



“Time Travel”

Sermon by Eric Liu • Civic Saturday

Northwest African American Museum • Seattle, WA • April 28, 2018

I am moved to be here today at the Northwest African American Museum. I am moved in part because two days ago in Montgomery, Alabama, a remarkable cousin to this institution opened its gates to the public. It’s called the National Memorial for Peace and Justice but everyone has been referring to it as “the lynching museum.”

The National Memorial is the brainchild of the lawyer Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative and celebrated defender of death row inmates. It honors the thousands of African American men and women lynched by white citizens in the 19th and 20th centuries. It forces our country to see that white supremacy is a system not only of laws but of social norms, and that for every white American who ever put a noose around the neck of an innocent black American or set that swinging body on fire or sliced off its appendages, for each such perpetrator there were hundreds more white bystanders who stood in the crowd in their Sunday best smiling for the camera.

Many of them still walk the earth today.

That memorial in Montgomery, like this museum here in Seattle, is testament to the fact that in the journey of truth and reconciliation, truth must come first. That memorial, like this museum, challenges us not just to face the past truthfully but also to see, as Faulkner said, that the past is not even past. It is with us, like a second self.

I’ve been thinking a lot about how truth travels through time. This morning, in fact, I was thinking about how it has become something of a convention, almost a cliché, at least in more progressive spaces, to open gatherings like this with a solemn statement of acknowledgment that we stand on Native lands and we remember the Duwamish and the other first peoples who were first to claim this place.

When this started happening at events and conferences a few years ago, I thought it was stirring and appropriate. Lately, though, I am finding this gesture to be unsatisfying. And a little bit dishonest. This land is not in fact Native land anymore. It is land that was appropriated – let’s say it plainly – *stolen* by white people, through force and legal subterfuge, from the Native peoples who were its earliest inhabitants.

That's the truth. And the question is: what, if anything, are we going to do with the truth? Most of the time, the solemn acknowledgment is followed by a quiet pause and then on to the business at hand. The better way to honor Native communities, I think, is not to say for show that this is still their land; it is to acknowledge that their ancestors were dispossessed of this land and that all of us who live here today have some obligation beyond words to address that. To make amends. To help reduce the inequities of health, education, and opportunity that have flowed from that history of dispossession.

This is the spirit of what Bryan Stevenson has created in Alabama. He draws a thick, unbroken line between the state-sponsored terrorism that was the Jim Crow lynch mob and the system of mass incarceration of black and brown people today. His day job is about repairing today's system of mass incarceration. And the memorial he and his team have created invites us to consider whether we, either in our day jobs or simply in our lives as citizens, might also be willing to step from remembrance to repair.

This is a year of so many fiftieth anniversaries in American social and political history. In the room next door, an exhibit that opened just last night commemorates the fiftieth anniversary of the Seattle Black Panther Party. Three weeks ago, we observed the moment fifty years ago when Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. I myself will be hitting the half-century mark in November. Which is why I have been eager to ensure that you and I don't just saunter self-indulgently along memory lane. Rather, you and I this year, this moment, must articulate a philosophy of memory that is aligned with a philosophy of action. What shall we *do* with our memory?

Most of the time, we Americans don't even bother to remember. How many Americans know that Black Panther is a top-grossing mega-phenomenon of a comic-book film but have no idea what the Black Panther Party was or did? How many Seattleites posted commentary online about the movie's magical society of Wakanda yet have no idea that the Carolyn Downs Clinic just a few blocks from here was born of the Black Panthers' community activism and is the nation's only remaining such clinic from that era? How few of us in this room know that "Lift Every Voice and Sing" started its life as a poem written for another anniversary – the 100th birthday of Abraham Lincoln – but became a cherished civil rights anthem and is considered today the black national anthem.

This tendency toward amnesia is why we Americans often act as if the mere act of remembrance is an achievement deserving of a prize. But it isn't. It's just the price of the ticket. You've earned the right to shape civic and political life if you know something about what came before and what people endured. That's why my theme today is time travel: literally and figuratively, politically and culturally, individually and collectively.

Imagine that we were jumping back in history, one decade at a time. What would you tell people if you – the *you* you are now – were transported in the blink of an eye back to 2008, then after a while to 1998, to '88, '78, and finally back to 1968? This thought experiment is occasioned by this fiftieth anniversary year. But it's inspired by Octavia

Butler, whose great novel, *Kindred*, imagined a black woman and her white husband becoming transported, without warning, back and forth between their apartment in California in 1976 and the Maryland plantation where her enslaved and enslaving ancestors lived during the 19th century.

