



Faith in Each Other
Sermon by Eric Liu • Civic Saturday
Skirball Cultural Center • Los Angeles, CA • November 10, 2018

I am so happy to be with all of you this morning and to be back at the Skirball. This institution, as you know, embodies the spirit and legacy of Jack Skirball and, through him, the entwining of the Jewish tradition and the American creed of self-government.

Jack Skirball was born in Pennsylvania, the son of Czech and English immigrants. He was ordained as a rabbi but after he came to LA in the 1930s he decided to produce films and do real estate. Sounds like a Hollywood cliché, I know. But Skirball's story is true and it's great. He became wealthy and he spent a lifetime circulating his wealth into the commonwealth, creating institutions that fostered interfaith understanding and that explained Jewish life in the context of the American idea. He applied his rabbinical training not by leading a congregation but by living like a citizen.

And his example of double-helixed faith is important for us, today more than ever.

We gather this morning more than a little unsettled. We're still getting our minds around the fact that at the Borderline Bar and Grill Wednesday night were many young people who had survived the Las Vegas mass shooting and now were terrorized anew.

We're still unclenching our pained hearts octogenerians and nonagenerians of the Tree of Life Synagogue who had survived the Holocaust and had no reason to imagine that weaponized anti-Semitism would find them on Squirrel Hill in Pittsburgh.

We're still digesting an election in which the good, the bad, and the ugly of American civic life were all amplified and emboldened. This was not what historians could call a settling election. It settled very little. It was an unsettling election.

Meanwhile, devastating fires are raging across California, fires that we know are part of the new normal of our changed climate, though knowing that doesn't help you now as the menace approaches and our lungs and eyes sting.

And I haven't even mentioned Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg (about whom there is a great exhibit here, by the way). Never has more rested on the ribs of an 85-year old.

I began this morning by saying I was happy to be with you and I admit that I don't sound so happy right now. But I meant it. I am glad and grateful to be in your company during such unsettled times. Especially during such times. At Civic Saturday we gather people in rooms like this all around the United States – in just the last couple of weeks, there have been Civic Saturdays led by people we've trained in Nashville, in Indianapolis, in Ellensburg, Washington and Athens, Tennessee.

Why do we gather? To find reasons to believe that democracy isn't done yet. To *be* the reason for that faith.

It is not written anywhere that a diverse and sprawling nation that has no historical memory and measures life by the dollar should be able to govern itself inclusively, justly, and with reverence for the rule of law. In fact, history both written and unwritten gives us reason to believe that democracy in America shouldn't work, can't work for long, or can't work for all. The promise of American democracy is just that, then – a promise, a leap of faith. Hope in the unseen.

Today I want to talk with you about this democratic faith – and about three things we can all do to repair it and perhaps redeem it. First, have values. Second, make choices that express those values. And third, pass the baton.

Having Values

Let me start with values. My advice is, "have some." I don't mean to be glib. I am addressing one of the most salient features of our polluted political environment. In the age of Trump – but, let's be honest, this started a long time ago and only became unavoidable in the age of Trump – we are surrounded by leaders and fellow citizens who believe that might makes right. That power without values is the true nature of things. That there are no neutral principles or moral truths. Just muscle, Darwinian conflict, and the ability to ram through what you want and then dress it up as legitimate.

The ancient Greek philosopher Thrasymachus put it succinctly when he said, "Justice is nothing else than the interest of the stronger." Oliver Wendell Holmes, the revered jurist and Supreme Court justice from a century ago, defined the law as nothing more than what a bad man predicts a court will do. The bad man, he said, "does not care two straws" about morality or principle. He just wants to know what he can get away with.

Sound relevant this week? This is the essence of the Trumpian mode of operating – of bending and breaking political and constitutional norms to see whether he can place himself above the law. But “might makes right” is also the implicit lesson that Americans left and right, poor and rich, have taken from forty years of trickle-down economics, forty years under *both* parties of concentration of wealth and clout into the hands of the 1 percent, and nearly twenty years of undeclared wars abroad fought by a very different 1 percent of us. The game is rigged. We all feel it, whether we benefit from it or not.

