



**“If We Can Keep It” – Sermon by Eric Liu
Civic Saturday – December 17, 2016
Madrona Commons, Seattle**

How many of you have ever been to a United States naturalization ceremony?

If you’ve never been, I urge you to find one in town and go. There are few experiences more moving, especially the “roll call of nations,” in which the applicants, who’ve already taken and passed their citizenship exam, are asked to stand up as their native country is called. *Azerbaijan, China, France, Kenya, Mexico, New Zealand*. When the roll call is complete the immigrants are told, “The next time you sit down, you will be Americans.” They then raise their right hands, swear an oath, and become United States citizens.

It gives me goosebumps just telling you about it.

A few years ago, after we’d been to a naturalization ceremony, my wife Jená had an idea. What if we created a ceremony like that – with ritual and emotion and an oath – not just for immigrants who were becoming citizens but for citizens of long standing as well? A ceremony where everyone, whether they were brand-new Americans or people who’d had the dumb luck to be born here, could renew their vows?

We were in a meeting and Jená got up to the whiteboard and sketched an image of a revival tent and described this not as a swearing-in but as a chance to be “sworn-again.” And so was born a little project of Citizen University called “Sworn-Again America.”

We created a simple template for a ceremony – readings, remarks, and an oath – then primed it with a few great partner organizations, and put it out into the world. There have been countless Sworn-Again America ceremonies ever since, at public libraries and college campuses and military bases. At the National Constitution Center and Monticello and the White House. At Starbucks headquarters here in Seattle and at house parties across the country. With a few people or a few thousand, all of them reflecting – some for the first time – on the content of their citizenship.

As folks create their own ceremonies, adapting them to local circumstances, the one constant is the “Sworn-Again” oath we created. Let me share it with you:

*I pledge to be an active American.
To show up for others,*

*To govern myself,
To help govern my community.
I recommit myself to my country's creed:
To cherish liberty as a responsibility.
I pledge to serve and to push my country:
When right, to be kept right; when wrong, to be set right.
Wherever my ancestors and I were born,
I claim America
And I pledge to live like a citizen.*

You'll notice a few things about this oath. It's non-partisan, of course. But it is *not* morally neutral. It contains a judgment about what it is to be a useful contributor to the body. And it's written in a way that applies regardless of your documentation status: for there are plenty of people in this country who lack the papers but live like great citizens, and plenty of people who have the papers but don't.

Today I want to talk about three commitments from this Sworn-Again American oath. First: *To cherish liberty as a responsibility*. Second: *To govern myself*. And third: *To help govern my community*. In unpacking these three phrases, I am truly asking what civic responsibility really means when the body politic is as unhealthy and corrupted as it is today. Let's start with the first phrase:

LIBERTY AS A RESPONSIBILITY

This sounds nice. But I wonder how many people in this country truly practice it.

To many Americans, liberty means, roughly, *It's a free country, man. Don't tell me what to do*. Or, to use more historically resonant language: *Don't Tread On Me*. This notion of negative liberty is deep in our nation's DNA. And that makes sense, given that the big bang of our nation was founded to throw off monarchical tyranny. The idea that liberty is the removal of encumbrance has a long and distinguished history. Those of you, my fellow civic nerds, who celebrated Bill of Rights Day on Thursday can appreciate this.

But a funny thing happened on the way to Trump Tower. We Americans forgot that real liberty requires more than just the removal of encumbrance. We forgot that a society cannot stand on rights alone. We forgot that only toddlers and sociopaths believe in rights without responsibilities. And we forgot that the colonists in the 1770s who made flags that said "Don't Tread On Me" didn't need to make other flags that said liberty is a responsibility because it was profoundly obvious to them. It was second nature. It was the very definition of adulthood back then.

Rights don't just come with duties. Rights *are* duties. Freedoms *are* responsibilities. Liberties *are* obligations. You figure that out pretty quickly when you have to sustain

your own little outpost in the woods with little outside help. Historians like Garry Wills and Bernard Bailyn have written about the deep culture of self-government that existed in the colonies before 1776 and that formed what Bailyn calls “the ideological origins of the American Revolution.” Over a century and a half, subjects of the British Crown evolved gradually and subtly into citizens of a new nation. They made assemblies. They made town meetings. They made common law. They also made, thanks to people like Benjamin Franklin, fire departments and libraries and public health organizations. That evolution was a byproduct of the unforgiving environment: of having to figure out how not to die, and realizing that mutual aid and strong reciprocity and a code of responsibility as necessary are to liberty as oxygen is to flame.