Though Butler is often called a science fiction author, she insisted that *Kindred* should be read not as science fiction but as a “grim fantasy” that would enable people to know more than the facts of the history of this nation and instead to feel that history in their gut. So come with me now as I unspool the decades in a journey of revelation.

All at once, it's 2008. I'm in my house in Seattle. I see my reflection in the window and my face has fewer lines, my glasses are not my current glasses, and I'm wearing a sweatshirt I thought I'd given away years ago. Yet it's me inside. I still know what I know, have experienced what I've experienced, as if it were 2018. Everything has been rewound but my soul. I look at my daughter, who isn't in college as I think she should be but is not yet nine and is doing homework in the kitchen, and at my wife Jená, who won't be my wife for six more years and only just moved in with me and Olivia.

They don't notice that I am stunned and disoriented to be suddenly a decade younger, so I slip downstairs to the office. I open my old clunky laptop and instinctively go to social media to find out what's happening, except that it's still three months before I will join Facebook and a year and a half before I sign up for Twitter. When I go to the New York Times website I see that it is April 28, 2008.

Who knows how long I'll be in this state, in this time? I ask myself: What should I tell people? What should I warn others about? Can I prevent anything bad? Is there something I did in this time, in the spring of 2008, that I have always regretted and now I can do differently or not at all?

The possibilities are paralyzing. Now that I have the chance, it seems, to redo and undo, I am newly aware that I don't know what it really is that I *did* do. It's hard to untangle the skein of action and omission in my personal life and to know what strands to snip or to savor. What about my life as a citizen, then? Are cause and effect any easier to untangle here? The main front page headline of the Times that day is, “Lenders Fight Stricter Rules on Mortgages.” Who do I tell, where do I go to ring the bell, to say *Stop futzing around! The economy is going to melt down in a few months and you are going to unleash a global tsunami of populist anger and racist scapegoating unless you curb these banks and stop giving mortgages to anyone with a pulse!*

I could warn the people I know who work for John McCain that if he chooses Sarah Palin as his running mate this summer he will release a strand of paranoid, nativist, anti-intellectualism into Republican politics that will destroy their party in all but name. Or I

could go around and tell people to watch out for Donald Trump – yes, the *Celebrity Apprentice* star – to curb him now so he can't build a nihilist reactionary movement to become the president of the United States who follows the dignified, decent, two-term President Barack Obama. But who would believe me? Well, then what? Should I at least tell people not to join Facebook – that they'll regret the addiction, that our country will regret the manipulation this platform makes possible?

I'm contemplating all this when suddenly the screen of my laptop gets fuzzy and then the room around me dematerializes and now I've fallen farther back in time.

It's April 1998. I'm in midtown Manhattan, near Rockefeller Center. It's still me inside but it's definitely the late '90s outside. Everyone around me looks like they're extras on the set of *Friends*. My clothes are impossibly baggy and my hair looks like a Chia pet version of my hair in 2018. People walking down the street and waiting at crosswalks and standing at bus stops are looking at other people, at the sky, at the windows of cafes. They have no smartphones. They have no idea what just happened in the world. Breaking News is not yet a sad description of the state of American journalism. It is something that happens, not very often, that you'll hear about later, possibly not until the next day, unless you are watching one of these new 24-hour cable networks.

As it happens, I work for one of these networks in 1998. I'm a new pundit at the new network called MSNBC, and three times a week, I'm thrown together with several other young pundits of all races and all political persuasions to debate the news of the day in politics and culture. Nobody's watching this new channel but we're having a blast. I am marveling at the game of it all, at how I can be having a heated debate on-air with Ann Coulter in which it occurs to me she is the very face of evil and then once the cameras are off she's warmly asking about my family and talking about plans for the weekend.

I know, standing there with my MSNBC colleagues, that even though it'll be for a brief moment and for a mere flicker of public attention, I have a platform. And I know how all this is going to end. Should I use that platform like Howard Beale did in *Network*, to go off on a live in-studio rant about how much the United States at the very peak of its global power is getting ready to squander all of what made it truly great?

The Monica Lewinsky scandal is blooming and the president will be impeached before the year is out and the dot-com boom is becoming a bubble but how do you know when a boom is a bubble and everyone has become a day trader and a stock picker and the hustle is intoxicating and meanwhile Boris Yeltsin's Russian democracy is curdling into kleptocracy and Osama Bin Laden is planning the bombings of the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi that will kill hundreds and wound thousands and most American won't notice. We are all looking at the wrong things. And we will all learn the wrong lessons.

