

Civic Saturday

“A Good Citizen” by Erin Kelley

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Civic Readings

Of Civil Society by John Locke

~1681

Men being, as has been said, by nature all free, equal, and independent, no one can be put out of this condition and subjected to the political power of another without his own consent. The only way whereby any one divests himself of his natural liberty, and puts on the bonds of civil society, is by agreeing with other men to join and unite into a community for comfortable, safe, and peaceable living one among another, in a secure enjoyment of their properties and a great security against any that are not of it.

Declaration of Independence

1776

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

Civil Rights Bill Speech by Rep. Robert Brown Elliott

1874

The results of the war, as seen in Reconstruction, have settled forever the political status of my race. The passage of this bill will determine the civil status, not only of the Negro, but of any other class of citizens who may feel themselves discriminated against. It will form the capstone of that temple of liberty, begun on this continent under discouraging circumstances, carried on in spite of the sneers of monarchists and the cavils of pretended friends of freedom, until at last it stands in all its beautiful symmetry and proportions, a building the grandest which the world has ever seen, realizing the most sanguine expectations and the highest

hopes of those who, in the name of equal, impartial, and universal liberty, laid the foundation stones.

Sermon

The Good Citizen

I thought I was going to talk about the sacred duty of voting today. After all, the timing of this Civic Saturday falls just before our State's primary election on May 8. In full disclosure, I think voting is a very big deal.

Voting is that bare basic thing we should all do as "good citizens," right?

But who is a "good citizen?" Who even gets to decide what that is?

That second question took me down a rabbit hole. Whenever you ask who gets to decide something, what you're ultimately asking is, "Who has the power?"

There's a big question. Who has power these days? Where *do* citizens find their power? And, if they do find it, how do they use it?

When you really dig into it, something as supposedly simple as the phrase "a good citizen" is rather complex.

Here's where it gets even trickier All this complexity and questioning? This is how America was designed to function.

Not dysfunction! We're not in a hyper-functional state right now, I know, but hear me out ...

For better or worse, this nation was founded by a bunch of Enlightenment thinkers (yes, white men) who loved the idea of self-government, but who never fully trusted the American public to govern themselves. Hell, they didn't even fully trust government itself.

America was designed to operate in a constant state of tension where "good citizens" must constantly work at finding new answers and new solutions. Where "good citizens" must struggle with what our values are and what it even means to be an American.

Folks, there is no clear-cut road map or set of instructions on how to do any of this. I'm going to share some ideas with you. Some ideas you might agree with and others not.

I also want to underscore that much of what I'm going to talk about was inspired by Eric Liu's *You're More Powerful Than You Think: A Citizen's Guide to Making Change*.

Ultimately though, I hope you'll agree our job as "good citizens" is to do more than sit back and enjoy the fruits of American democracy. Our job as "good citizens" is to cultivate and harvest those fruits not only for ourselves, but for future generations.

Yes, voting is a part of this – voting is a part of being a good citizen – but what I really want us to reflect on is how being a good citizen is more than voting. It's about three things:

- It's about showing up (especially for each other)
- It's about believing in and claiming our right to citizen power
- And it's about using our power to achieve goals bigger than our individual selves

Showing Up

In conventional terms, citizenship is largely defined by one's legal status. Particularly today, citizenship is talked about in terms of documentation. You either have birthright citizenship or are naturalized. Either way, there is paperwork somewhere proving a legal status.

That's *who* a citizen is in legal terms. But our question is, "Who is a good citizen and what makes them a good citizen?"

To answer that, we first need to understand the history of citizenship has changed over time and is not a universal idea.

Citizenship is a Western concept. Not all societies think of the relationship between an individual and the state in the same way. Since our democracy is founded in Western thought, that's where I'm focusing my remarks – but it's not a universal way of thinking.

When it comes to Western societies – from ancient Greece and Rome to the Middle Ages in Europe and even here in America – how a citizen has been defined has changed over time.

Who could own property, petition the government, vote, engage in legal action, run for office, serve on a jury . . . all the various rights that have been assigned citizens throughout Western history, have changed from society to society over time as people have debated the nature of citizenship. (As people have debated who should have power.)

As an aside, it's worth noting Socrates, a man born in the very birthplace of democracy where the concept of "citizenship" emerged, declared: "I am not an Athenian or a Greek, but a citizen of the world."