It’s the same lesson the Americans of 1787 had to re-learn when they faced the collapse of the Articles of Confederation and decided they had to ratify a Constitution to form a more perfect Union. Without that Constitution, each state was like a toddler, asserting rights and evading responsibilities and paying no heed to a continental tragedy of the commons. The states had to grow up if they wanted liberty to mean anything in the United States. The alternative, they knew from a decade of experience, was not utopia but bedlam.

The story goes that when Ben Franklin walked out of Independence Hall in Philadelphia after the Constitutional Convention was over, a woman passing on the street asked him what the convention had created. He replied: “A republic, if you can keep it.” In other words: “We didn’t create anything. It’s on *you*.”

And so here we are today. Hardly anyone talks like this now. The closest you get, in our militarized post-9/11 age, is the slogan “Freedom isn’t free.” I remember one recent summer during Seafair, when my family went down to Lake Washington to watch the Blue Angels – and I do appreciate the Blue Angels – and as those fearsome FA-18s buzzed past, a beer-drinking man with skulls and tanks on his T-shirt screamed out to no one in particular, “YEAH BABY!! FREEDOM AIN’T FREE!! WOO-HOOOO!”

But *this* articulation of the idea has more in common with the late Roman empire than it does with the early Roman republic – or the American republic that we were supposed to keep. *This* articulation of the idea is simply a reminder that our professional warriors – the 1 percent of our population to whom a morally avoidant nation has subcontracted a decade and a half of war, when we all should have been drafted and all should have served – that these warriors now have semi-sacred status as guardians of our liberties.

The natural conclusion of *this* articulation of the idea – freedom ain’t free, so show respect to your military – is a presidential cabinet overstocked with generals.

No, I’m talking about the *Founders’* articulation of the idea. *Liberty as responsibility*. And I’m talking about their knowledge, as Bernard Bailyn wrote, that “free states are fragile and degenerate easily into tyrannies unless vigilantly protected by a free,

knowledgeable, and uncorrupted electorate working through institutions that balance and distribute rather than concentrate power.”

A free, knowledgeable, and uncorrupted electorate. Well, we have catastrophically failed in our responsibility to be *that*. The American electorate today is half-absent and the other half is half-ignorant.

Each passing day confirms that Donald Trump is a menace to our form of self-government. But in a sense, he is also a blessing. For in this odious, cynical, incurious, pathological person is now *personified* all the sicknesses in our political culture: rampant materialism and celebrity-worship, profound ignorance of history and the world, disregard for fact or fairness, addiction to instant gratification. He is not the cause of our democratic sickness. He is the result of it. (Although he may yet cause a collapse).

And what Donald Trump does for *all* of us is force us to ask whether we, too, are the personification of all the sicknesses in our political culture. How should we, civic physicians, heal *ourselves*? Which brings me to the second commitment of our oath:

TO GOVERN MYSELF

What does this mean?

Well, it means first to remember that society becomes how *you* behave. Every social change, welcome or unwelcome, begins with the individual. Your choice to be compassionate or not, civil or not, courageous or not, becomes rapidly, immediately, imperceptibly contagious. To realize that society becomes how you behave is to leave behind the myth of what economists call “externalities” – the idea that you don’t have to bear the costs of your bad or selfish behavior. But to realize that society becomes how you behave is also to leave behind the myth that you are just one in a billion, one helpless inconsequential individual. You are at *all* times a node of contagion.

That is especially true in *these* times – times when prosocial moral norms are teetering and when the people threatening those norms most vividly have titles like “president-elect” and “senior counselor to the president-elect.” Those men have chosen to govern themselves a certain way, which is to indulge the darker demons of their nature, and they’ve given permission to many millions to act just as deplorably.

You – we – must generate the counter-contagion. We must create a countervailing kind of permission. Permission to speak truth to power. Permission to disrupt the disrupter-in-chief and to answer his cynicism and self-dealing with integrity and moral clarity. Permission to show some guts and to spend some capital and clout, if you have any, on behalf of those who have less.

For instance: How on earth did all those tech sector titans like Jeff Bezos and Sheryl Sandberg and Brad Smith go to the meeting that Trump called this week without one of them saying one word to decry the odious things Trump has said and done against women, immigrants, labor leaders, and everyday citizens? Those tech titans, each with their vast hoards of capital of every kind, were profiles in cowardice this week.