Might makes right is on display right now in the efforts to stop ballot-counting in Florida and Georgia. It’s been on display in the process by which Mitch McConnell rammed through two justices of the Supreme Court. It is on display in a hundred transactions a minute in this great city, from studio and agency boardrooms to underground brothels. The law is what a bad man thinks he can and can’t get away with.

This approach to the law is sometimes called realism and it seems very practical. But let’s be clear: it is also the raw material for fascism. The absence of morality – the utter shameless immunity that leaders display to the norms of morality – eats away at our ability as parents, as workers, as neighbors to be a *good* man or woman.

Justice is what the strong say it is. That’s the kind of nihilistic language that made the Nazis so appealing to their aggrieved followers. We should remember this, on the morning after the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht. I was reminded of this last month when my wife and I were in Berlin, where I was meeting with a group of citizen activists from across Europe who are working to rehumanize political life and to create thicker ecosystems of civic groups and gatherings in their countries.

Whether they came from Serbia or Poland or Bulgaria, Britain or Sweden or Greece, they reported that the habits of citizenship were evaporating. As one participant from the Balkans put it, “We are not citizens. We are just population. There is no concept of the citizen.” He wasn’t talking about passports and papers. He was talking – as am I – about the deeper notion of the citizen as a member of the body, a pro-social contributor. Without it, a people becomes a mere population – and susceptible to a strongman.

The civil rights activist Ella Baker once said, “Strong people don’t need strong leaders.” I love that line. But it doesn’t tell us what to do when a people is weak or weakening. The answer is, we must fortify them. Fortify their moral core and their capacity for courage.

Let me put it simply. The key moral question of our time is whether it is possible to stop an ethical race to the bottom. If you answer nihilism and raw power plays with decency and principle and character, can you save corrupted institutions? Or are you just a naïve sucker who will get steamrolled?

I believe that we can reverse this race to the bottom. Decency is not weakness. It is strength. Time's Up. Me Too. Black Lives Matter. March for Our Lives. Vote for Our Lives. These movements prove it is possible to reverse the cycle. To create brand-new power coupled with values of inclusion and fairness. And these movements are migrating from social activism to political action. Though it'll be months before we get complete data, the first analyses of the midterms tell us that youth turnout and turnout by voters of color reached highs not seen in decades. We already know how many women and women of color are now members-elect of the 116th Congress.

And it's not just DC. Whatever the final results of the gubernatorial and Senate elections in Florida, that state has already, by vote of the people, re-enfranchised over 1 million former felons. In Michigan and Utah and North Dakota the people voted to unrig partisan gerrymandering and expose dark money.

The antidote to law without values is having values. The cure for power without character is cultivating character. And when I say, "have values," I mean reflect upon and codify your core beliefs as a citizen. Not with single nouns like *freedom* and *justice* and *equality*, though those are of course foundational. I mean fuller statements of creed.

Here are a few that we at Citizen University believe:

- Society becomes how you behave.
- We're all better off when we're all better off.
- There's no such thing as not voting.
- True patriotism means "My country – when right, to be kept right; when wrong, to be set right."

And one more, special for you Angelenos:

- You're not stuck in traffic; you *are* traffic.

As these distillations of our creed remind us, justice is not an outcome; it is a perpetual effort to set things right. Freedom is not the removal of all restraints on our appetites; it is the *acceptance* of restraints and of a duty to participate. Equality is not about pillaging and polluting as much as the next guy; it is about acting as if you *were* the next guy.

I urge you, when you go home today, to think about your own civic creed. To share with your family and friends the values that form how you live in public. Maybe you value individual liberty more than I do or are motivated by greater mistrust of authority. That's great. Know what you believe and why. As you deepen that process of discernment, you will be able to choose mindfully when circumstances demand it. Which brings me to my second topic today: making choices.