I sit in the TV studio, I clear my throat, and I am about to use my twenty years of foresight to tell my fellow Americans to get their shit together, when – *bam* – another decade has been obliterated. It is April 1988.

My mind, which is already scrambled by this unpredictably predictable march backward in time, struggles to recall what the world was like when I was nineteen going on twenty. As I get my bearings, every cell in my body screams to call my father. My father, who will be dead in three years, dead suddenly without a proper chance to say goodbye, and so if it's April 28, 1988 I have three years, two months, nine days and six hours to call him and see him as often as possible and to bring a notebook so I can record his answers to all the questions I've been wanting to ask him for the last 28 years of *my* life. There is so much I want to say to him, and will have to find a way to say without revealing that I have come from the future and know his fate and ours.

And to my country? What do I want to say to my country now that I've traveled back thirty years? I am in college. It is my sophomore spring. I am 19 and have yet to cast my first vote. George H.W. Bush and his Southern henchman Lee Atwater will run a campaign that is more than ruthless enough to dispatch nice Mike Dukakis. President Bush will expel Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in a couple of years and make possible another President Bush who will think he's finishing the job in Iraq but instead will commit the greatest unforced error in the history of American foreign policy.

But that's not what I want to turn around and tell my classmates in 1988. What I really want to tell them is that thirty years from now Barbara Bush will have passed, George Bush the elder will be frail, the Bush dynasty will be at an end, and with it the WASP Establishment way of being American. Because I am at Yale in 1988, forty years after young war hero Poppy Bush was there, I will be able to see that that the WASP Establishment, for all its clubby insularity and hypocrisy and obliviousness to the rest of America, did get some things right. I will be able to warn everyone I encounter – classmates, professors, visiting dignitaries – that the United States had better come up with an affirmative alternative to the WASP ethic of service before self, institutions over individuals, party above country, and no crying just because the world is cruel.

I will tell them that in years to come the nation will rediscover African American activists like Pauli Murray from the early civil rights fights who through the force of her words and deeds integrated American life more deeply – and that in fact, the newest residential college at Yale will be named after Pauli Murray in 2017. I will tell folks that young Chinese New Yorkers like me, or young Kenyan Kansans like Barack Obama, will want to inject into that WASP ethic our abiding belief in American hybridity. But I will tell them also that the torch will be passed, if I may defile JFK's language, to a new generation of white supremacists: born in this century, tainted by war, deformed by a hard and bitter peace, and proud of what they mistakenly take to be their heritage.

The first time through the year 1988 I was just a kid. I didn't yet know how to convey all this to the world. But in my return trip now, knowing all that I know, I just want to help my country accelerate its readiness to deal with the day when America is white no longer. And part of what I know now is that even a kid – especially a kid – has the moral authority and the clarity of imagination to call forth a new story of us. Now I know that the teens in Parkland and Seattle and all points between – some of whom are here today – organized the March for Our Lives with just a few weeks' notice and grabbed hold of the national narrative to make gun reform more likely. I know now – and I'll tell my 19-year-old friends in 1988 – that being young is no bar to being a big citizen.

But just as I start organizing, as I start to find my voice – which is to say, to give my younger self my older voice – the elm trees of the Old Campus start pixelating into patches of abstract color, and with one dizzying turn I now find myself thrust back ten more years. Next thing I know I'm in the family room of my childhood home in Wappingers Falls, in the Hudson Valley of New York. It is April 1978. I'm wearing a bowl haircut. In fact, I'm six years away still from accepting my buddies' dare to get my head shaved, which then set me onto a lifetime of crew cuts. And though I am not yet ten, my mind and my spirit somehow carry the hard-won wisdom of nearly fifty years of being.

So the first thing I do, of course, is to run down the street and tell my pals playing baseball not to lose faith – that the Yankees will fall fourteen and a half games behind the Red Sox by July and still, *still* they will triumph: they will come back and win the division in a one-game playoff against the Sox and then win the World Series against the Dodgers. I tell them that it will be a glorious and life-shaping season, and that they must suffer the sting of every early season loss to appreciate the full glory of what's to come. And I tell them to savor it for another reason: it will be eighteen more years – a whole generation – before the Yanks will win another Series.

Now, I know you Mariner fans right now are thinking, *A World Series win every eighteen years? I'll take that.* But my pals in Wappingers Falls are looking at me like the kids in *Stranger Things* and thinking, *Eighteen years, fourteen and a half games – you're being weirdly specific. How do you know this?* To throw them off, I tell them to have faith in something else: in New York. The City in 1978 felt at best adrift and at worst condemned. A year earlier the Bronx had burned, there were blackouts and riots, the Son of Sam was on the loose. Even in my outer suburb there was a creeping sense, certainly among the adults, that not just the city but the world entire was unraveling.

