



# Library podcast

## Civic Saturday

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[00:00:36] Presented in partnership with Citizen University. My name is Davida Ingram and I am Public Engagement Programs Manager at the Central Library and I want to thank you for coming to hang out with us downtown on a really beautiful Saturday. There. I like this crowd. I'd like a crowd that has good energy. Today's program is made possible with support from The Seattle Public Library Foundation. Do we happen to have any donors here in the crowd. If you can you can make some noise as a podcast so if you if you raise your hand.

[00:01:10] Thank you for keeping this library fun and vital. I want to start by just thanking citizen university for reaching out to us and saying hey we want to do Civic Saturday at the Central Library. There are a couple different things that I want to tell you that are a little bit personal about civic Saturday. I also wanted to thank everyone who put a hand into building this program out because we've been planning it for the last few months.

[00:01:34] So for the civic the Citizen University team Krista Janay and Eric Catherine thank you so much. Taylor thank you so much for spending your time and energy and also for my Seattle Public Library family. Abigail Miss Nadia thank you so much for your energy. I'm especially delighted because this program will also have young leaders who are incredible. So I want to say thank you to our guinea did I get your name right.

[00:02:07] Because I said that was important. I wanted to keep that promise Saudi and Zaria thank you so much for sharing your energy with us today. So I promise you this story and that I want to get off the stage and that story kind of begins in November. My first civic Saturday was directly after the November 2017 presidential election.

[00:02:30] So I want you to take a moment and go back to that time.

[00:02:33] How were you feeling who were you with.

[00:02:38] What were your hopes and fears. And how were you thinking about the state of our country. Today we have Elliott Bay Book selling books today including Eric lose. You are more powerful than you think. But I remember that they were the hosts for that civic Saturday and that felt really hollow to me special spiritual when I think about that day I think about the presence of mind and the foresight that citizen university had to make a public commons which is what civic Saturday is. And I feel so proud to know that Eric Lou and the team that's its citizen university. So Janay or Mr. Taylor Bean we're really interested in doing something that I think is really patriotic. They asked us to think about the work of repair and I want to point out that that was a conversation that they started before the aftermath of the presidential election.

[00:03:38] So I remember sitting in a conversation and their civic collaborator Ari where they kind of propose what are we going to do no matter what your worldview and political aspirations are what are we going to do to come back together. And I think that's what makes civic Saturday a really beautiful thing.

[00:03:54] And I want to thank you for being in this moment as we continue to do the work of repair so knowing that the vision is that United we are so much stronger and it we're so much stronger than the impulses to break apart even when someone is believing or thinking or doing things that you don't abide that we decide to come back together. I also wanted to share with you as a just as the library staff member that we too have been thinking about when you think about not just this central library.

[00:04:26] And I think about this place a lot because I work here so I remember liking knowing that there are nine nine thousand Diamond those glass shapes there nine thousand of them and that this is a place where you come to shine and V diamond like and to find the things that you love and to know that knowledge is power.

[00:04:46] So we have been working on a series of public programs that were really designed to think about what to do in this moment where the political climate in America is shifting so much. And to make it so that everybody understands that they belong in this library. So I'm smiling at our guinea because I happen to go to the Douglass truth library and I was so proud to see young civic leaders who were in high school working with immigrant families to make sure that they knew their rights. And I made sure to tell them you all are so incredible to do this work and to let people know publicly it's not just adults who are thinking about family safety planning and know your rights an immigrant one to one.

[00:05:34] But it's also our young people who very much will inherit the problems that we're creating right now. And they're also in the place of thinking about repair. So with that said I'm excited to one shift our attention over to that incredible podium I'm sad because I'm five to and that podium calls to me because it's cuter.

[00:05:56] I also want it to I believe that I'm bringing. Is it Eric that I'm bringing up first is Janay that's Janay as special to my heart.

[00:06:06] Yes we have a 5 2 0 5 3 and a half club you'll see them now they'll show up.

[00:06:14] Eric and I were the founders of that club at least in our in our house. Thank you. I love David Ingram so much. And we had a really neat I'm not gonna say that because we're podcasting we had a really kick team putting this together.

[00:06:36] So the first thing I always like to do is bring up our team. Come on up here.