Making Choices

I do a lot of work with a great educational nonprofit called Facing History and Ourselves. And I love to quote their tagline, which says, “People make choices. Choices make history.” It reminds us that history does not have a capital H. It is the endlessly complex bloom of consequence and contagion arising from an infinity of individual choices by which we put our stated values into practice. Or not. Society becomes how you behave.

Our first reading today came from a young Abraham Lincoln. It was the speech that brought him to national renown. You may have interpreted that excerpt, about what he called “political religion,” as an overheated praise song for our Constitution. Perhaps you questioned his claim that we should revere and obey our institutions and follow the laws even if we think they are unjust.

Remember, though: at the time, pro-slavery mobs were going after abolitionists in lawless, violent campaigns of harassment and even murder – and he was fearful that if the abolitionists responded in kind then the nation would descend into chaos. We know now that the nation did descend into chaos. But 180 years ago, still a generation before the Civil War, what young Abe Lincoln had to do was to discern a path in dim light.

Many years later, when he was a rising politician, he argued for making what might seem to you like hair-splitting moral distinctions. Here’s an example. The Constitution provides for the return of fugitive slaves in Article IV, Section 2, Clause 3. Because Lincoln considered the Constitution’s requirements to be sacrosanct, he said he would have voted in Congress for a Fugitive Slave Act to execute the clause even though he found its purpose reprehensible. Yet at the same time, he said he would have voted to ban slavery in the territories even though the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Dred Scott* held that such a ban would be unconstitutional.

Why the difference? As the legal scholar Albert Alschuler pointed out, it was a matter of “settling power.” In the hierarchy of Lincoln’s political religion, the text of the Constitution had unchallengeable power to settle a dispute – whereas interpretations by the Court are not entitled to the same level of obedience. Court decisions are permanent until they aren’t. And when the Court undoes a precedent it is often because of popular pressure, which a politician might properly mobilize. Settled law just means settled for now.

But the constant in Lincoln’s discernment was the principle that slavery was evil. That’s why, when Stephen Douglas proposed making slavery in the territories a matter of “popular sovereignty” – letting whites decide in each place, as if slavery and not-slavery were ethically equivalent – Lincoln said he was “blowing out the moral lights around us.”

Again, with the benefit of hindsight, we may find it unsatisfying or problematic that Lincoln would defy unjust laws only some of the time instead of all the time. But what he had to do was discern. He didn’t default to the blanket idea that might makes right. Or to

the idea that right makes might. He tried to reckon with imperfect institutions and he struck a balance based on gradations of legitimacy and moral obligation. Martin Luther King did so as well when, from Birmingham Jail, he spelled out the case for civil disobedience – a case that required that he take his punishment from an evil system.

Of course, I don't mean to suggest that his kind of accommodation to the system, even as you challenge it, is the only honorable path. Harriet Tubman and the conductors of the Underground Railroad gave neither the Constitution, the Court, nor the laws of the Congress or of the states any such deference. We consider her a civic saint today.

How would you choose? You can ask this as a thought experiment about the past. But far more useful is to prepare with others for the everyday choices before us now. You in California have your voices minimized by the Constitution that Lincoln revered – by the structure of the Senate and the Electoral College. Should you accept decisions by the Senate that hurt your state? Should your state respect the Supreme Court if the Court says that you can't go your own way on immigration or refugees or trade policy or other issues? Imagine if it reverses itself on marriage equality.

What do you in Los Angeles considered settled? What arrangements and precedents are you ready and even willing to *unsettle*, whether you're a conservative or a liberal? And what about all the people who are not in this room of class and color privilege, or people whose ideology is the opposite of yours – how would they answer, and would you respect their answers? In which institutions do you place your civic faith? In which people under which circumstances within what borders do you vest settling power?

