



**“Present at the Creation” – Sermon by Eric Liu
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Madrona Commons, Seattle**

We find ourselves this morning still digesting.

Yes, we’re still working on leftover Thanksgiving turkey and stuffing and pie, and various stupefying combinations thereof. But of course we are also digesting our new political reality, which, though not three weeks old, is also stupefying and already exhausting.

There’s an unreality to this new reality, just as there is to reality television. And actually, reality TV is one of the main models for what the coming years in America might look like: a self-enclosed and self-referential dome of manufactured drama and competition. Another template, of course, is the Twitter feed, an endless current of trumped-up controversies that disappear as quickly as they flare up. Another still is the fake news – or, to speak more plainly, the welter of lies and propaganda from Russia and the extreme American right – that’s been spreading like a rash across your Face(book).

These three templates, these metaphors for how we take in politics today, all have one thing in common. They disrespect truth and they enshrine subjectivity. Sometimes the subjectivity poses as truth. Sometimes it mocks and dismisses truth. Either way, the message today is that facts are old-fashioned and truth is simply what *I* feel – and when that *I* is very powerful, truth becomes simply what power says it is.

Today I’d like us to help us make sense of this new era of narrative, this post-truth, fact-optional era of fragmented shards of story all refracting the light in crazy ways.

I’d like to share three thoughts in particular: first, that there is some good in all this fragmentation; second, that we are called now to be citizens in new ways; and third, that as shattered as the public square may seem, there is one thing – and it’s counterintuitive – that can bring us back together. Let me begin with the first topic:

WHAT’S GOOD ABOUT THIS AGE OF STORY-FRAGMENTATION

I want to tell you about a delightful fellow I met last week. He was born in England and schooled in Scotland, and his slightly high voice has a slight Highland accent. When I first laid eyes on him, at a buttoned-down DC conference, he was wearing a Scottish kilt with a fur-lined silver sporrán, or man-purse. He moved to the United States several years ago. Specifically, he came to Jonesboro, Tennessee, to run something called the

International Storytelling Center, which every year gathers tens of thousands of people for a conference on the art of story. In his years in Appalachia, he's become friends with his neighbors, many of whom supported Trump and some of whom didn't.

Got a picture of him? His name is Kiran Singh Sirah. He is of Indian descent. The pattern of his kilt was the Sikh tartan, which was invented only about twenty years ago. And though he admitted he was a bit nervous about stepping outside his home the morning after the election, he has in the weeks since remembered that he doesn't care what story you tell about him: he's going to make it more complex.

Complexity is the watchword of our time. It is why so many people crave simplicity. Donald Trump – and I do not mean this as criticism, or only as criticism – is a genius of simplicity. But only a certain kind of simplicity.

The great Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes was shaped by his experience as a Union officer in the Civil War. He never forgot the carnage that could spill forth from simple ideas. And he once said, "I would not give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity."

Sit with that a moment. This sentence lays out the arc we are in now. We used to think we had simplicity. Now we are confronting complexity. Trump wants to take us back to the old imagined simplicity. Someone else will have to lead us forward, to push through to the other side to the kind of enlightened simplicity Holmes would've given his life for.

I remember an essay by the novelist Saul Bellow about his Depression-era childhood in Chicago. He described walking along Lake Michigan one summer evening and seeing cars parked by the water, all with their doors open and windows down. The passengers were listening to the same thing at the same time: President Roosevelt, giving a Fireside Chat. And Bellow could pick up the entire radio address as he strolled by one parked car after another, FDR's reassuring voice ebbing and flowing from vehicle to vehicle. That image, that memory of sound, has always stayed with me.

Of course, it's Bellow's memory, not mine. But when I first read it, in my twenties, it stirred within *me* a strange sense of nostalgia. My reaction was, *Boy I wish I still lived in a time when we all listened to the same thing, all knew the same things, all were part of the same story like that.* I lamented, even in the 1990s, the fragmentation of narrative and common things in America.

But as I've grown older, I've come to realize something. I was kidding myself. The notion that there was ever a time when all Americans were on the same page and of the same mind and agreeing upon the same reality is, well, an illusion. A dream.

It was a dream made possible in part by a lack of democracy, by a set of walls around the public square that made it accessible to whites only, more to men than to women,

and more to people of means than without. Another book I read when I was young, by Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, was called *The Wise Men*. It told the story of a handful of WASP American men who made the postwar world. They'd gone to Groton and Andover, then to Yale and Princeton, they were named Harriman and Lovett and Kennan and Acheson, they came from wealth and made more of it before serving in government. And even before World War II had ended, they were the wise men who designed and built the multilateral institutions that were meant to keep nationalism and short-sightedness in check: NATO, the UN, the IMF, the World Bank.