[00:06:42] Said Abby. All right. Let. Me. Take a photo okay.

[00:06:56] I did actually introduce everyone and I'm going to do it a little slowly because I want Olivia are our resident photographer today to come or make our way to the center and take a photo of us altogether. Yeah for the podcast they want that. So my name is Janay McCain and the co-founder of citizen university and of civic Saturday. But first I want you to look at our new logo. I love graphics and logos. The yellow up there is not right. Look at this one it's so beautiful.

[00:07:29] Our designers Tim Sanders he he moved out of Seattle last year but we love him and notice it's yellow because we started making this after the longest rainiest darkest winter and I was like he had a low energy radiating I love it. Okay so I'm going to introduce some folks this is shoddy r music musician in residence for today. This is Ben Phillips our Kik. Program manager. This is. How to get a name. Oh it's so beautiful. She's gonna read with us today. This is at our amazing intern from the U Doug. She's a freshman by the way. Or. She's

[00:08:17] Moving up. This is in Misha also works at the library. This is Taylor our civic Saturday's special projects coordinator. Something I just made that up. This is a risk to. The program manager for civic Saturday. And

[00:08:33] This is Zaria. Awesome. Did I get everyone.

[00:08:38] Oh Catherine is doing Facebook Live at this at this moment. OK. Good good good. Where's Abby. Abby I missed Abby somehow. No I got you. OK.

[00:08:49] And Emily is a citizen university book tour manager with Catherine. Who's coming on full time this summer. OK.

[00:08:59] I love our people. Thank you.

[00:09:04] Stay here stay here. OK. I tell you what we're doing here today civic Saturday is a civic analog to church a gathering of friends and strangers in a common place to nurture a spirit of shared purpose but it's not about church or religion or synagogue or mosque or religion. It's about American civic religion the creed of liberty equality and self-government that truly unites us even as we argue over it. That is our mission. So we're going to. Sit in silent reflection together today. We're going to

have conversation circles. We're going to sing together. We're going to have readings of American Scripture civic scripture. Eric is going to deliver a sermon.

[00:09:57] We're going to have more silent reflection and then we're going to break for what we call our social hour.

[00:10:03] We'll have coffee and snacks and then I'll tell you later we're going to create our civic Saturday listening circles and sharing circles for those of you who wish to stay. So now

[00:10:17] I know it's analog but I don't have a watch. We're going to start out just by sitting and standing for about 90 seconds of silence and reflection listening. And if you keep your eyes open seeing let's all take a breath together and let it out.

[00:10:41] In another breath exhale close your eyes if you wish. Oh I just got back from my other home I grew up in Baton Rouge Louisiana I went to college there and then I moved to Seattle and I feel very at home when I'm at a library and when I go to Louisiana when I go back to Baton Rouge I always go to the library in Baton Rouge has a beautiful renovated Central Library and the other place I really feel at home and I try to go when I travel places is the YMCA the Y and the library in Baton Rouge and NCLR and my two favorite places and they never let me down in Baton Rouge just a little different from Seattle in the. Most you know me I can talk to anybody anywhere or more honestly I talk to everybody everywhere

[00:11:47] And in Baton Rouge everyone does. And so at the Y I met all kinds of amazing people and I talked about civic Saturday a lot and I met some people at the Y who want us to bring it there and I think that's going to be our first. Satellite civic Saturday that we we helped prepare and we got some lovely funding for it from some civic Saturday congregants who are going to help us do that and spread it to other places. So I'm very happy to have my two homes and wear them on my neck. I have a Washington and Louisiana necklace but I'm really glad to be back home in Seattle where it is sunny and warm just like it is in Baton Rouge. If you feel today at anytime you want to clap when you hear something that you like or. The thing I love most of all doing this now. I feel like I can do it. Please do that. We love that be a part of us be with us. We're kind of spread out today but we want to feel together so I turn to someone and say hey that was really good.

[00:12:56] If you want to clap it's all good. OK.

[00:13:00] Christie It's your turn Kingston. So now everyone we'd like you to turn to your neighbor and answer the question. Where do you see renewal. So this is going to inform our civic circles during social hour. And you have eight minutes. So go ahead get

[00:13:19] All right. In five four. Three. Two

[00:13:27] And one. Thank you Janay for telling me to count down

[00:13:33] As a human. I'm over here. Of course we could all talk forever and we will in the civic circles after this. So do do stick around and join us for special hour.