With the hindsight that time travel makes into foresight, I know that New York will bounce back, for just the reason that if I can ever get back to 2018 I will tell folks then and there that *America* will bounce back: the resilient chaos of a complex system that no single person can control or destroy, the capillaries and axons of immigrant hustle that cause the society to repair itself, the unrelenting will to reinvent, and the annoying habit of waiting until things are really broken before patching them for a while longer.

I'll tell it to anyone who will listen. I'll quote my friend Jim Fallows, who will write a book in eleven years, in 1989, called *More Like Us*, explaining why nurturing those qualities – acting more like us and not trying to mimic a rising Japan – will enable America to stave off decline; and then another book in forty years with his wife Deb, called *Our Towns*, explaining why for every visible, palpable dysfunction of national politics in 2018 there are many more invisible, intangible things that work in San Bernardino and Sioux Falls and Greenville and that a bottom-up renewal of civic life is underway in our towns.

I believe it. I have faith in it. And I am aware that only by believing in the possibility of renewal can I make that renewal possible. Of course, these complicated feelings filling the heart of a nine-year-old son-of-immigrants Little Leaguer can hardly make their way through the narrow canal of language out into the world. So much belief, so much feeling and faith and fear, never gets spoken.

And this is what I am thinking when the final burst of chronological energy blinds me and sends me back to April 28, 1968. I am in the womb of my mother Julia Liu. I won't be born for another six months and three days. I am the reason for my mother to have faith. I am the gut feeling she has and will always have. If my 49 year-old consciousness could express itself now I would tell my mom to pay attention when Dr. King is slain and to support the Poor People's Campaign he had launched before his death, to ache when Bobby Kennedy's eyes lose their light on the floor of that California hotel, to become a citizen sooner than 1977 so she can vote in this pivotal year.

But my mother is not paying attention. She is just being. She is breathing and circulating blood and converting food into energy and taking long quiet rests and believing, and that breath and that blood and that energy and that unspoken belief is making me ready to face the world one day.

And here I am. Here we all are, born to so many different mothers, born of so many different worlds, traveling so many curved and broken arcs of time and space to arrive here at this museum on this morning.

It's been quite a journey. Now imagine taking your own decade-by-decade trip back in time. Imagine knowing then what you know now. In this final portion of my sermon, I want to share five truths that this thought experiment of time travel has revealed to me.

First, we should spend less time preserving forms and more time preserving values. Only values should endure. The Congress of the United States exists in roughly the form it took in 1789 but the values that animated it then have nearly evaporated. It is not obvious we need a Congress constituted as it is today but we do need a working system of representative democracy unrigged by money power. The Black Panther Party is not

here anymore in structure yet its values of self-help and mutual aid, of independence and interdependence, endure in many social movements today, both on the left and the right. Nurturing spirit is better than worshipping institutions.

Second, it is too easy to read into our history a single straight-line story of rise or fall or a single personality. We are all things at once. We contain Whitman's multitudes, and we won't know for at least fifty more years whether we are done. When I was born in 1968 America sure looked done. It was not. Or, rather, it was and it wasn't all at once.

Earlier this week, Ben Phillips from our team at Citizen University performed in a brilliant production of Hamlet at the Stimson-Green Mansion on First Hill, in which there are two casts in two tracks that merge and split from room to room. Hamlet the character, we all know, is divided. But by having two actors play Hamlet at once he is also doubled. The genius of expressing our division as a doubling is something to take from the stage to the civic arena. I'm not myself. Am I? Is America itself, or at war with itself? The answer is *yes*: we elected Obama and we elected Trump. *To be and not to be*.

Third, our patterns betray us. Whatever we say we are, what we do over time tells. We Americans say we believe in individual liberty but we have let an imperial trickle-down market mentality march through our society and obliterate the middle class that in the end is liberty's greatest guarantor. We say we believe in equal justice but the majority does not honor the three words "black lives matter" just as it did not honor fifty years ago the four words "I AM a man" because then, as now, the majority saw such assertions of equality of dignity as an attack on their identity. Our patterns betray us.

Fourth, nothing great happens by individual action. Pauli Murray was willing, in an unconscious echo of Nathan Hale, to give her "one small life" for the cause of desegregation but it took decades of collective action for that cause to prevail. At no time could she have stopped Jim Crow alone. She might have stopped a single lynching with superhuman courage and extraordinary luck. But it would take all of us to undo the system that made lynching as routine and special as a big football game. Because it takes all of us to, whether we are awake or not, to make and maintain such a system.