Imagine if all of them – if one of them – had held a press conference after that meeting and said, with all civility, that while their meeting was pleasant and interesting, they'd told the president-elect and they were telling the public now that they would never be party to the construction of an online registry to round up Muslim Americans and that the president-elect's rhetoric this fall against immigrants was especially harmful to a sector of American innovation that depends on making immigrants feel valued.

We should not wait on our leaders. We should lead them. *We* have to be the ones who signal that we will disable any such registry by flooding it with all our names. *We* have to be the ones who make that choice in our heart, and then vocalize it. To carry ourselves in a way that is conscious of the power of example and the example of power.

To govern oneself means figuring out exactly what you believe and why. Doing this is hard. It will illuminate how challenging it is to apply your beliefs evenhandedly. It'll also reveal what principles you won't ever sacrifice for personal gain.

Let me confess, on the point about applying beliefs evenhandedly, that these last few years I was not that troubled by President Obama's use of executive orders and administrative rulemaking powers to bypass an obstructionist Congress and Article I of the Constitution. Why? Because his *ends* were appealing to me: ends like protecting our undocumented friends from deportation, like protecting the environment from coal-fired despoliation. But now that it's going to be President Trump using those same powers, I have a belated respect for checks and balances and for Article I and for the reasons why Congress and not the President was the focus of Article I.

If I'm to govern myself honestly, I must admit my hypocrisy about ends and means. And I've got to try to hold myself and my side to account with integrity. Because otherwise I remain too vulnerable to the temptation to sacrifice principle when the ends demand it.

I was reading recently about Elliott Richardson, an old upright Establishment figure who was United States Attorney General when Richard Nixon ordered him on October 20, 1973 to fire Archibald Cox, the special prosecutor investigating the Watergate scandal. In what became known as the "Saturday Night Massacre," Richardson refused the order and he resigned. His deputy, Seattle's own Bill Ruckelshaus, also refused and resigned. Finally, Solicitor General Robert Bork, third in command but least in command of himself morally, carried out the president's order and fired Cox. And Watergate approached its disgraceful endgame.

There are likely going to be moments like this in the coming Administration. But not just for Trump's equivalents of Richardson and Ruckelshaus and Bork. For you. And me. You want to be ready when that moment comes. It may not be in the White House and it may not be national news. It may be on your block, when someone emboldened by the times mistreats a neighbor. It might be at your kid's school. It might be at work, when good old boys feel like it's OK again to be politically incorrect and tell their female colleague how much they like the way she walks. To govern yourself is to know yourself morally. To know what will come out under the crucible of a crisis or in a random revealing moment. To know that you'll know right from wrong when the pressure's on.

To govern oneself also means regulating your behavior and your reactions to things. You can't control what Donald Trump does. But you can control how you react to what Donald Trump does. For starters, let's stop jumping at everything that little man tweets, or at everything that someone posts about what that little man tweets. In fact, let's take a social media Sabbath. Let's *decelerate*. Trump thrives on relentless acceleration, on creating a whirlwind of controversy that obliterates memory and disorients us from fact and truth and gets the body politic so stressed out and hopped-up that it's in a state of constant agitation that's like an autoimmune disorder. To govern oneself means saying no to all that. Taking control of your own metabolism and mind.

To govern oneself also means to experiment relentlessly in search of a better way to be of use to others. Mohandas Gandhi titled his autobiography *Experiments with Truth*. I love that title. I love the idea that to live like a citizen is to be running experiments all the time, personal experiments that may be invisible to all, in pursuit of a truer and better way to live out your ideals and to enact justice.

When Gandhi was a young lawyer still in his native South Africa, he wrote a letter to the great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy seeking advice on how to liberate India. Tolstoy's answer cut right to the chase. Describing how the British East India Company had come to take over India, Tolstoy wrote: "A commercial company enslaved a nation comprising two hundred millions. Tell this to a man free from superstition and he will fail to grasp what these words mean. What does it mean that thirty thousand people, not athletes, but rather weak and ordinary people, have enslaved two hundred millions of vigorous, clever, capable, freedom-loving people? Do not the figures make it clear that ... the Indians have enslaved themselves?"

And after that wake-up call, Gandhi began tinkering with his own imagination, his own way of living, his own notions of convention and normality and what he would accept as conventional and normal. He began to see, as he later wrote, that "The moment the slave resolves that he will no longer be a slave, the fetters fall. He frees himself and he shows the way to others. Freedom and slavery are mental states." The rest, as we know, is history. But you don't go from zero to Gandhi after one sermon. (Even if it is crazy-inspiring to learn that Tolstoy lit the flame for Gandhi). And you don't leap from being a couch potato and Twitter addict to strong citizenship in one move.