[00:13:45] But as you as we kind of recollect ourselves please rise.

[00:13:51] If you're able to our friend Shorty who's our musician in residence today is going to lead us in an original song she composed just for us as of Saturday.

[00:14:03] Yes.

[00:14:06] And she composed it using lyrics from Walt Whitman and Alice Walker poems. So

[00:14:13] What. What an honor to be here and to be able to write a song to sing with you all. So full disclosure I have. I don't think I've ever written a sing along song before. So. It's kind of like an experiment. We're gonna see if it's sing along of all or not. And you all get to be the guinea pigs. So I think we're just we're going to have the lyrics up there so that'll make life easier. But but as was mentioned the lyrics come from two of our great American treasures Alice Walker and Walt Whitman. So the first part a lot of it is Colin response when the lyrics come up you'll see there's the parts in parentheses. Those are the parts that you sing back. Pretty easy straightforward. The parts that I hear America singing the Whitman part that we sing on together. So we'll learn it together now. So listen and then just sing it back

[00:15:09] America's Dee. One thing now. And

[00:15:22] We're Gussie. Great. Let's do that again. And I

[00:15:34] Maverick see Dee one more time to lock it in. He's a. Maverick seemingly gay. Next part is

[00:15:52] Love. Zach everyone loves me. Careful study. Perfect back

[00:16:09] Back game. Great.

[00:16:15] So then the other part with apprentices is pretty straightforward. And later we're going to try combining these parts. I'm gonna split you into groups now and just try to remember your group if you can. So from about here can you please raise your hand. The person in the cool star noodle t shirt. Thank you.

[00:16:35] So from about this friend of ours that way your group one you're gonna be the Whitman group.

[00:16:40] Not now in the future. Thank you. And then from there to about would you raise your hand. I. Thank you. So this little middle section you're going to be the Coal Group. So Group number two

the coal group and then everybody else you're gonna be the response group you have the easiest job. You're welcome

[00:17:06] But we'll get there for now. Let's start by singing this. Let us be poor a bit. Let us people

[00:17:16] And know the truth. Courage handed down. By Steve it's Mother's Day. Joe

[00:17:29] Let us gather. Blossom. Under fire

[00:17:36] And fire.

[00:17:40] Yeah. And that. Well love is dangerous. You all start just a hair earlier. So it'll go well.

[00:17:46] Mother's Day Mother's Day. Let us gather block. Let us get the blossoms. Yeah. You got it. You got it. Here. You

[00:17:56] Go. Let us be put in now. But truth. Courage handed down

[00:18:07] Bowed spirits. Love is danger. Natives gather blast. And fire. And

[00:18:22] Let us know a truce. Chanted Bout's parents

[00:18:34] And lovers. Let us have a blast. And a fire

[00:18:43] And a fire.

[00:18:52] Their victims. De. Maverick Gus de

[00:19:12] The beautiful. The day that he

[00:19:27] Met us. Let us know but choose. To chant it down

[00:19:43] Bowed spirits. Oh I love this. Let us give a glass. And

[00:19:52] Fire. Just

[00:19:58] Great. Now remember the groups from before. So group one you're gonna be the Walt Whitman piece. So just I hear America singing but not the carols part just I hear America singing just over and over again. And then this middle group you're going to sing what I was singing before the US before

[00:20:16] And I'll bet you. Yeah you got it. And then you all you're just going gonna do what you're doing before so you're gonna be the response.

[00:20:21] Yeah I think we got it. I think we got it.

[00:20:23] And then in the ad we'll all actually just come together and sing this. I hear America singing altogether too close and maybe maybe I'll sing something over the top. I don't know. We'll see. We'll see. Here we go. So we're just going to start with this Whitman group. Just I hear America singing and then I'll bring you all in.

[00:20:41] Here we go. It is beautiful. Keep that going. Get

[00:21:04] Ready. Let us be. Rich. Handed down. By lovers. And. And

[00:21:29] Meadows as people. No but choose. To chant. Bound spirits. When data. That

[00:21:45] Is gathered. And

[00:21:51] I'm just one more time.

