



“Being Responsible”
Sermon by Eric Liu • Civic Saturday
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I want to begin today’s sermon by saying something I may not get to say again for a while: The Seattle Mariners are tied for the most wins in major league baseball.

True, it’s only one week into the season. And most experts expect them to finish the year in last place. But what a gift it is in early April to imagine winning next week and the week after, to imagine a compounding habit of winning, the expectation-defying emergence of a *culture* of winning. Savor that possibility. It has not yet evaporated.

The point of baseball fandom is to savor possibility. And to remember that possibility is more satisfying than probability. In this age of endless data analytics that dissect each player’s patterns and tendencies, we know too much about what is probable. But during the marathon of a season, the arc of a series, the course of a game, the dance of one at-bat, the explosion of a single pitch, we live for what is possible.

What separates baseball from the lesser sports – which is to say all other sports – is that in its central conflict between pitcher and batter it captures two mysteries of human experience: chance and causation. At each scale, from full season to single pitch, random and microscopic shifts in circumstance can turn the tide. And once something *has* happened, it’s hard to assign credit or blame clearly – to determine who caused it.

Oh, we pretend to, of course. When our favorite slugger hits a walk-off home run we credit his brawn, his eagle eyes, the ice water in his veins, his unerring instinct for sensing what pitch was coming next. Yet in that moment, we completely forget that our counterpart from the *other* team’s fan base, who’s screaming in anguish, is fixing blame on their idiot pitcher and his weak arm and jittery nerves and choker’s heart.

Which of those stories is true? Which one is *truer*? Did the batter succeed or did the pitcher fail? Who caused that game-ending outcome? When we watch the brightly lit home-run ball sailing through the nighttime sky, what makes the flight of the ball last so long, whether we are cheering or crying, is that while we watch it we are simultaneously and instantaneously creating a total and zero-sum narrative of responsibility.

And that is the topic I'd like to explore today. Not baseball – although I will have lots more to say about that. I mean responsibility. What does it mean to be responsible? There are two ways to interpret that question. The first is: for what should we be properly blamed or held to account? The second is, in what ways are we living up to an obligation or expectation? One is about blame. The other is about duty.

I want to unpack these two meanings because both are at play in our lives as Americans today and because our political culture has increasingly privileged one definition over the other, with corrosive consequences for us all.

Let me start with responsibility as blame.

Blame

The philosopher Alva Noë, in a short new book called *Infinite Baseball*, describes the sport as “forensic” in nature. That is, it's all about assessing the scene of the action and evaluating who did what. Should a third baseman be given an error for not fielding a scorching ground ball cleanly and thus allowing a runner to score? Is it reasonable to assume that an average third baseman would've made the play and prevented the run? What is the key link in the causal chain, and who owns that link? Players and fans alike are constantly assigning responsibility for outcomes like this. In Noë's view this forensic work is not incidental to the game; it is at the heart of it.

The flip side of blame is credit. Under the rules, if the third baseman is assigned an error by the official scorer, then the batter is denied credit for a hit; moreover, the pitcher is not blamed for giving up the run. The run is called “unearned” and it won't count against his “earned run average.” But whatever the official scorer decides, fans make our own judgments about who should've done what. These are, of course, utterly biased and distorted by our rooting interest.

What's important about baseball is that it captures, in miniature, the habit we humans have of creating forensic stories of culpability out of patterns of random action, and then living by the morals of those stories – that is, imbuing them with meaning that guides our future choices.

To take one example from the game of politics: Did Hillary Clinton blow it or did Donald Trump crush it?

One way to interpret the nascent Democratic presidential primary race is that it is a competition among narratives of responsibility for 2016 – that is, who is to blame and why. Some of the 2020 candidates have as their rationale the idea that the failure, the error, was in ignoring white working-class voters in Appalachia and the Rust Belt. Others believe the failure was in not giving young progressives and voters of color a fresh enough alternative. Others think the failure was in having a nominee who was too polarizing and who made it too easy for her opponent to divide and conquer.