Dean Acheson, the most famous and patrician of these Wise Men, who served as Truman's secretary of state, titled his memoir *Present at the Creation*. But at the very moment that the Wise Men were designing the postwar world, the seeds of the destruction of that world were already proliferating.

And at the very moment Saul Bellow was taking in President Roosevelt's voice, an unbroadcast cacophony of other American voices was in fact at full pitch: labor radicals who found FDR too tame; conservative capitalists who found him alarmingly socialistic; isolationists who resented the way he was nudging the U.S. into war; African Americans fighting a culture of unchecked lynching; women who wanted not just a vote but a *say*.

All those voices were always there. They just didn't have the microphone of the one or two radio corporations that created much of public life in the 1930s. Even the 1960s, for all their upheaval, look today like a time of storytelling simplicity. There were just three TV networks, all of which beamed Bull Connor and Andy Griffith into tens of millions of living rooms at once. People still read newspapers every day, local and national. As late as the 1990s, before Fox News and of course before the Web became the Web, it was still possible to sustain the pretense of a common narrative.

So does this mean we're screwed now? Does it mean society is trending ever more rapidly toward entropy and chaos? I don't think so. I think society is trending toward *growing up*. Toward seeing the true complexity of social reality.

The Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns us of the "danger of a single story." That danger is great indeed. A single story is usually told by a few to rationalize their domination of the many – to give the few a sense of coherence they might wouldn't otherwise have. Adichie was talking about the story the West invented about Africa – a narrative that helped *make* the West and became both cause and effect of a global machinery of racism. But her insight is universal.

Think about how the most elemental stories begin. "In the beginning." "Once upon a time." We are hard-wired as humans to tell stories, and part of that hard-wiring makes us imagine big bang moments when the story begins, when what preceded the story is voided out, darkened into oblivion. *Present at the creation*.

But the American Revolution itself, that biggest of our country's big bangs, was not really a thing that sprung out of insensate silence and darkness. It was only the inflection point, the coming to boil, of a turbulence that had been brewing for decades.

Rewind further. In celebrating Thanksgiving two days ago, we perpetuated, if tacitly, a storyline that says America began with the Pilgrims' arrival. We did so even as Native Americans today, at Standing Rock, are reminding us, as they face fire hoses fed by the very waters they wish to protect, that what preceded the Pilgrims here was *people* and the *land* and the *relationship* between people and the land.

In eleven days we will mark the 75th anniversary of Pearl Harbor. For the Japanese Americans who were rounded up and put into internment camps in the weeks following, the first part of their story – the part where they'd grown up here, farmed here, run grocery stores here, went to church here, played Little League here – that part was obliterated. A new single story descended upon them, which began on December 7, and it deemed them alien to the core and presumed them hostile to the United States.

It took decades for the Congress and the country to acknowledge the sin of that story and its consequences. And here's the thing: it's only taken a few more decades for us to begin to *forget* that acknowledgment. We are beginning to not know what we once knew. A new world is emerging from that forgetting.

We are *always* present at the creation, for better or worse. And the creation is always a "bloomin' buzzin' confusion," in the words of William James, the American pragmatist philosopher. We make sense of that confusion with our story filters. But we should never mistake the filters for what's actually out there, the shadow for the act.

I think it's good that we are facing this fact. For one thing, today's is a world where my voice and that of my new friend Kiran Singh Sirah from Jonesboro by way of Glasgow, who just got his green card, can be part of the cosmology of American stories. Yes, it's also a time for unsavory, hateful voices who no longer have to wait for wise men and elite gatekeepers to let them speak. They are definitely speaking now. They have megaphones, and soon they'll have access to the White House.

And yet net-net, I still think this centrifugal storm, this fracking of the single story and this explosion of perspectives and truths, is *progress*. Because it's forcing us to see the world as it has always been. To listen for voices that were always there. To stop saying that when people of color demand to be heard it's "identity politics" and to stop pretending there was some prelapsarian paradise when America was unsullied by identity politics. Identity politics here started when the first Puritan stepped ashore.