Fifth, and finally, we are all time traveling right now so we should learn to do it better. This very moment there are things from the '60s – the 1860s – still happening in our country. Indentured servitude. Caste and color lines that cannot be crossed. Sexual slavery. Underground sanctuaries for people without papers. Seattle itself is 21st century splendor and 19th century squalor, and you can travel across the span of centuries by walking down a single block in Pioneer Square or South Lake Union.

Hindsight is foresight if we know how to see. The cultural movement that yielded Octavia Butler and her novelistic universes, as well as the Black Panther comics and film characters, is called Afrofuturism. It weaves diasporan dreams with fantastic technologies to make people here and now see that the technology for transformation

already exists. It is in our hearts. It is in our willingness to organize and to make power out of thin air. We could all stand to learn from Afrofuturism. We need a futurism for us all that is dedicated to the proposition that if we are all created equal we should start acting like it. We need a futurism that uses superheroes and comic-book villains to teach us how to see what's right in front of us.

And you know what? If you pay attention, you'll notice that we have the raw material for such a futurism. The superheroes and their foils are all around us. Teenagers across the country are organizing some of the greatest social protests and direct civic actions this country has seen in, well, half a century. Meanwhile the occupant of the White House and the occupant of Kanye West's mansion are tweeting that they are spirit brothers because indeed they are: brothers in narcissism, in a talent for attention-getting, in ignorant certitude that wealth equals wisdom, in a flattened ahistorical belief that what is now is all that is.

Civic Saturday exists so that together we can remember that no condition in our country was created yesterday and no citizen of this country will live forever. Civic Saturday exists so that we can teach each other how not just to tell the truth about our history but also reckon with it. Civic Saturday exists to remind us that to reckon means to calculate, to count up and tally. To prepare ourselves and others to pay the price of reconciliation.

So, here at the Northwest African American Museum, where the Central District meets South Seattle, I want to close by acknowledging that we stand on land that was once inhabited by aspiring African American families, whose elders migrated here as hopeful young people three generations ago from the segregated South and who found a foothold here for a while – for a blink of an eye – and who now have been displaced by gentrification and by the compounding inequity of wealth that has left them unable to withstand the tide of gentrification.

I want to acknowledge further that we must give our time and votes and money to people and organizations and institutions that are working to remedy that underlying inequity and injustice. Some are here today, registering people to vote or working to put universal health care on the ballot in our state or sharing art made by and for activists or teaching the basics of community organizing and empowerment.

And I want to acknowledge the long line of civic superheroes who built this museum: who built it by building it or built it by designing it or built it by justifying it, by living the history that is told within these walls.

Many of them still walk the earth today.

Let us honor them by living like grown-up citizens who know our own minds, who know our place in time, and who will join with others to ensure that the spirit of the struggle for liberty and justice outlives its fragile bodily forms.

Readings to Precede the Sermon
April 28, 2018

Bryan Stevenson
From *Just Mercy*
Published 2014

Proximity has taught me some basic and humbling truths, including this vital lesson: Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done. My work with the poor and the incarcerated has persuaded me that the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice. Finally, I've come to believe that the true measure of our commitment to justice, the character of our society, our commitment to the rule of law, fairness, and equality cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected among us. The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.

"Lift Every Voice and Sing"
By James Wheldon Johnson
Written 1900, set to music 1902

Lift every voice and sing
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the listening skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us,
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun
Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
Till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who has by Thy might led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,
Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand.
True to our God,
True to our native land.

Pauli Murray
From “An American Credo”
Published 1945

I do not intend to destroy segregation by physical force. That would entail human waste and would not gain my objective. I hope to see it destroyed by a power greater than all the robot bombs and explosives of human creation – by a power of the spirit, an appeal to the intelligence of man, a laying hold of the creative and dynamic impulses within the minds of men. The great poets and prophets have heralded this method; Christ, Thoreau, and Gandhi have demonstrated it. I intend to do my part through the power of persuasion, by spiritual resistance, by the power of the pen, and by inviting the violence upon my own body. For what is life itself without the freedom to walk proudly before God and man and to glorify creation through the genius of self-expression?

I intend to destroy segregation by positive and embracing methods. When my brothers try to draw a circle to exclude me, I shall draw a larger circle to include them. Where they speak out for the privileges of a puny few, I shall shout out for the rights of all mankind. I shall neither supplicate, threaten, nor cajole my country or her people. With humility but with pride I shall offer one small life, whether in foxhole or in wheatfield, for whatever it is worth, to fulfill the prophecy that all men are created equal.