So, finally, to govern oneself means to get in shape civically. That means setting goals and finding places to work out: *I will, in the next year, be able to give a five-minute extemporaneous speech on a civic topic.* Or: *I will organize (and meet) my neighbors to do something together for the good of the neighborhood.* Or: *I will, starting now, read national and local news every day, as well as trusted opinions from left and right.* Or: *I will, by midyear, learn what the core arguments are in American civic life.*

When you're civically fit, you can organize people through word and deed. You can recognize the patterns and the echoes from history when modern politicians argue, the way we now sense Hamilton and Jefferson reverberating in contemporary politics thanks to Lin-Manuel Miranda.

Of course, 'tis the season to be thinking about how out of shape we are *physically* and to make resolutions to remedy that. Well, it's the same civically. We commit. We pace ourselves. We make a routine. And the routine will go better and last longer if we show up with others and make progress together.

This gathering, at an hour when there is *so much else to do*, is proof of that. We are a community, and part of a larger one. So the final commitment we must make is this:

TO HELP GOVERN MY COMMUNITY

There's so much going around social media these days in the "What Should I Do?" category. The latest thing I saw is a document written by an anonymous group of congressional staffers – an insider's guide for everyday citizens about how to lobby and apply pressure on members of Congress to resist Trump's agenda.

I think this is exactly the right idea – and the exactly wrong arena. It's the right idea because every one of us now must become far more fluent in how power operates in civic life. Every one of us now must be able to understand in civic life who decides, who drives decision, and what gets left off the agenda for decision and why. Every one of us needs to learn how to read and rearrange the array of sources and conduits of power that comprise what we call the power structure.

To govern your community means to become literate in power – and to know how to read *and* write power. Too many of us know too little about how to make stuff happen.

But the congressional insiders' guide focuses on the wrong arena, I think, because the place for you, the citizen, to exercise your power and to achieve civic fitness most effectively today is *here*. Your community. That's partly because a gerrymandered and challenger-proof Congress is deaf to people outside each member's base electorate.

But it's also because it is at the level of the city and the small town that we can learn anew how to run things like we are responsible for them.

Because we are.

Let me tell you, as someone who worked in the United States Senate and then the Clinton White House twice and who now serves on a federal board as an Obama appointee, that my true and best education in democratic self-government came during my ten years as a trustee of the Seattle Public Library, from 2002 to 2012.

In Washington the game was mainly talking points and positioning and the appearance of doing something. When you are one of five trustees overseeing an institution that's beloved by the city, there's no hiding behind talking points. You either build and program these neighborhood libraries in accordance with the hopes and dreams of the neighbors – or you fail to. You either learn who can make stuff happen in Lake City or Ballard or the International District – or you proceed at your own peril.

So take that insider's guide to Congress and apply it to City Hall or the School Board. Organize other people, your neighbors and friends and fellow Seattleites, for simple teach-ins about how those institutions work and how they could work better. And then, crowdsource a supplement to that insider's guide that's not about the formal institutions like City Council and the state legislature and people with public titles and salaries but is about the informal web of *who really runs this town*.

To govern your community is to know the answer to that question. Mayor Ed Murray is surely part of the answer. But so is Paul Allen, who holds no office but owns South Lake Union and the Seattle Seahawks and is defining the shape of this city's landscape and demographic profile. And so is Estela Ortega, who also holds no office but who runs El Centro de la Raza and is a power broker for immigrants and communities of color and the Beacon Hill neighborhood. And so on and so on. You can do a roll call of power brokers that is longer than the list of elected officials; it may leave many of them off.

To govern your community is not only to understand who *really* runs this town but then to insert yourself into the answer. To participate. To volunteer. To serve. To take leadership roles in established committees. Or to establish your own. The three greatest words in American civic life, words that Ben Franklin lived by, are *start a club*. On anything useful. To govern your community is to start a club or join one so that in the company of others you can practice power. And practice some more. And some more.

Now how, you might ask, will this stop Congress from repealing Obamacare or enacting Trump's tax cuts for the rich or doing worse? It may not, immediately. But starting and joining clubs, and signing up to make change happen where you live, rebuilds citizen muscle and it redistributes citizen power. Address homelessness. Fix mental health systems. Feed schoolchildren real food. Fund our schools right. And all that muscle and

power can then be deployed in any arena, whether national or local. Sending emails to Senator X or Congressperson Y or sharing outraged posts on Facebook does not build power the same way or at the same rate.