Somewhere on the other side of this complexity is a better kind of simplicity – if we know how to find it. Which brings me to the second topic I want to address today:

WHY WE AS CITIZENS MUST CHANGE OUR HABITS OF MIND

Last week, when I was in the other Washington, I spent a day meeting with a range of leaders in science, both from big institutions and community-based organizations, about how to make citizens more science-literate and scientists more civics-literate. As you can imagine, we talked a lot about the truth-challenged, fact-denying ways of not just the president-elect but also the private interests who are eager to take advantage of his ascendancy. Climate change deniers, public health deniers, gun violence deniers.

I was reminded of the line by Upton Sinclair, the muckraking journalist from a century ago, who said, “It’s hard to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on not understanding it.”

But also, I would add, if his *self-image* depends on not understanding it. We are all ardent, often unconscious defenders of the images we’ve constructed of ourselves. That defense is a primary human reflex. This is why I’ve always been dissatisfied with Thomas Frank’s thesis in *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* – that poor conservatives who vote for billionaire-coddling Republicans are “voting against their interests.”

Self-image, more than salary, determines what most people think of as “their interests.” And self-image is bound up with status – *relative* status – in ways that salary can’t fully express and indeed often obscures. Self-image is more often about fears of decline than hopes for advancement but in all cases it’s more about emotion than rationality.

This actually makes me optimistic. Because it hints at a set of things we can do. The first is to be humble: to realize we hardly know ourselves. We think we have a self and we think it consists of experiences and memories and predispositions that we can label and name and yet at the very same time we are nearly blind to how much we are formed by people around us; one, two, three network links away. Heck, we are *totally* blind to how much we are formed by our own microbiome – the blooms of bacteria in our gut – who not only give us our “gut feelings” but whose genetic volume and diversity far exceed that of our human DNA. As it is with the body so it is with the body politic.

Starting with humility enables us to begin to see our own patterns of truth-making and truth-evading. And foremost among those patterns is self-justification.

In his deeply wise book *Bonds That Make Us Free*, C. Terry Warner describes a universal human dynamic of self-justification. It goes like this: I *accuse* you in order to *excuse* me. You, in turn, return the favor. And then we are off on a cycle of blame and evasion that defines interpersonal, interracial, international dynamics. It starts with

- *Why didn’t you take out the trash?*
- *Well, why didn’t you do the dishes?*

And it goes to

- *Why don't you fund failing schools?*
- *Well, why don't you fire failing teachers?*

Or to

- *Why don't black lives matter?*
- *Well, why don't blue lives matter?*

We accuse to excuse, incessantly, in private and public life. But Warner teaches that we can reset this loop. We can convert it from a vicious circle of *denying* responsibility into a virtuous cycle of *accepting* it. We can start that in our smallest conversations, over the seemingly smallest things. Because all things are made of small things.

When we admit our piece of the problem we free ourselves from the burdens of constant self-serving justification. We influence others by letting them influence us, which awakens *their* sense of responsibility

- *You're right, I should've taken out the trash*
- *Well, you know, I still haven't done the dishes*

This is not preemptively surrendering high ground. It is leading people who are stuck in self-justification by sharing your example of getting *unstuck*. That example is contagious. In fact, contagion, not persuasion, is what really ever changes minds and self-images. Warner has helped people at every scale apply these insights, from families in crisis to nations at war. Every scale holds the same truth: We make one another. We can remake one another. No one is blameless. Yield to advance.

Does this sound like woo-woo left-wing hippie talk? That's OK. Some of my best friends are woo-woo left-wing hippies. I note, though, that C. Terry Warner is a professor at Brigham Young University, where, decades ago, he was a mentor to an earnest man in search of himself named Mitt Romney. Warner's work is informed by his Mormon faith, as he says up front, though he takes great pains not to proselytize or even to name that faith. What I, a non-Mormon non-Christian believer in American *civic* religion, took away from Warner is simply this: how to live like a citizen.

Once you see through the lens that Warner crafted, you begin to question yourself in other constructive ways. During my meeting last week with the citizen-scientists in DC, what became clear is that Americans can find scientific information easily if they want it. What they can't get so easily is the desire to want it. What they – we – need is to remember that we can deal with a changing world more effectively when we learn how

to think like the best scientists. How to ask great questions. How to ruthlessly prune away bad assumptions. How to stay aware of ignorance while gaining expertise.

And also this: how to build communities of practice to keep you honest. This is what we've got to do now as citizens. Make circles of friends and newcomers alike to talk about the news, to expand the number of sources you're getting information from.