[00:21:54] Let us speak for now. But true

[00:22:00] To its hands and bound spirit. Vast. A. Vast. Number of fashionable everyone there part. I. See. One more time. As a

[00:22:50] As. That was incredible. I actually have the chills right now. Thank you Shadi. That was that was amazing. It was really special. Thank you. Well. Still feeling it.

[00:23:06] So now we're gonna have some readings from Zaria Nadia and I are gone a so high and Zaria and let's just get into this.

[00:23:20] I'm going to be reading Justice Sonia Sotomayor from my beloved World 2013 until I arrived at Princeton. I had no idea how circumscribed my life had been confined to a community that was essentially a village in the shadow of a great metropolis with so much to offer of which I tasted almost nothing I was enough of a realist not to fret about having Miss summer camp or travel aboard or a casual familiarity with the language of wealth. I honestly felt no envy or resentment only astonishment at how much of the world there was out there and how much of it others already knew. The agenda for Self Cultivation that had been set for my classmates by their teachers and parents was something I'd have to develop for myself. And meanwhile there could come at any moment the chagrin of discovering something else I was supposed to know once I was trying to explain to my friend and ladder roommate Mary cadet how out of place I sometimes felt at Princeton. It must be like Alice in Wonderland she said sympathetically Alice who she was kind enough to salvage the moment with a quick Grace. It's a wonderful book. Sonia you must read it. In fact she would guide me thoughtfully toward a long list of classics she had read while I'd been pursuing Readers Digest.

[00:24:51] What did my mother know of Huckleberry Finn or Pride and Prejudice.

[00:25:05] Good morning.

[00:25:07] I'll be reading from President Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural address on March 4th 1861 in your hands my dissatisfied fellow countrymen and not in mine is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not appease you. You can have no conflict without being yourself the aggressors. You have no oath registered in heaven to destroy the government. While I have the most solemn one to preserve protect and defend it I am loath to close. We are not enemies but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of mystery stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and heart stone all over this broad land will yet swell the chorus of the Union.

[00:25:55] When again touched as surely they will be by the better angels of our nature so first.

[00:26:11] That was amazing. It is. Always. Hello again my name is I don't get any song or getting put out a good name has a in there and then are just to let you know so I'm going to re treat said Tempest Williams from one woman's woman were a bird into that from 2012. Even though I've done so many of these I still have stage fright so I got to know. That. This. Rewrote an impression letter to our friends. It began. We need your help. The letters went on to say Utah. Red Red Rocks wilderness in Egypt where the political status we are un up against. We knew you love Utah while lenders. We were asking you to please write the most beautiful essays or poems you have ever written. We cannot pay you and we need your essays in 3 weeks. We mail the letters to twenty five Western writers each one with firsthand knowledge of American Red Rocks rudeness recklessly. In three weeks we had twenty original piece from a community of writers committing to language and landscape essays as heartfelt as anything we have ever read.

[00:27:39] We had to work quickly. We knew the buyer graphic were important to show the stent standard standing of the writing involved. We want signatures from each of the writers to add salary and depth. We include a map with a list of all the purpose wilderness areas of within the citizen per proposal of American Red Rocks wilderness in two and two weeks. We had our books. We called it the logic testimony. We in the West speak on behalf of Utah wilderness. Good work is a state against despair. Copy of the test morning test and morning me were in fact passed throughout the Congress six months later on September 18 9 1996. President William Jefferson Clinton signed the new Grand Staircase national momentum practiced in nearly twenty two million of wilderness in Utah. Afterward President Clinton held up a copy of the testimony and said this little book made a difference one never is known the term effect of literature but on that particular day. Looking north into the vessel Walden Walden woodland on a Colorado told him one could believe in the collective power power

[00:29:01] Of voice.



[00:29:09] Thank you again to all of our readers and. We will be later on today posting on our Web site. Both the text of the sermon I'm about to deliver and the readings as well. It's so good to be with all of you here today.

