, *Recognize me*. And the simplest, most effectual, and, in the present posture of affairs, the mode of treating with it on this head, of expressing your little satisfaction with and love for it, is to deny it then....

“I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men who I could name – if ten *honest* men only – ay, if *one* man, in this State of Massachusetts, *ceasing to hold*

slaves, were actually to withdraw from this copartnership, and be locked up in the county jail therefor, it would be the abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done forever.”

Annie Dillard

From “A Writer In the World,” included in her essay collection, *The Abundance* Published in 2016

“One of the few things I know about writing is this: Spend it all, shoot it, play it, lose it, all, right away, every time. Don’t hoard what seems good for a later place in the book, or for another book; give it, give it all, give it now. The very impulse to save something good for a better place later is the signal to spend it now. Something more will arise for later, something better. These things fill from behind, from beneath, like well water. Similarly, the impulse to keep to yourself what you have learned is not only shameful; it is destructive. Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes.

“After Michaelangelo died, someone found in his studio a piece of paper on which he had written a note to his apprentice, in the handwriting of his old age: “Draw, Antonio, draw, Antonio, draw and do not waste time.”