Implicit in all these narratives, of course, is the notion that Hillary Clinton did blow it and is to blame. Each 2020 candidate has their own theory of *how* Clinton blew and why they're the right person to correct for her fatal errors.

This is a natural way for candidates to try to earn supporters. But it is deeply misleading because it blocks from the field of vision a vast set of other interpretations of responsibility and causation. Maybe Clinton didn't blow it so much as Trump crushed it. Maybe Trump crushed it because he's a genius and there's something important to learn from his way of tapping into popular culture and subconscious anxiety. Or maybe he crushed it because he got just enough help from Russian bots and online saboteurs who sowed dissent and misinformation and dampened turnout among Democrats.

We can't say for sure. Even if we get to read every unredacted page of the Mueller report, we won't be able to say for sure. Why? Because in life, as in baseball, everything causes everything. But in life, as in baseball, we tend to fixate on the most recent and most tangible causes. That game-winning home run I was imagining before, or that run-yielding error by the third baseman – neither of those would have mattered except that a numberless array of other interactions and confrontations during the game went the way they did. Had one of those earlier events gone differently, the score might've been different, the psychological balance might've been different, and maybe the home run wouldn't have mattered. Maybe there wouldn't have been a home run.

This is metaphysical musing. But what's real is what we do with it. Since we must, in our drive for narrative neatness, assign responsibility somewhere, we will. And once we do, even though on some level we know this assignment of responsibility is arbitrary and something of a fiction, a necessary lie, we will invest it with the feeling of truth and become emotionally attached to it. We will need it.

Let's take a more local example. Are tech companies like Amazon who've made Seattle so suddenly expensive responsible for the surge in homelessness? Or are the too-lenient, less-than-competent agencies of our government responsible?

Again, the truth is indeterminate, so the fight is over whose version of the truth will predominate. And that fight is not just in the media and the public square. It is in our hearts. If I have in my heart a story that says these homeless people are weak-willed addicts and criminals drawn here by generous benefits, I have put responsibility for their fates on them. I have removed it from me. But if I have a story that says they are afflicted by an addiction or by job loss and circumstances of political economy beyond their control, another story emerges.

Those two very different stories of agency will yield two very different ways not just of seeing but of behaving. Consider that if you are not homeless, you have probably formed a set of heuristics, a subconscious flow chart of responsibility-assigning that guides you in your reactions as you encounter people who are without homes.

Let me be upfront about mine. I tend not to give to panhandlers, though I look them in the eye when I decline. I always buy Real Change, the street paper made and sold by people who are or have been homeless. I regularly donate money to nonprofits that work systemically to provide housing and mental health services to the homeless. I supported the head tax that would've funded far more housing and services.

Implicit in my little rule set is a story of responsibility that is heavier on the collective and lighter on the personal. There's some good in that: homelessness in Seattle is surely a collective systemic failure. But if I am honest I will admit there is some evasion in it too. It absolves me, individually, of doing more for other individuals when I encounter them. Maybe I should do more for each one. And maybe I should expect more of them as well.

Citizen University's office is upstairs. Look out the window. Every day we look at people living in tents on the near sidewalk or requiring emergency medical assistance across the street at the Union Gospel Mission. Recently a man died in one of these tents. Because we are not insensate jerks, we ache for these, our neighbors. Because we have finite capacities for empathy, we eventually move past the ache.

Then what?

The team here at the Impact Hub regularly organizes donations and aid. Our team at Citizen University spent a day meeting with people from the Downtown Emergency Service Center to better understand the dimensions of the crisis and the range of remedies. Many in this building are doing far more to be part of the solution.

You may have a rule set that's very different from mine: more open-hearted or less, more trusting or less. That's to be expected. But the problem with personal unspoken rule sets is that they reinforce the idea that civic life is a series of one-off interactions guided by private ethics instead of a social compact framed by public ethics.