These are questions that get answered not by concepts but by choices, everyday choices that emerge from a habit of choosing. Voting is the most visible and well-known of such habits. But it's not necessarily the most important.

Consider the tens of thousands of Americans who took to streets and public squares Thursday to protect the Mueller investigation and to send a message after the attorney general was forced out. Their choice to respond to an alert and show up two days after an exhausting election was, in some ways, as consequential as their choice to cast a ballot. Legitimacy comes in many forms: votes are one; street heat is another.

On that trip to Europe a few weeks ago, Jená and I went to Barcelona for the first time. It was as beautiful and vibrant as we thought it would be, and seeing the otherworldly architecture of Gaudí was mind- and soul-expanding. But for the civic nerd in me, what was particularly interesting was the politics of Catalonia, the region that includes Barcelona. Under the Spanish Constitution, Catalonia has a great deal of autonomy. But a little over a year ago a constitutional crisis unfolded over a referendum on Catalan independence. The Spanish government interceded and the leaders of the Catalan government were arrested, jailed, and replaced. Protests and upheaval followed.

That's why it seemed every other window in the Gothic Quarter was flying the yellow Catalan flag with three red stripes, and why the remaining windows had signs calling for the freeing of political prisoners. It is why the Barcelona versus Real Madrid soccer match wasn't just the usual big-time football contest but had sharp political overtones. And it's why, when I went to the Museum of Catalan History and struck up a conversation with a staff member there, he warned darkly that a rebellion was coming.

In many parts of California and the United States there are people who also warn darkly that a rebellion is coming. Some are crackpots, some are prophets, some are both. Some are Tea Partiers and militiamen, others are socialists and Antifa. History – which, again, is only the accumulation of our choices – will decide whose rebellion will matter. But rebellion isn't self-executing. If it comes, it will come because people in fives and tens and hundreds will have practiced asking themselves and each other whether it is better to repair a damaged institution or to destroy it. They will have decided that it is better to start anew. If the society is as lucky as this country was 240 years ago, they will be prepared for the burdens of their choice.

Where do we get that kind of practice? In clubs. In associations. In town meetings. In gatherings like Civic Saturday where you're not just spectators but where you are the congregation or the citizenry, working through ideas and emotions with one another and knowing that you can only do your work for a length of time before you must hand it off to someone else. Which brings me to my final topic today.

Passing the Baton

The poem we heard by Elizabeth Alexander was not just a nod to the fact that Barack Obama was elected president ten years ago this week. It was also a reminder to us that no single president can ever save or destroy a country. That a democratic republic is really an unending relay race – and a relay race run not in a stable oval but in chaotic swerves – and run not primarily by the president but by the people.

We the people overcame tyranny to make a black man leader of the free world and then made his successor the most powerful friend a foreign tyrant could ask for. But to focus on the faults and virtues of each man – and I believe each man has both – and to focus on elections and Election Days is to lose track of what really matters, which is the baton that's moving, generation after generation, backward and forward, through this struggle toward a distant, more perfect destination.

The baton is our values. The baton is the American creed. The baton is the set of institutions our Framers gave us to govern ourselves. It is their example. Even when a president throws the baton aside, we the people can pick it up and keep running. We do. We are. A society that depends on a president or a premier or a chancellor to always carry the baton – to be the keeper of the creed – is a society that is sick.

When my wife and I were in Berlin, we took a side trip to a small town called Aschersleben. It's in the former East Germany but unlike Berlin was not devastated by war or remade by communism, so it retains its medieval city wall and many of its ancient buildings. Aschersleben is where Jená's father and his half-Jewish family lived until 1936, when they read the writing on the wall and fled to the United States.

