

Civic Saturday
Optimism as Rebellion by Erin Kelley
July 20, 2019

Civic Readings

“What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”

Frederick Douglass

July 5, 1852

I have said that the Declaration of Independence is the ring-bolt to the chain of your nation’s destiny; so, indeed, I regard it. The principles contained in that instrument are saving principles. Stand by those principles, be true to them on all occasions, in all places, against all foes, and at whatever cost. . . .

“Is it a Crime for a U.S. Citizen to Vote?”

Susan B. Anthony

1873

It was we the people — not we white male citizens; nor yet we male citizens — but we the whole people, who formed this Union; and we formed it, not to give the blessings of liberty, but to secure them – not to the half of ourselves and the half of our posterity, but to the whole people, women as well as men. And it is downright mockery to talk to women of their enjoyment of the blessings of liberty while they are denied the use of the only means of securing them provided by this democratic-republican government.

Speech Excerpt

Cesar Chavez

1968

When we are really honest with ourselves, we must admit that our lives are all that really belongs to us. So it is how we use our life that determines what kind of [people] we are.

Sermon

Almost a year ago today, I stood in this room and talked about “promises.” How America is an experiment and how its many promises have yet to be fulfilled. I talked about how as citizens – “citizen” not defined by papers or laws but by the shared action of showing up for each other in public life – how as citizens we have an obligation to help America live up to her many promises.

I gave that sermon a year ago because of what was in the news: America had just begun separating families along the border. We were warehousing children in abandoned Wal-Marts.

It’s hard to imagine how things could go from bad to worse; but they have.

Our government actually debated in federal court last month whether children under our care deserve soap and toothpaste. Last week our country launched massive deportation efforts of undocumented immigrants; attempted to change asylum rules; and told four of its Members of Congress – all women of color -- “to go home.”

In each instance, children, undoubtedly, were harmed by what they experienced or heard.

How anyone can look at a scared child and think they deserve anything less than warm hugs, smiles, encouragement, and the security only a parent or loved one can provide – not to mention basic necessities—is beyond me.

When it is my very country that cannot see this, it breaks my heart.

It is despairing in the deepest sense and makes me feel weak and insignificant in the face of an inhumanity I cannot comprehend.

Thinking back how I concluded that sermon last year ...

I talked about the need embrace and remember the darker moment of our history because while the past shapes our present, it need not define our future.

And I talked about how we need to love one another so that we don't lose sight of our humanity.

I still believe all that. But I also believe we need a little rebellion.

We're a nation founded – and shaped—by rebellion, after all.

But rebellion – the constructive rather than destructive kind – takes energy. A lot of energy.

I know it can be hard to tap into that energy when times are so bleak. That's why I want all of us here today to commit to one particular act of rebellion ... that is, to be optimistic.

As the futurist Alex Steffen says: "Cynicism is often seen as a rebellious attitude in . . . , but in reality, our cynicism advances the desires of the powerful: cynicism is obedience. . . Optimism is a political act."

I admit not feeling much optimism in our elected officials or political systems right now. And it is hard to feel optimistic while children suffer.

But I refuse to let go of hope. I refuse to let go of a belief that good citizens – you, if no one else – will fight for those children and in doing so fight for the soul of our democracy.

Giving up and claiming it's all hopeless; embracing an attitude of cynicism – folks, that's the goal of these cruel practices!

There are those who want us to be complacent. Obedient.

Sadly, using children to crush optimism and breed cynicism – that's one of those hard historical truths we have to deal with to move forward.

This country turned away Jewish refugees (many of them children) fleeing Nazi Germany in the 1930s; it stole Native American children off reservations and sent them to "white/re-education" boarding schools throughout the 19th & early 20th centuries; it lied to Mexican-American citizens during the Great Depression by

telling them jobs were waiting for them back in Mexico, put them on trains and effectively deported thousands; and it has stalked and tore apart black families 150 years after emancipation with Jim Crow laws, segregation, red lining, and mass incarceration.

But we cannot let the weight of that knowledge paralyze us. We must stake out rebelliously optimistic roles for ourselves because that is the courageous act needed if we are to help America live up to her principles and promises.