[00:29:30] Here at the Seattle Public Library this this institution the public library represents everything that is vital in our democracy today and everything that is under siege as well. Fact. Knowledge. Curiosity diversity community openness stewardship I was proud to serve. For over a decade as a trustee of this institution and I would have served many years more. Had I not been term limited and loved the library I love the people who work here as I really want to know what's been said many times. Thank DaVita and her entire team

[00:30:14] For making it possible for us to be in this hallowed space. This building designed by the daring Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas hated by many satellites during the public comment period. And then upon opening celebrated almost instantly

[00:30:35] For its light filled Democratic boldness. This building reminds us in the first place how fickle public feeling can be. It shows us too that a cathedral makes the people as much as people make the cathedral this building imperfect. But ambitiously unconventional

[00:30:55] Makes us better civic Saturday is as we've described a civic analog to church. Here we are in this great civic cathedral. We have sung together we've reflected silently together. We've heard civic scripture. Well here's another churchy thing. I'd like to add to the mix confession. Here you all have come in search of meaning and purpose and some slender reads of hope in a time when national politics obliterates and makes a mockery of all these things and here I am with the job of supplying such purpose

[00:31:34] And such hope perhaps I will but I want to confess to you first that I am full of doubts my faith in American civic religion is under stress. Maybe that's not surprising given a crisis in Washington that's approaching Watergate depths and a simultaneous depth. Of ignorance and amnesia and inattention among giant swaths of the American public. Still I'm usually Mr. Glass half full and so I'm here to tell you today that number one. I'm doubting whether the government. I don't mean just the Trump administration whether this government is legitimate. Number two. I. Am doubting whether democracy is. On balance. A good thing. And finally

[00:32:33] I am doubting whether the union is even worth preserving.

[00:32:38] I'd like to share my doubts on each of these three fronts and see if maybe we can come out the other side with something maybe a little more than doubt.

[00:32:48] So let's begin with legitimacy.

[00:32:52] I recently realized that Donald Trump and I have something in common neither of us can escape this nagging feeling that his presidency is illegitimate.

[00:33:08] He is unfit mentally. He is dismissive of constitutional norms. He is in league with an American adversary to strengthen illiberal racist populist worldwide and to undermine the rule of law at home. He does not even remotely understand the rule of law. He wants people to take an oath to him

[00:33:27] And not to the Constitution. That's just from yesterday's Twitter feed

[00:33:34] His insecurity about being a popular vote loser. Stuck at 38 percent approval. The fact of rock Russian manipulation in the election and his possible knowledge of collusion with Russia. All of this compounded by his profound inability to regulate himself. All this makes Trump compulsively claim as fact

[00:33:58] What he knows is in doubt that he's legit. It makes him lash out at anyone who could challenge him from a free press to an independent FBI. This is a Pinocchio poulitice. Who wants to be a real boy and a real president. But wishing doesn't make it so. Let me amend that his wishing doesn't make it so.

[00:34:27] How are wishing good. More on that in a moment.

[00:34:32] Let's look first at what legitimacy actually means legitimacy is the widespread belief that institutions of power are just both in their origins and operations and should thus be respected. In the case of the president it's the belief that he should be accepted and followed as the rightful holder of power. Let's take that a layer deeper how widespread must that belief be to count. How informed or active

[00:35:00] A belief. How much respect. Should such belief demand. How much is enough.

[00:35:08] And measured how one core theory theories that legitimacy derives from the consent the consent of the people as Madison wrote in Federalist Papers in Federalist 49. The people are the only legitimate fountain of power. That is true when the alternative is say a king or emperor or self-proclaimed Son of God. But taken on its own terms the people is a problematic idea and always has been for most of his country's history most of its people. Had no opportunity to express consent. Today when the Supreme Court and their confederates in Congress and the states got the Voting Rights Act. Making it harder for poor people and people of color to vote. How can we talk in earnest about the will of the people and let's be honest. Let's be honest

[00:36:04] Even absent active voter suppression.