Fluidity and disagreement around the idea of "citizen" is not new. Humans have struggled and argued over this idea for millennia.

What hasn't changed around the notion of "the citizen" is this core idea of a person being bonded to non-family members through some sort of shared public/civic existence.

Citizenship is about seeing our connectedness and our interdependence to those outside our families. It's an acknowledgement that we need each other – that we can't make it out here all alone. We are not only in this together, but stronger when we're together. ("Alone, all alone. Nobody but nobody can make it out here all alone," the poet Maya Angelou tells us.)

This is part of what John Locke is getting at when he writes humans are born with a natural liberty (which I'll say more on in a minute), but then agree to join and unite in a community because that's what helps ensure comfort, safety, and peace.

With all of this in mind, and especially within the fellowship we create at these Civic Saturday gatherings, I encourage you to think of "citizen" not in terms of documentation and legal status. But to think of it more in terms of how a citizen – particularly a "good citizen" – is someone who shows up in public life.

Showing up for each other ... showing up for our communities, our schools, our libraries, our parks, our neighbors, showing up on *and* beyond Election Day ... that is how we fuel the fires of democracy.

As Ralph Nader said, "There can be no daily democracy without daily citizenship."

There is a sacredness to those daily acts of caring enough to show up for each other. We must take the time to nurture and honor that sense of responsibility *in everyone* because that sense of duty and compassion is not about legal status. It's about our shared humanity and it's about the maintenance of the fundamentals of democracy.

What I just said about citizenship might challenge some of you. It might even seem like those were partisan words –that is, that they supported or endorsed a particular party.

I want to take a moment to push back on that. Again, this is a space to grapple with hard stuff.

What I expressed was an idea. An idea that, when considering the lessons of history and embracing this moment in this space with each other, we consider "citizens" as those who care about their public roles and act in the common good.

I didn't try to redefine how the *legal system* should classify a "citizen." Nor did I make a case for adjusting anyone's status or giving newcomers an immediate right to vote. Just how we might broaden the term to think about public roles, shared humanity, and a capacity for anyone to contribute in a democracy.

That may or may not be what you heard. And I honestly don't blame you if it wasn't what you heard.

We have been trained over the past generation or so to fall into a knee-jerk reaction of reading more into an idea than what is there and turning it into something partisan.

You know why? Because systems work the way they were designed to work. Hyper-partisanship serves the interests of those who hold traditional power – on both sides of the political spectrum. It's a strategy that diminishes the true power of democracy.

That true power is citizen power.

Which brings me to the next point...

Believing & Claiming (Citizen) Power

A good citizen not only shows up, but claims their power.

I am not saying we all have equal opportunity to access power. Nor am I saying everyone in this room was the intended recipient of power when this nation was created.

Without question we do not all have the same access to power. Strong and systemic barriers exist to keep many of us from "claiming" power.

But it's a falsehood to think that power only resides out there somewhere.

Citizen power is there for the taking because citizen power exists from within.

I know that might sound a bit self-help-y, but it is actually foundational to democracy. Citizen power isn't something that exists outside of us. It is something that resides in each of us the moment we take our first breath in this country (no matter how we take it).

The vision statement of this nation, the Declaration of Independence, declares each of us – all humans, not just legally defined citizens – as equal under the laws of nature and God. That's just self-evident. It also says we have "inalienable rights." Inalienable rights are those which are impossible to give or take away.

Life, liberty, and happiness ... those are ours. They're not things granted to us by the government. They exist independent of governments and laws.

Those rights of life, liberty, and happiness; the idea that we're all equal; all that that power ... it naturally resides in each of us. (Our democracy reminds me of a wonderful phrase I learned last year during the Spirit & Place Festival from my friends at Southeast Community Services and The Church Within: *I am naturally creative, resourceful, and whole.*)

I know some of you right now are thinking, "Hey, that's great, but Thomas Jefferson and the founders didn't mean me."

Many of them owned slaves. Even the more progressive ones like John Adams laughed when their wives clamored for more rights. (Remember the ladies, John!) Most of these guys didn't

even think most other white men (those without property) should vote or have full access to citizenship.

That's all true. Enlightenment Era ideals and Enlightenment Era reality are two vastly different things.