You, if no one else – and this goes for you regardless of color, age, gender, ethnicity, background, political persuasion – you must find the courage to cling to your optimism.

As Alex Steffen also says, “We cannot build what we cannot imagine.” You’re going to need some optimism to imagine something better than what is.

My goal today is to try to provide a little inspiration on that front. I’m going to briefly talk about three rebels who dared to imagine “a more perfect Union.” Three rebels whose optimism made this nation better – **Frederick Douglass, Susan B. Anthony, and Cesar Chavez.**

None of these people lived perfect lives. They were not heroes in all of their deeds and words. Yet they had heroic moments that we’re all the better for.

Frederick Douglass

Our nation just wrapped up its 243rd birthday. We celebrate the 4th of July because it marks the beginning of a new nation – a nation founded on the ideals of liberty, equality, freedom, happiness ... and also rebellion.

We are a nation that emerged out of an act of rebellion. From The Boston Tea Party – aka, that costume party with “looting” as its main theme – to the actual Revolutionary War, this nation was founded by rebels.

Of course, that rebellious and freedom-loving spirit did not include everyone. As Samuel Johnson – a British writer, essayist, and moralist – wrote in 1775, “How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?” Fair question, Dr. Johnson.

This hypocrisy is why when the abolitionist Frederick Douglass was asked by the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society to deliver the keynote address to their Independence Day celebration in 1852, he declined to speak until July 5th.

"This Fourth of July is yours, not mine," he says. "You may rejoice, I must mourn."

"What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless . . ."

He was just getting warmed up.

Here is the context in which he made those remarks:

We know from the 1850 census there were more than 3.2 million enslaved people in the United States.

We also know that in 1850 the Fugitive Slave Act had been passed. This was a federal law requiring everyone in the United States to honor the "property rights" of those who enslaved black Americans. It made it illegal to assist – give food, water, or shelter – to those running toward freedom. (Sound familiar?)

This was the world Frederick Douglass – a man who had escaped slavery himself – lived in.

His speech that day was harsh, but also optimistic. He believed the abolition of slavery would ultimately happen. He believed good people, and even America's institutions would make it so.

He tells his audience the Declaration of Independence contains "saving principles." And that they should, "Stand by those principles, be true to them on all occasions ... at whatever cost."

He even concludes by saying: "I do not despair of this country. There are forces in operation, which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery. I, therefore, leave

off where I began, with hope. While drawing encouragement from the Declaration of Independence, the great principles it contains, and the genius of American Institutions, my spirit is ... cheered ...”

When I read this speech, what I hear Douglass telling these folks (a group of white women, so it does resonate with me from that perspective): Hey, I get up every day in a world that is a lot harder for me to walk in than it is for you. So I need you to remain committed to those founding documents & principles you say you love so much on *your* Independence Day. I need you to fight cynicism and remain rebelliously optimistic with me that our efforts will amount to something. Because giving up isn't an option for me. And if I can remain optimistic in the progress of humanity and in a nation that literally thinks me less than human, what's your excuse?

I'm like anyone else. Sometimes I need a “kick in the pants kind of message” to stay motivated and that's what Douglass provides. How dare I not put in the work and remain optimistic my country can correct itself when Frederick Douglass – a man who faced challenges I will never be able to comprehend – maintained such courage and optimism himself?

Susan B. Anthony

Another rebel who inspires me is Susan B. Anthony.

Like Douglass, Anthony did not believe failure to be an option. In fact on her 86th birthday in 1906 she famously quipped, “Failure is impossible.”

Anthony died a month after that birthday remark and the 19th amendment – which prohibits the government the denying the right to vote based on sex – wouldn't become part of the Constitution for another 14 years.

Anthony began her work as an activist at the age of 17 by collecting signatures for an anti-slavery petition. In her early 30s she met her dear life-long friend Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Together, they founded many organizations including The Women's Loyal National League -- the first women's political organization in the nation and led a campaign to amend the Constitution to abolish slavery.

Eventually, Anthony came to believe women could only make headway on important societal issues if they focused their efforts exclusively on the right to vote. So, she and Stanton founded the National Woman Suffrage Association in 1869.