We must make a rule set – let me go deeper – we must commit to a collective code of justice that is out in the open. That we name and say out loud. A code that is meant to make everyone more responsible for the crisis.

This code should not be binary: in any public crisis, every person bears more than none of the blame and less than all of it. The code should not coddle anyone: it must demand more of both the powerful and the powerless. But the code should be toughest on the powerful: it should have an ethic of progressive contribution. Those who have the most capacity should be expected to put the greatest proportion back into the commonwealth.

Why? Because it's how a city or country survives and thrives. When Tocqueville wrote nearly two centuries ago that "the American's heart easily inclines toward benevolence," he was not making the claim that among all humans Americans were unusually altruistic or saintly. He was making the claim that through long habits of face-to-face democratic association among people who were civic equals, Americans – well, let's be clear: *white*

American men – had internalized the truth that true self-interest is mutual interest. That we are all better off when we are all better off.

This is the distillation of the public code of justice we should be reinforcing now.

And here I have begun to shift from one meaning of responsibility to the other. We are all responsible in that we are all to blame for how things got this bad, by our actions or omissions, our narratives of justification. But we are also all responsible in that we all have a duty to fix things. We all carry an obligation to do more, be more, learn more, serve more, help more. I'm not just talking about homelessness in Seattle now. I'm talking about the divided, anxious, addicted, crushingly unequal state of our Union.

So let me now turn to responsibility as duty.

Duty

Bart Giamatti was an unusual and unlikely Commissioner of Baseball. The grandson of Italian immigrants, he had been a scholar of the Renaissance, a professor at Yale and then its youngest-ever president at the age of thirty-eight. But more than anything, he was a lover of baseball, a devotee of every aspect of the game: its poetry and prose, its grit and its capacity to glue our nation together. So when he was offered the job as president of the National League in 1986, he ditched Yale to take it. That was a few months before I arrived at Yale as a freshman, and I remember the slightly embarrassed way that professors spoke of Giamatti's self-inflicted demotion.

But as a fellow lover of baseball, I understood and even admired his choice. Three years later he moved up to become Commissioner. The central act of his tenure as Commissioner was his lifetime banishment of Pete Rose, the legendary all-time hits leader who had gambled on Cincinnati Reds games while he was the Reds' manager. The banishment from the game stands to this day. But the stress of the investigation killed Giamatti, who was felled by a heart attack seven days after his decision.

I was thinking about Bart Giamatti last week not because the baseball season had just begun but because when Special Counsel Mueller filed his report and Attorney General Barr issued his cursory and perhaps misleading letter of summary, I was trying to recall what it looked like when the leader and steward of a public institution, after receiving the results of a controversial investigation, explains the result with integrity.

Giamatti's statement was our first reading today. I truly believe it to be a piece of civic scripture because I believe baseball to be part of American civic religion. But it's a classic of democratic ethics. If you were to substitute the words "the democracy" for the word "the game" in every part of that statement, you would have a statement that is like an Aaron Sorkin "West Wing" version of what we wish Attorney General Barr had said.

For instance: "...the integrity of the democracy cannot be defended except by a process that itself embodies integrity and fairness...."

What Giamatti's statement says loudly without ever using the word is that we have duties. That when we get the privilege to be participants in an institution as cherished as baseball or self-government in a democratic republic, we have a duty to maintain the health of the institution. And we should recognize that every one of the rights we enjoy within that institution is also a responsibility, every opportunity an obligation.

In the law, there is a language of duty that is used to assign liability. Fiduciary duty, for instance, or duty of care. I want to adapt this language of duty beyond the legal meaning of what you could go to jail for or pay a fine for to a more normative meaning of what you could be honored or dishonored for.

Being responsible in this sense of duty means asking what am I responsible for doing? How do I do my part? What actions and attitudes are expected of me if I am to be a citizen – by which I mean, a pro-social contributor to community?

Yes, vote and volunteer and read the news and know your own mind. But I'm talking about some deeper dispositions. Let me describe four of them.