Today there are zero Jews in Aschersleben. But thanks to a committee of local citizens, the stories of the Jewish families who once called that place home are being told again. Two years ago, we were invited to Aschersleben for a ceremony with the German artist Gunther Demnig. Gunther has for years been making and installing brass cobblestones called *stolpersteine* – stumble-stones – to mark and memorialize the places throughout Germany where Jews and others persecuted by the Nazis last lived. On this crisp autumn day in September 2016, he was installing stones for Jená's father, brother, and grandparents, who fled, and for her great-aunt, who had remained and was, as the inscription states, deported to Theresienstadt and murdered.

The citizen working group had organized this ceremony. They had done the historical, genealogical, and architectural research to know the house that was Jená's family's home (it's now a medical office building) and to know the story of each person being memorialized. During that visit we became particularly close to two of the members of the committee, and it was these two whom we went back to see last month.

One is named Udo Stephan. He just turned eighty. A retired microbiologist, he is compact and quiet and has an understated wry sensibility that masks a deep quiet current of energy. Our other friend is Lars Bremer. He is closer to forty, the husband of the pastor of the 500-year old Saint Stephani church, father of five, and a high school teacher. They and their fellow volunteers have been assembling so much research on the lost Jews of their town that beyond the *stolpersteine* ceremonies they have been writing books, organizing symposia, and creating museum exhibits.

The latest exhibit was set up inside the church, as part of the town's centennial commemoration of the end of World War I. It was about the Jewish residents of Aschersleben who'd fought in the Great War for Germany. Each had a posterboard placard in the aisle of the church, with his photograph and key biographical details. Some died in the Somme and the Marne and on the Western Front. Others survived the war only to be killed in the Holocaust. Others still survived and lived under communism.

What was remarkable was that Udo and Lars knew each person's story inside and out, knew about relatives of each person and who those relatives were related to and where they had gone. They spoke of the dead Jewish men and their families as if they were kin. And that's when I realized: they see themselves as something akin to kin. They see those stories and their own as entwined. They see their responsibility not only to the dead but to the living: to each other, they who must live as citizens of today's Germany.

When Udo is too old to do this work, Lars and others even younger, including one of his former students, David, will take the baton. They carry memory, yes. But they carry a creed as well, of warning and of duty. A creed that led them to welcome Syrian refugees to Aschersleben three years ago and to help those refugees find work. To protect those refugees when anti-Muslim graffiti started appearing on the old city buildings and as nationalist right-wing parties started drawing more votes from their polite neighbors.

Udo and Lars and their small band of big citizens do not have illusions. Udo told me he assumes that no more than a few thousand of the town's 30,000 residents really know about what they're doing. But they work with high purpose. And though as Germans – East Germans – they have an ambivalent relationship to patriotism, I would say they work with a spirit of true patriotism. And I would ask: What can you do, where you live, to live more like Udo and Lars? To do your small part of the vast reckoning and repair?

You'll recall that line in my civic creed that true patriotism doesn't mean "My country, right or wrong" but rather "My country – when right, to be kept right; when wrong, to be set right." I didn't make up that line. I borrowed it from its creator, a man named Carl Schurz. Schurz was a German immigrant who joined the Union Army during the Civil War, became a general, ran for office, and became a U.S. Senator from Missouri. He uttered those words in a Senate debate. I've quoted him more times than I can count.

What I didn't learn until I was in Berlin last month, at an exhibition on the history of parliamentary democracy in Germany, is that Carl Schurz was a so-called "Forty-Eighter" – one of the young idealistic reformers who in 1848 pushed for democracy and created Germany's first parliament, but then were blocked by the aristocracy and military, and had to flee. Many escaped to the U.S. – to Texas and the Midwest.

Young Carl Schurz left Germany to become an American patriot. He brought the baton of liberty and equality here. He fought to end slavery. When he was a senator during the Gilded Age and the age of Empire, he spoke out against nativism and jingoism fiercely and proudly enough so that 160 years later a son of Chinese immigrants might come upon his example share it with you in this, the most global and diverse and future-facing city in our nation. The baton has been passed. I pass it on to you.