That reality and that history should never be denied. Hypocrisy is part of our inheritance as a nation. We have to own it so that we can work to overcome it.

At the same time . . . I don't care that Jefferson and the others didn't mean me when they drafted the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution.

The idea that I have value – that I am naturally creative, resourceful, and whole; that I have an innate power which allows me to claim equal access to life, liberty, and happiness; that I am equal to everyone in this room (and vice versa) . . . those are damn fine ideas.

I want those things. I believe those things. I take and claim those ideals as my own regardless if the originators of those words meant them for me.

I claim my citizen power.

“We the People” – no matter our history – are the power source of this entire country. When we show up with and for each other, we are unstoppable.

It's when we stop showing up and when we stop using our power that things go south.

When we become insular and when we disconnect from our public lives (and responsibilities), we give our power to others who often do not have our best interests in mind.

Being a good citizen is about showing up, it's about believing in our innate worth and claiming our power -- because that's the only way a democracy can actually work.

But then we have to use that power not only for ourselves, but for each other.

Using (Citizen) Power

One of the civic readings we read today was by Robert Brown Elliot.

For those who don't know, Elliott was born to West Indian parents either in Boston or Liverpool, England. The historical record is unclear. Regardless, he was person of color who chose to move to South Carolina just after the Civil War ended.

In South Carolina, he helped organize the Republican Party; was the editor of a local newspaper; practiced law; was elected the South Carolina House of Representatives in 1868; and then elected to Congress in 1870 and again in 1872.

Leading up to passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1875, he gave one of the more eloquent speeches ever heard in the House. It's a speech that when you read it in full you realize was directed toward "the honorable gentleman from Georgia."

That gentleman was Alexander Stephens. A fellow Congressman and former Vice President of the Confederacy. A man who argued in 1861, that the "cornerstone" of the Confederacy rested on the idea not just of slavery, but of white supremacy.

Can you imagine being in Elliott's shoes? Try to. Whatever history you bring to this space right now, use it to imagine how Elliott felt.

Try to imagine standing in space you knew was never intended for you, in front of people who literally thought you were less than human. And then imagine how you still found enough hope, inspiration, and beauty in this democracy to say: We can use the best parts of our nation's foundation to create a magnificent capstone on the "temple of liberty." Forget the cornerstone, we can build a capstone that achieves our "highest hopes" based on the ideals, if not the reality, of our founding.

And we should do this for everyone who feels discriminated against.

"The passage of this bill will establish the civil status of not only the Negro, but any other class of citizens who feel discriminated against..."

What impresses me about this moment is that Elliott, with full understanding of the flaws of this country still decided it was worth showing up; worth the effort to claim his inalienable rights and power, and that his efforts should be not only for himself and other African Americans, but for all others who feel the stings of discrimination.

He understood how to balance the tension between the claim to his personal power and liberties and the need to be a "good citizen" – a person who understands they are bonded to others (people they don't even know) in deep and profound ways.

It's not only this "greater good" thinking that impresses me about Elliot. It's also his savvy at knowing how to use power. He understood he needed to move to a community (Reconstruction South) where he'd have a chance to run for office and win. He understood he needed to be "at the table so that he wouldn't be on the menu" as the late Rep. Bill Crawford was fond of saying.

For all the idealistic and philosophical stuff I've been talking about today in regards to believing in, claiming, and using citizen power, it's also critical to understand the mechanics of our government so that you can step into those spaces and do the work that needs to be done.

That's one of the reasons voting is so critical (I had to put in a plug for voting somewhere!). Voting is an essential step of putting a check on the power that does exist "out there." Not all of us will run for office like Elliot, but we do have the capacity (the power) to hold accountable those who claim to represent us.

Conclusion

Of course, Reconstruction failed. Elliot did not live to see a truly equitable America. We're still working towards that.

Elliot's words are a reminder that we are not done building this nation. We can't change the past, but we can build a future. And in building that future, we need each other; all of us.

And all of us need to understand – and believe – in our innate worth and power.

We need to show up.

We need to believe in and claim our power.

We need to use our power.

We need to practice – all of us; Republican/Democrat; Liberal/Conservative – the art of opening our ears and hearts to ideas that challenge us. We need to wrestle with these ideas to gain clarity on how we can be "good citizens."

And, finally, we need to make being a "good citizen" both the cornerstone and the capstone of our civic lives.