



## “Still More Perfect”

Sermon by Eric Liu

IdeasCity New York • Sara Roosevelt Park, Manhattan • September 16, 2017

I’ve been asked to open this gathering with a sermon. I’ll bet some of you are nervous about that. So let me explain myself, and how I aim to spend these twenty minutes.

I lead an organization called Citizen University. Our purpose is to teach powerful citizenship. I don’t mean citizenship as documentation status. I mean the deeper ethical sense of being a member of the body, a contributor to community. *A non-sociopath.*

One of our programs is called Civic Saturday, and it’s a civic analogue to church. But it’s not about Christianity or Islam or Judaism. It’s about American *civic* religion: the texts, acts, promises, and failures that form the moral foundation of our experimental republic. We run Civic Saturday like a faith gathering: we sing together, we turn to meet our neighbors and answer a common question, we hear readings of what you might think of as civic scripture – Emerson, Angelou, Lincoln, Steinem – I deliver a sermon, we sing again, we break bread, we organize for activism.

Even though today we don’t have an entire morning together, or time for all that ritual, Karen Wong asked me to speak in the *spirit* of Civic Saturday. So I will share an abbreviated sermon, based on a single text. And I will claim this space, this park of the people named after a family of great citizens of this city and country, as our church.

The text I’ve chosen is Henry David Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience*. The subtext is life in the greatest city in the world, New York.

How many of you have read *Civil Disobedience*? Some, but not many. So let me give you a capsule of it. It is a lecture he wrote in 1848 after having spent a night in the Concord, MA jail for refusing to pay his 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.

His arrest came as he walked into Concord from the cabin he had built in the woods near Walden Pond, a mile or so away. He was going to the cobbler when he was arrested. He stayed in jail only one night because someone – perhaps his aunt – paid the poll tax for him. Legend has it that his role model, Ralph Waldo Emerson, came to visit him in jail and asked, “What are you doing in there?” To which Thoreau answered, “What are you doing out there?” And from that liberating night and day in the jailhouse, he wrote a speech called “The Rights and Duties of the Individual in Relation to Government,” which was little noticed at the time but published later as *Civil Disobedience*. It has since endured, becoming the inspiration for Gandhi and then for King as they taught others to practice civil disobedience at a society-changing scale.

I want to use three pieces of this talk by Thoreau as mirrors for our exceptional moment. First, on the meaning of tradition. Second, on the costs we are willing to bear to keep a promise. And third, on whether it’s possible to imagine a better society.

Let’s start with tradition. Early in *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau observed that “This American government, – what is it but a tradition, albeit a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity?” *What is it but a tradition?* Government, in any nation but especially this creedal nation, is but a tradition – of idealism, reverence, *obedience*. The legitimacy of government is an impossibly complex and fragile web of agreements to pretend – to suspend disbelief about whether it at every moment truly represents the will of the people.

We pretend that our dollars and debts have behind them “the full faith and credit of the United States.” Pray we don’t have to find out what that means. We pretend that a half-baked authorization for military action after 9/11 should be an open-ended writ of permission for endless war. We pretend, when we thank veterans for their service in the seventh inning at Yankee Stadium, that thanking them is sufficient sacrifice on our part, we who were never asked to serve and never volunteered. We pretend, though incumbents draw their own districts and bend the knee to donors, that they are representative of “the people” and that their election equals “consent of the governed.”

Do we really consent? Government in normal times amounts to a collective habit of unspoken, perhaps unwitting, consent. We dress up that habit with the word “legitimacy.” And this autopilot of pretense is usually necessary, especially in the complex ecosystem we call a city. If we had to expressly reaffirm every assumption behind every institution at every minute, all collective endeavor might grind to a halt.

But these are not normal times. We no longer can suspend disbelief. In part, we can thank Donald Trump for stirring millions of Americans out of a complacent, apathetic slumber. By challenging the illusion that the rule of law is forever, by revealing just how fragile democratic norms are, he has done us all a service. He has forced us to ask how real the tradition of self-government is, and how deeply committed to it we are.

But when I say that millions of people are now questioning the tradition of ritual deference to government, I don't mean just those who are engaged in resistance against Trump. I mean also the activists organizing under the banner of Black Lives Matter who will not pretend any longer that policing and the criminal justice system are to be presumed just. I mean the conservative activists who force us to see how flimsy and partial the American commitment to free speech truly has become, especially on campuses. I mean the millions of people who have gotten squeezed out of Manhattan, and then out of other boroughs, and who no longer are willing to pretend that this city and its government are going to reckon sufficiently with the scale of the affordability crisis. The rent is *still* too damn high. No one is dreaming anymore that what the market *fixed*, in the sense of rigging, the government will *fix*, in the sense of remedying.