It's not an either-or, of course, and many of us are simultaneously practicing power locally and applying what we have nationally too. As a people, we must all be in that spirit of tinkering and experimenting with truth and hammering out new practical ways to make change happen. Let an ecosystem flower from our diverse efforts. But wherever we choose to focus our energies, the thing to remember is what James Madison said in 1792. "In Europe," he observed, "charters of liberty have been granted by power. America has set the example ... of charters of power granted by liberty."

If we in our liberty grant power to others to rule for a time, then we must also renew the covenant behind the grant – a covenant that says that they rule not *over* us but *with* us. *By* us. *For* us. The idea of a covenant has Puritan overtones, and covenant theology is what propelled the Pilgrims to Plymouth. But the American covenant belongs to us all. It's not just a Mayflower thing. And it is not a commitment to consensus; it is a promise to argue perpetually over the meaning of our creed. It is a hammering out of disputes and of often irreconcilable visions of the good life. It is a reckoning with dangers. It is a binding of fates that can be unpleasant and hard.

We agree to form and to reform this Union, to try to keep this republic, challenging and contradictory as it is, because we imagine that we are better off with it than without.

A nation, Benedict Anderson wrote, is an "imagined community." That is particularly true of a nation like ours that has no mythic common bond of blood or soil. We are a nation bound together by the flimsiest thing in the world: a creed. But that creed, that cloud of intangible words like *liberty* and *equality* and *justice*, can also, when spoken together, bind our best selves together.

I commit to using all my powers to resist authoritarianism in this country.

I commit to teaching everything I know about civic power to as many people as I can.

I commit to helping remedy economic and political inequality in Seattle.

I commit to defending disfavored people whom Donald Trump tries to bully.

I commit to building the kind of beloved community I want to be part of.

In a moment, I will invite you to reflect on what *you* are willing to commit to – and then to share those thoughts with each other over coffee and cookies. But I want to close this morning with the words I began with, the Sworn-Again American oath. These are words for friends. For neighbors. For citizens. I want to tell you during this holiday season, as

we end a dark and challenging year, how grateful I am for the friends and neighbors and fellow citizens who give me and my family hope and strength. How grateful I am for *you*.

And so I ask you all to rise now, and join me in this covenant:

*I pledge to be an active American.
To show up for others.
To govern myself,
To help govern my community.
I recommit myself to my country's creed:
To cherish liberty as a responsibility.
I pledge to serve and to push my country:
When right, to be kept right; when wrong, to be set right.
Wherever my ancestors and I were born,
I claim America
And I pledge to live like a citizen.*



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Readings and songs that preceded the Sermon continue on page 11.

Readings to Precede Sermon

JANE JACOBS

From a reply to a McCarthyite committee investigating her beliefs, 1952

I was brought up to believe there is no virtue in conforming meekly to the dominant opinion of the moment. I was encouraged to believe that simple conformity results in stagnation for a society, and that American progress has been largely owing to the opportunity for experimentation, the leeway given initiative, and to a gusto and a freedom for chewing over odd ideas. I was taught that the American's right to be a free individual, not at the mercy of the state, was hard-won and that its price was eternal vigilance, that I too would have to be vigilant.

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

From "The Struggle for Human Rights," a speech delivered September 28, 1948

We must not be deluded by the efforts of the forces of reaction to prostitute the great words of our free tradition and thereby to confuse the struggle. Democracy, freedom, human rights have come to have a definite meaning to the people of the world which we must not allow any nation to so change that they are made synonymous with suppression and dictatorship.

ROSA PARKS

From the book Rosa Parks: My Story, published in 1992

I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was 42. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.

America the Beautiful

Words by Katharine Lee Bates,

Melody by Samuel Ward

O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!
America! America!
God shed his grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!

If I Had a Hammer

Lee Hays & Pete Seeger

If I had a hammer
I'd hammer in the morning
I'd hammer in the evening
All over this land
I'd hammer out danger
I'd hammer out a warning
I'd hammer out love between
My brothers and my sisters
All over this land, uh

If I had a bell
I'd ring it in the morning
I'd ring it in the evening
All over this land
I'd ring out danger
I'd ring out a warning
I'd ring out love between
My brothers and my sisters
All over this land, oh

If I had a song
I'd sing it in the morning
I'd sing it in the evening
All over this land
I'd sing out danger
I'd sing out a warning
I'd sing out love between
My brothers and my sisters
All over this land, oh

Well, I've got a hammer
And I've got a bell
And I've got a song to sing
All over this land
It's the hammer of justice
It's the bell of freedom
It's a song about love between
My brothers and my sisters
All over this land