First, we have a duty to **connect**. Two weeks ago, I was in Concord, New Hampshire to announce a run for the presidency of the United States. Just kidding! I wanted to make sure you were still listening. I was in Concord, though, to meet with and speak to catalysts from across the Granite State gathered by the Endowment for Health.

The Endowment is the state's largest health foundation. Like many of their peer institutions in other states, they have come to realize that the only way to improve health outcomes sustainably is to address *civic* health. And at the core of civic health is connectedness. Getting people out of isolation. Creating opportunities for people, whether in impersonal cities or small rural towns, not only to meet but to act together, create art together, tell stories together, build power together. Loneliness kills. It fuels hypertension, diabetes, addiction. Inclusive collective action heals, revives, saves.

We who have gathered here today are proof of that. It's why we keep doing it. And when we consider the presence of homeless people in severe isolation and disconnection who literally surround us today, we recall too that the connections that need making are not just *among* people of your set but *across* condition and status.

Second is the duty to **cultivate**. This week I was in Chicago for a meeting of local civic innovators that Citizen University helped organize. The evening before the meeting, we all met for dinner at a place on the South Side called the Sweet Water Foundation. It's an urban farm and learning center created out of several once-abandoned blocks on South Perry by a couple named Emmanuel and Jia Lok Pratt. They have gardening and aquaponics and printmaking and dance classes for kids from the block. There are

artists-in-residence called humans-in-residence also from the South Side. As Emmanuel said to me with a smile, “We are building a campus here. A citizen university.”

We ate inside a structure called the Thought Barn. It was hand-raised in 2017 by the people of the neighborhood, making it the first barn raised in city limits in over a century. The tables and floors are unfinished wood, moveable into many combinations for common meals or dance parties. The chairs are hand-made crates. The spicy cornbread and fried chicken and greens we were served were made by a local elder. There’s a big banner proclaiming, “There GROWS the neighborhood!”

As a guy who wrote a book called *The Gardens of Democracy*, as someone who often says that “Rugged individualism never got a barn raised,” I was flabbergasted. I fell in love with Sweet Water instantly. The message of the whole magical endeavor is that there is wealth already here in this often-disrespected neighborhood – there is wealth in the ground and in the hands and the hearts of the people who live there. It’s a matter of taking responsibility for cultivating it – and making cultivation everyone’s job.

The third duty is what I call a duty to **circulate**. In my work on power I often say that once you take inventory of the various kinds of power and privilege you have, from money power to ideas power to people power to social influence to sheer muscle, then you face a very simple binary choice: shall I hoard or shall I circulate?

What we are seeing in things like the elite college admissions scandal is that many powerful people over many years have chosen to hoard. They constructed a gleaming edifice of hoarding, within which the logic of scarcity became the logic of entitlement. There is a stunning searing essay by Caitlin Flanagan in the Atlantic circulating now about her glimpse into that edifice 25 years ago when she was a college counselor at an elite LA private school. The piece is called “They Had It Coming,” which Felicity Huffman and the like certainly did. But the *they* is not just the celebrities and hedge fund managers now under indictment for bribing admissions officers and coaches.

The *they* is anyone who gives in to the temptation to rig the game: for your kid’s college chances, for your own material comfort, for the psychic security of feeling like you deserve every privilege you have. *They* include some of us here today. And this duty I speak of now is a duty to resist that temptation to hoard and instead to choose intentionally to circulate your power. To tax yourself. To disseminate insider knowledge. To spend capital bolstering those who may later challenge your hold on capital.

Again – not out of saintliness but out of self-interest properly understood. Hoarding kills. First it kills those cut out of opportunity. But then it kills the hoarder too. As those LA luminaries learned, no gated community can keep out the resentment of the screwed over. Insecurity is contagious. Hoarding and monopoly make prisoners of us all.