"America, you great unfinished symphony." That line at the end of *Hamilton*, in the scene that ends Hamilton's life, rings achingly true to me. It is the Carl Schurz story. It is the Barack Obama story. It is also the story of countless millions of others who lived lives of quiet inspiration. Robert Cane – Jená's father. Chao-hua Liu – my father. It is the story of connections of blood and belief between Aschersleben and America. It is the source of my faith in democracy – and the object of my devotion to our country's creed. There is so much pain around us today, so much anger and cynicism. Let us take a step together. One more leg, one more length. As Elizabeth Alexander wrote: *Praise song for walking forward in that light.*

We make American democracy worth believing in by believing in it – and then by organizing in small circles of citizens to bring those beliefs to life. This democratic faith is not blind. It is not divine or supernatural. It is nothing more and nothing less than a faith in each other. Are you worthy of such faith? I will make you more so by believing in you. By inviting you. Then by creating with you or excavating history with you or maybe even arguing with you about what it means to live like a citizen. To set things right.

The American revolution never stops but sometimes it accelerates. This is such a time. Will we have the rule of law, or the rule of bad men? Can we rewrite our social contract from the bottom up and the middle out? Can we reverse the coarseness of our culture? Can we put out the fires that are consuming our republic? I think we can because I am looking at you. We are called today to rename and rediscover what we must believe and put into practice if we're to make this American experiment work.

Have values. Make choices. Pass the baton. Your country is counting on you.

Reading to Precede the Sermon
November 10, 2018

Abraham Lincoln
Speech at Young Men's Lyceum
Springfield, Illinois
January 27, 1838

Let every American, every lover of liberty, every well wisher to his posterity, swear by the blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least particular, the laws of the country; and never to tolerate their violation by others. As the patriots of seventy-six did to the support of the Declaration of Independence, so to the support of the Constitution and Laws, let every American pledge his life, his property, and his sacred honor;— let every man remember that to violate the law, is to trample on the blood of his father, and to tear the character of his own, and his children's liberty.

Let reverence for the laws be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe that prattles on her lap – let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges; let it be written in Primers, spelling books, and in Almanacs;— let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the *political religion* of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.

While ever a state of feeling, such as this, shall universally or even very generally prevail throughout the nation, vain will be every effort, and fruitless every attempt, to subvert our national freedom.

Elizabeth Alexander
“Praise Song for the Day”
Poem for the Presidential Inauguration of Barack Obama
January 2009

Each day we go about our business,
walking past each other, catching each other's
eyes or not, about to speak or speaking.

All about us is noise. All about us is
noise and bramble, thorn and din, each
one of our ancestors on our tongues.

Someone is stitching up a hem, darning
a hole in a uniform, patching a tire,
repairing the things in need of repair.

Someone is trying to make music somewhere,
with a pair of wooden spoons on an oil drum,
with cello, boom box, harmonica, voice.

A woman and her son wait for the bus.
A farmer considers the changing sky.
A teacher says, *Take out your pencils. Begin.*

We encounter each other in words, words
spiny or smooth, whispered or declaimed,
words to consider, reconsider.

We cross dirt roads and highways that mark
the will of some one and then others, who said
I need to see what's on the other side.

I know there's something better down the road.
We need to find a place where we are safe.
We walk into that which we cannot yet see.

Say it plain: that many have died for this day.
Sing the names of the dead who brought us here,
who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges,

picked the cotton and the lettuce, built
brick by brick the glittering edifices
they would then keep clean and work inside of.

Praise song for struggle, praise song for the day.
Praise song for every hand-lettered sign,
the figuring-it-out at kitchen tables.

Some live by *love thy neighbor as thyself*,
others by *first do no harm or take no more
than you need*. What if the mightiest word is love?

Love beyond marital, filial, national,
love that casts a widening pool of light,
love with no need to pre-empt grievance.

In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,
any thing can be made, any sentence begun.
On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,

praise song for walking forward in that light.