The tradition we call the American republic no longer commands automatic obedience or deference – from any of us. So now what?

Let me read the second piece of Thoreau's text I want to share today, 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 fashion, 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? Are you willing to disrupt your morning by calling out an act of bias on the subway, by raising the stakes with strangers? Might you put your body in the way if ICE agents come to deport your undocumented neighbor tomorrow morning?

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.

And in the same way, the raising of wages for people who can't live on what they earn doesn't hurt the affluent. It feeds the entire economy and enriches us all. The integration of disfavored groups into the structure of opportunity doesn't limit opportunity. It expands it. We're all better off when we're all better off. This isn't altruism. It's self-interest properly understood: because *true* self-interest is *mutual* interest.

And nowhere can you see that more than in a city. In *this* city. The promise of New York is not that white makes right or men know best or Jesus saves but rather that in 100 out of 100 cases, hybridity beats purity. Confident inclusion beats cowardly protectionism. Investment in *we* pays off for *me*.

So in this age of profound inequality in this city of *profoundest* inequality, we could all take more risks, with capital of every kind, to deliver on the New York idea – which is only the American idea of a fair shot for everyone, taken from parchment and put into the nerves and sinew and the sweaty, striving flesh of humans of every hue.

“Cast your whole vote,” Thoreau wrote, “not a strip of paper merely but your whole influence.” Let me ask you, citizens of New York: 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.

This brings me to my final Thoreau passage, the closing lines of *Civil Disobedience*. Thoreau described an ideal government that truly respects the individual, that both allows and expects the individual to be radically self-actualized. He wrote: “A State which bore this kind of fruit, and suffered it to drop off as fast as it ripened, would prepare the way for a still more perfect and glorious State, which also I have imagined, and not yet anywhere seen.”

I love that. He had imagined a *still more perfect* Union, because he had imagined a citizen who had full integrity: the *union* of power and moral character, of rights and responsibilities.

Can you imagine that?

Thoreau's call, ultimately, is to awaken the power of the individual imagination. You are more powerful than you think. That's the title of my new book, about how to activate citizen power. But it's also the core reality of human existence. Power is a gift. It inheres in us. And yet we heedlessly throw it away most of the time, by our inattention, by our distraction, by our failure to vote or to speak up or to engage. Stop giving away your power. More than that: *practice* power. Practice it like you'd practice anything that involves risk and reward. With care, with passion. Most of all, with *others*.

Thoreau played the hermit. He wrote poetic passages in *Walden* about how his little cabin allowed him to commune with nature and how little he needed news of the world or the company of others. But critics who thought this amounted to selfish solipsism did not read him closely enough. Always in the background of Walden Pond is Concord village. And what gives shape to the jail cell of *Civil Disobedience* is what sits outside: his neighbors and acquaintances; the structures, systems, and sentiments of society.

Thoreau understood that while the ideal government would sanctify the dignity of the individual, such sanctity would be meaningful only in the context of the community. Of the city. He understood that we are all woven into a web of relationship and obligation.

The individual's obligation in America is to push society to keep its promises. Society's obligation is to create such individuals. Every day in the city we have a chance to renew that deal. Every day in the city we have a chance to set off a cascade of moral and civic imagination. To reimagine policing. To reimagine housing. To reimagine schooling. To reimagine care. Then to exercise the magic act of *organizing*, which, by bringing just one other human into the endeavor, generates new power out of thin air. That's what a city, in all its density and intensity, is for.

I am the son of immigrants. I grew up in Wappingers Falls, 90 miles up the Hudson. My Po-Po, my mother's mother, lived with us in the tidy white suburbs for a while when I was a kid but eventually she couldn't take it. She needed to be in the city, and she chose to live in a crowded tower of public housing at the corner of South and Clinton, from where she could walk to East Broadway and make her way through the street markets and over to Confucius Plaza to see her doctors and her friends. She found her liberty here – and her community. She, who could speak fewer words of English than I could of Mandarin, was a *still more perfect* example of the American spirit than I who grew up in a development of colonial and ranch houses called Merrywood.

Merrywood was surely not the kind of place Thoreau imagined as he sat by Walden Pond 172 years ago. But I have a strange feeling modern Chinatown would have pleased him. I bet this gathering today would have stirred him. And I think the greatest thing we can do to live up to the promise of empowered citizenship that he imagined and yearned for, and challenged us to bring into existence, is to remember this:

To be a New Yorker – with a habit of disobedience and a deep bent for justice – is to live like a citizen.