And finally, a duty to **question** myself. Over the last few months, I’ve been reading from very different political sources. I began reading Jacobin magazine, one of the smartest

journals of the resurgent socialist left. Its writers are making a case from first principles about why many more sectors need to be under state control and public ownership.

I also began reading Robert Nisbet's *The Quest for Community*, an Eisenhower-era classic of conservative thought about how a centralized state undermines intermediate circles of association, from clan to church to club, and leaves individuals lost and anxious and easy marks for charismatic leaders with easy answers.

More than reading, I've been listening. On the right, to thoughtful people who are challenging their long-held assumptions about the benefits of the market. On the left, to people who worry about the rise of ideological and identity purity tests. What I'm learning is how to notice my blind spots, and once I notice them, how to adjust my sight. This isn't an academic exercise. It is a matter of responsibility and self-interest. For how can I possibly change another person's mind if I am not willing to change my own?

These two ideas I've explored today – responsibility-as-blame and responsibility-as-duty – are both part of our civic culture. But our culture too often focuses on blame over duty, on forensics over ethics, on punishments instead of expectations. We've got to recommit ourselves to our duties: **to connect, to cultivate, to circulate, to question ourselves**. If all we did we did with these dispositions then the quality of political life, the tenor of democratic debate, the civic health of our communities would be so improved.

I know that talk of duty and responsibility and obligation rubs some people the wrong way. Some of my libertarian friends hear nanny-statism in such language. Some of my left-wing activist friends hear victim-blaming. People with lots of power hear righteous moralism. People with less power hear disrespectful hectoring.

I was recently in Detroit where my colleagues at the Aspen Institute helped organize a public event for our Better Arguments Project. The topic was the tensions between longtimers and newcomers in this rapidly changing and gentrifying city. These are tensions of race, class, and place, magnified by mutual stereotyping and mutual attribution of bad motives. Thanks to our partner there, an organization called Urban Consulate, we gathered over 200 Detroiters, both longtimers and newcomers. The goal wasn't consensus or friendship. It was simple humanization. A healthier way of arguing and navigating power imbalances. The goal was to foster the conditions in which both sides might see themselves, for all that divides them, as in it together.

We started the table conversations with a simple question: What do longtimers and newcomers owe each other? Some people resisted the idea of "owing" someone else. Some black longtimers felt *they* were owed more recognition, and resented the hip white Millennials whom the media has deemed saviors of a dying city – especially when it was a prior generation of white power brokers who had disinvested in the city. Some of the white newcomers understood this intellectually but felt *they* were owed more respect, or at least less hostility, for bringing new blood and new energy into the city. Over the course of the day, thoughts that people had kept to themselves were at last vocalized – not in flash floods of anger but in a slow, twisting stream of trust-building.

At the end of the gathering an older African American longtimer came up to me. She said, “I have many misgivings about this day. I also think it was a gift.” I could not have put it better. To hold misgivings and gratitude at once, to perceive how both have their roots, etymologically and spiritually, in the idea of *giving*: this is the soul of responsibility.

Conclusion

I’ll conclude today with a final baseball tale. Late Wednesday night I noticed an MLB umpire named Ron Kulpa trending on Twitter. That’s rarely a good thing for umpires. And indeed, it was because in a game between the Houston Astros and the Texas Rangers, Kulpa had made a string of not-even-close wrong calls against the Astros. When their pitcher and manager protested his inconsistent strike zone, Kulpa first ejected them and then he really lost his cool. He didn’t just argue back. He taunted them. With a bullying smile he got right in the face of the Astros manager and yelled, “I can do whatever the hell I want!” Then he yelled it again.

People went nuts on Twitter. Videos, GIFs, lipreading analyses, moral exegeses. It all came pouring forth.

I had to tell this story for two reasons. One, the guy’s name is Kulpa – he was made-to-order for a sermon about culpability! The other, though, is to unpack why his behavior triggered moral outrage – not just among Astros fans but among baseball purists. It wasn’t only that he was a bad umpire responsible for skewing the outcome of a game. Poor performance is galling enough. But it was especially that he acted as if he were exempt from consequences for his poor performance.