This group opposed the 15th Amendment which prohibited the government from denying the right to vote based on race. Anthony and Stanton argued suffrage for African Americans and women needed to happen at the same time. If not at the same time, then white women should come first because they were tired of waiting their turn and “better prepared” for the responsibility.

This created a rift in the woman’s suffrage movement which, frankly, still affects feminism today. “Intersectionality” was not a concept at this time, although there were certainly black women leaders, like Ida B. Wells & Mary Church Terrell, who spoke about the unique challenges and obstacles facing women of color. Anthony, unfortunately, never really got the point.

But to put Anthony’s work in a little more context, she lived in an era where women (regardless of color): Could not own property; petition for divorce; be granted custody of their children if their husband divorced them; could be committed without consent by their husbands to mental institutions; had no labor or equal pay laws protecting them; and, of course, could not vote.

Yet Anthony believed, until her dying day, failure was impossible. She may not live to see the day women could vote, but she would tell women: *You* can make it happen.

Anthony, of course, was more than just words. I couldn’t verify this quote, but I did read somewhere that when co-writing the 6-volume set *The History of Woman Suffrage*, she said she “enjoyed making history more than writing it.”

An example of this is when in 1872 she registered to vote and on Election Day attempted to cast a ballot. She was arrested and leading up to her trial began giving a speech called “Is it a Crime for a U.S. Citizen to Vote?”

When the judicial powers that be got pissed about that, they moved her trial to a different county ... so she packed her bags, moved to that county, and started giving her speech there.

“It was we, the people, not we, the white male citizens, nor yet we, the male citizens; but we, the whole people who formed the Union,” she would tell her audience.

The verdict, unsurprisingly, came back guilty and Anthony was fined \$100.

Although the judge tried silencing her repeatedly, she refused to be quiet and told him, “I shall never pay a dollar of your unjust penalty And I shall earnestly and persistently continue to urge all women to the practical recognition of the old revolutionary maxim, that ‘Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God.’”

To put it more bluntly, she told the *Kansas Leavenworth Times* in 1873 that, “The only chance women have for justice in this country is violate the law, as I have done, and as I shall continue to do.”

Anthony never paid that fine.

Like Anthony and Frederick Douglass, I believe in America’s institutions. I really do. But I don’t believe in them blindly, and neither did they. Part of Anthony’s rebellious optimism was rooted in her willingness to act rebelliously against those institutions when they were wrong.

Sometimes, when systems are rigged against us, the only patriotic and moral thing we can do is disobey them.

Cesar Chavez

To be clear, I’m not talking about acts of violent disobedience. Rather, how it oftentimes takes brave acts of civil disobedience to make change happen.

Famous leaders on this front come from the American Civil Right’s Movement: Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Diane Nash, Congressman John Lewis ...

Many Americans don't know enough about another non-violent social justice champion: Cesar Chavez.

Maybe you have heard his name, but don't know much about him. Let me tell you a little bit.

Throughout his life, Chavez used acts of civil disobedience – ranging from boycotts and strikes to marches, protests, and fasts—to draw attention to the plight of farm workers.

Chavez was a Mexican-American who, during the Great Depression, moved with his family from Arizona to California where they could find work as farm laborers. A few years after graduating high school, he went into the Navy but eventually returned to farm work after his honorable discharge.

Chavez became a labor organizer in the early 1950s for a Latino civil rights group. It's during this time that he was introduced to the writings of Gandhi and the concept of non-violent protest.

By the early 1960s, Chavez decided the work he was doing wasn't enough for farm workers. So he walked away from a decent paying job and founded the United Farm Workers union (the UFW).

At the height of the UFW's power, they engaged more than 17 million Americans in a grape boycott aimed at helping California farm workers win better pay and more humane working conditions. This boycott lasted a number of years (from 1965-70) and drew national and international attention. Never before had farmers united in this way.

Building off the success of the boycott, Chavez organized a 110-mile march from San Francisco to the vineyards of Modesto, CA in 1974. The march began with relatively low numbers. By the time it reached Modesto, the numbers had swelled to more than 15,000.