The best scientists have the soul of an artist and the decisiveness of a warrior. They can face themselves, their accumulated patterns, their own body of work and ask: What here is obsolete? What must I release to move forward? They can then say, to use the title of an anthology by the science publisher John Brockman, *This Idea Must Die*.

Ask of yourself each day: Which idea of mine must die? Which way of thinking about other people – whether my allies or those I've decided are my enemies – is holding me back? Here's one idea that I think must die in American civic life: the idea that *we all have to get along*. Which brings me to the third and final topic I'd like to speak to today:

WHAT IT REALLY MEANS TO COME TOGETHER

How in this age when everyone has her own truth and facts can we ever manage to re-establish the commons? Here's a hint: it's not about empathy and reconciliation.

In fact, I'd say today that what America needs is not forced reconciliation that papers over our actual and deep philosophical divides. What we need now is to argue more. *More?* Most people, it is true, would say we have such dysfunction today because we already argue too much about too many things. But that's a misdiagnosis of what ails American politics. We don't need fewer arguments today; we need less stupid ones.

The arguments in American politics today are stupid in many ways: they're stuck in a decaying two-party institutional framework; they fail to challenge foundational assumptions about capitalism or government; they center on symbolic proxy skirmishes instead of naming the underlying change; they focus excessively on style and surface.

Americans can do better. Remember: America doesn't just have arguments; America *is* an argument—between Federalist and Anti-Federalist worldviews, strong national government and local control, liberty and equality, individual rights and collective responsibility, color-blindness and color-consciousness, *Pluribus* and *Unum*.

The point of civic life in this country is not to avoid such tensions. Nor is it for one side to achieve “final” victory. The point is for us all to wrestle perpetually with these polarities, to fashion hybrid solutions that work for the times until they don't, then to start again.

Imagine if in public libraries, civic clubs, neighborhood groups, and spaces like this we

taught ourselves how to argue better, how to identify and name our foundational fights over principle, how to argue all sides and not just one's own, how to change one's own mind as well as another's, and how to put together solutions that draw from each pole of principle — as if we had responsibility for solutions, not just posturing. Because we do.

This is reconciliation for grown-ups. It doesn't pretend that all will be peaceful—or that it should be. It acknowledges the never-endingness of our fights. But it acknowledges too that to be a citizen means fighting to make our fights more useful: more honest, more open to change, more human.

Knowing how to have better arguments is the job of every American now. And perhaps paradoxically, it is the way we can come together. Let's come together to fight. To fight better. Let's invite each other out of our virtual bubbles and engage each other for real.

It's also our job to point out to each other, in the spirit of *Bonds That Make Us Free*, the blind spots we don't know we have. To be, in the most loving sense possible, the blind leading the blind.

I want to close with the words of a great citizen. Grace Lee Boggs was a Chinese American who defied conventions of race and gender to become a leading activist in the civil rights movement and a revolutionary activist in Detroit to the end of her 100 years of life. "History is not the past," she said. "It is the stories we tell about the past. How we tell these stories — triumphantly or self-critically, metaphysically or dialectally — has a lot to do with whether we cut short or advance our evolution as human beings."

There are a lot more stories in the mix now. Let's find the good in that, and search out the simplicity of universal human yearnings in all those complex stories. Let's learn how to lead by an example of humility and responsibility-taking that will, in the end, be the greatest antidote to the pathological braggadocio and responsibility-shirking of the next president. And let's learn to argue not in the manner of social-media impression-managers but in the manner of humans who have to face one another.

And let's always remember just how blessed we are to be present at the creation.



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Readings to Precede the Sermon

THOMAS PAINE

From his pamphlet "Common Sense," December 1776

"These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it NOW, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph."

U.S. SENATOR MARGARET CHASE SMITH (Republican of Maine)

From her Declaration of Conscience, in response to McCarthyism, June 1950

"Those of who shout the loudest about Americanism in making character assassinations are all too frequently those who, by our own words and acts, ignore some of the principles of Americanism: The right to criticize. The right to hold unpopular beliefs. The right to protest. The right of independent thought. The exercise of these rights should not cost one single American citizen his reputation or his right to a livelihood nor should he be in danger of losing his reputation or livelihood merely because he happens to know someone who holds unpopular beliefs. Who of us does not? Otherwise none of us could call our own souls our own."

EMMA LAZARUS

"The New Colossus," a poem written in 1883 to raise funds for the Statue of Liberty

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"