The world is full of such people. But when they occupy a station in which we repose special trust and confidence – like home-plate umpire in the major leagues, say, or president of the United States – it is worse than an abuse of power. It is a betrayal of trust. A mockery of the idea that no individual is greater than the game. That wording I just used, by the way – “reposing special trust and confidence” – comes from the commissioning documents for senior White House officials, signed by the president.

When an umpire steps out of role, descends to being just another man with anger-management issues, and starts telling a player he can do whatever the hell he wants, and then returns to role and punishes the player, that player can do very little and a fan can do close to nothing. The umpire *is* the rule of law. But when a president or any political leader acts irresponsibly to undermine the rule of law and give permission to other sneering cynical political actors who wish to further erode norms, a *citizen* can do a lot and a *group* of organized citizens can do even more.

That’s the one crucial way in which baseball is not life. In baseball, we the people are mere spectators. In life, we are players. In our life as democratic citizens, we are players, owners, managers, and umpires. And so even if some of our leaders are

corrupted, conflicted, and self-dealing, in the end we the people – all the people – are the stewards of the institution. We are responsible for its health and resilience. We are to blame when it falls into decay. We have a duty to keep it out of decay. We can do that duty. And we will find joy and common purpose doing it.

I will be told I am an idealist for believing this. In the words of Bart Giamatti, I hope so.

Readings to Accompany the Sermon

A. Bartlett Giamatti, Commissioner of Baseball Statement on the Banishment of Pete Rose from the Game August 24, 1989

My purpose in recounting the process and the procedures animating that process is to make two points that the American public deserves to know:

First, that the integrity of the game cannot be defended except by a process that itself embodies integrity and fairness; Second, should any other occasion arise where charges are made or acts are said to be committed that are contrary to the interests of the game or that undermine the integrity of baseball, I fully intend to use such a process and procedure to get to the truth and, if need be, to root out offending behavior. I intend to use, in short, every lawful and ethical means to defend and protect the game. I say this so that there may be no doubt about where I stand or why I stand there. I believe baseball is a beautiful and exciting game, loved by millions – I among them – and I believe baseball is an important, enduring American institution. It must assert and aspire to the highest principles – of integrity, of professionalism of performance, of fair play within its rules. It will come as no surprise that like any institution composed of human beings, this institution will not always fulfill its highest aspirations. I know of no earthly institution that does. But this one, because it is so much a part of our history as a people and because it has such a purchase on our national soul, has an obligation to the people for whom it is played – to its fans and well-wishers – to strive for excellence in all things and to promote the highest ideals.

I will be told that I am an idealist. I hope so. I will continue to locate ideals I hold for myself and for my country in the national game as well as in other of our national institutions. And while there will be debate and dissent about this or that or another occurrence on or off the field, and while the game's nobler parts will always be enmeshed in the human frailties of those who, whatever their role, have stewardship of this game, let there be no doubt or dissent about our goals for baseball or our dedication to it. Nor about our vigilance and vigor – and patience – in protecting the game from blemish or stain or disgrace.

The matter of Mr. Rose is now closed. It will be debated and discussed. Let no one think that it did not hurt baseball. That hurt will pass, however, as the great glory of the game asserts itself and a resilient institution goes forward. Let it also be clear that no individual is superior to the game.

Alexis de Tocqueville
From *Democracy in America*, Volume II

Published 1835

The free institutions of the United States and the political rights enjoyed there provide a thousand continual reminders to every citizen that he lives in society. At every moment they bring his mind back to this idea, that it is the duty as well as the interest of men to be useful to their fellows. Having no particular reason to hate others, since he is neither their slave nor their master, the American's heart easily inclines toward benevolence. At first it is of necessity that men attend to the public interest, afterward by choice. What had been calculation becomes instinct. By dint of working for the good of his fellow citizens, he in the end acquires a habit and taste for serving them.