This got the attention of then governor Jerry Brown who in 1975 signed an Act into law giving farm workers the right to collectively bargain.

Many of Chavez and the UFW's successes were short lived. Power does not like to give up power and later elected official (and business leaders) worked to weaken some of these legislative successes.

But that doesn't erase the fact that Chavez – despite setbacks – never stopped believing in the power of everyday people to organize and to take control of their destinies. To take control of this democracy and make it work for them.

Chavez – who, truth be told, had a complicated relationship with undocumented workers – still inspires today. How many of you remember Barack Obama's "Yes We Can!" slogan? That came from the UFW slogan Si si puede.

Chavez once said, "From the depth of need and despair, people can work together, can organize themselves to solve their own problems and fill their own needs with dignity and strength."

What he's talking about there is the unstoppable power of citizens who believe it matters when we show up for each other. Citizens who, even during times of hopelessness, never give up hope; and who fight to see America live up to her principles ... whatever the cost.

Finding Optimism Today

That's a lot to ask for, I know. It's a lot for me to ask of myself let alone you. But it is this kind of rebellious action and optimism that has historically moved America forward.

It's also very important to remember that this optimism was not only held by Douglass, Anthony, and Chavez. It's an optimism that was held in the hearts of the everyday people who worked alongside them – the YOU and me of the day. Those millions of supporters who fought off cynicism, remained optimistic, and showed up for each other when needed.

I find strength and comfort from these stories of the past. They help center my civic commitment and recharge my optimism. If looking to the past doesn't do it for, look at today.

Look at the Wayfair employees who conducted a walkout to bring attention to that company's profiting off a furniture contract with ICE.

Or the Jewish activists with "Never Again Action" who are protesting (and getting arrested) outside ICE facilities. Or the Catholic priests and nuns who were just arrested this week for protesting at a Senate Office Building in D.C.

Look at the jurors in the case against Scott Warren – a 36-year-old geography teacher who assisted two hungry and dehydrated migrants in the middle of the desert last summer. The jury couldn't decide if what he did was a crime; so he's a free man.

These are all examples of the mightiness of citizen power.

As I close, I have to tell you I think it's important we all find that "something" – a poem, song, text, historic figure, close friend – that helps us remain optimistic.

For me, that's been an essay in Time Magazine by the filmmaker Guillermo del Toro.

This essay came out in February and I have found myself going back to it repeatedly because it helps recharge my civic spirit.

I told you my goal today was to help inspire you and recharge your optimism.

So we're going to do something a little different today.

Stand up. Grab that green piece of paper that was in your program. We're going to read del Toro's essay aloud – popcorn style – and I want you to mean the line you read. And we're all going to read the bold section.

Optimism is radical. It is the hard choice, the brave choice. And it is most needed now, in the face of despair – just as a car is most needed when there is a distance to close. Otherwise, it is a large, unmovable object parked in the garage.

These days, the safest way to appear intelligent is to be skeptical by default. We seem sophisticated when we say we don't believe and disingenuous when we say we do.

History and fable show nothing is ever entirely lost. David can take Goliath. A beach in Normandy can turn the tide of war. Bravery can topple the powerful. These facts are often seen as exceptional, but they are not. Every day, we all become the balance of our choices – choices between love and fear, belief or despair. **No hope is ever too small.**

Optimism is our instinct to inhale while suffocating. Our need to declare what needs to be in the face of what is. Optimism is not uncool; **it is rebellious and daring and vital.**

The writer Theodore Sturgeon once said: "90% of everything is crap." This also means "10% of everything is worth the damn effort."

And so it goes time after time, choice after choice, that we decide to leave behind a biography or an epitaph. **Look around you now and decide between the two.** Inhale or die.

There are those who do not want you showing up for others in public life.

There are those who do not want you to commit to living by America's finest principles.

They will try to crush your spirit. They will try to paralyze you into inaction. They will encourage cynicism at every turn.

Fight for your optimism.

It is a vital and rebellious act to do so. It is how you will change the world.

Thank you for being here today.

To close I'm going to ask that we join in small Civic Circles to discuss the following question: **How will you put your optimism into practice this week? (And what kind of help do you need to keep your optimism?)**