[00:36:07] Only three fifths of the electorate even bothers to vote in presidential elections three fifths is not a particularly auspicious standard in American civic life. So is ignorance a century is apathy acceptance is a long habit of acquiescence. Enough to make our leaders legitimate legitimacy. Legitimacy has something to do with popularity and something to do with justice but it's not the same

as either one. Even at the depths of his unpopularity. Jimmy Carter was never seen as an illegitimate president Richard Nixon became illegitimate well before he resigned in disgrace. And Jim Crow was plenty popular in the south. And seen by the majority there as legitimate. Even if it was morally repugnant and unjust. Well then what about procedural legitimacy. The requirement that following legal procedures correctly makes an institution or a leader legitimate by that standard trumps Electoral College victory. Was legitimate. So it was Hitler's rise to the chancellorship in Germany. By that standard to the United States Constitution is foundationally illegitimate since it was created by a group of delegates. Who'd been told by the people they represented to shore up and repair the Articles of Confederation not to replace them outright to borrow the title of a fascinating book by the historian Michael Klarman. The Constitution was the product of a framers coup. Most of us of course today feel it is far too late to challenge the legitimacy of the United States Constitution. Heck. Most of us rapidly acquiesced to the 2000 Bush Gore presidential outcome which some had described at the time. As a coup by the Supreme Court. Why. Because most of us feel it is better to pretend that a system is legitimate. Then to face the alternative of anarchy self-government in a democracy has always required a suspension of disbelief about public consent.

[00:38:26] Faith in the magic of unspoken trust to keep the system running but then Donald Trump came along. From the time he was a candidate. Trump ripped away the facade and gave us cause to wonder

[00:38:41] Whether we should still suspend belief.

[00:38:44] By his ingrained instinct for disruption by his attacks on the weakened institutions and corrupted institutions of our democracy and by his own reckless and feckless form of occupying the presidency these last one hundred and twenty one days Trump has revealed the rot and he has accelerated it those are separate things. We shouldn't conflate them so let's thank him

[00:39:10] And then let's contain him thank him for being the virus that got the immune system of the body politic to finally kick in. It took a made for TV money grubbing self dealing fraudster who thrives on inequality to prove that American democracy is now a made for TV money grubbing self dealing fraud fest that thrives on inequality. But after we thank Trump for making us face facts about how sick American politics is for forcing us to admit how unworthy of trust so many of our institutions have become we must contain him as relentlessly as the United States contains Soviet communism during the Cold War. Because his brand of truth warping illegitimacy ever anxious to justify itself and now weaponized by the state presents a potentially fatal threat to freedom when South Carolina Senator John C. Calhoun didn't like the drift of federal tariff laws in the eighteen forties. He proclaimed a right of nullification the idea that states could just nullify any federal law they didn't like. The US Supreme Court repeatedly struck down the idea but the stance of nullification had staying power in the form of states rights all through the years before the Civil War and all through the years of the Civil Rights Movement Calhoun became a this unionist secessionist but he and his kind had to yield just as George Wallace and his kind. Did a century later not because their claims were overruled by a court but because the United States used force to compel them to yield push

[00:41:06] Came to shove bloodily Trump is a modern day Calhoun. But what he threatens to nullify is not just particular laws or statutes or treaties he threatens in his rhetoric and actions

[00:41:22] To nullify the rule of law itself. The more he tries to delegitimize the FBI the federal courts the free press. The more he awakens America out of acquiescence. As. And. This my friends. Is the origin of his illegitimacy. It is why he faces resistance at a scale that feels to his fragile ego like a witch hunt but consider this. Donald Trump could make himself more legitimate today if he started behaving like a grown man in control of his faculties.

[00:42:00] A man who is respectful of the law and of the two thirds of Americans who today disapprove of him. He could he could get a majority to root for him odds are you won't but the fact that he could. Tells us this

[00:42:18] Donald Trump is not illegitimate because he isn't popular. He is unpopular because he is a legitimate understandably many people are unnerved by such talk. Indeed some have suggested to me that the logical consequence of any questioning of a president's legitimacy must necessarily be armed rebellion against the government that's simply wrong. Martin Luther King Jr. did not accept or respect the legitimacy of the governments of the former Confederate states. But he preached and practiced nonviolent resistance against their illegitimate systems of oppression as did Gandhi. Who had even less reason. To accept the legitimacy of the British colonial government and even more numbers on his side. Had he wanted to foment armed rebellion there are non-violent ways to challenge hobble change or topple an administration that most people deem less than legitimate protest civil disobedience organizing. And of course elections those by the way. Are the same tools for healing a democratic system

[00:43:31] That has been rigged by the privileged to reward the privileged.

[00:43:36] In short the alternative to blind acceptance of a leaders claim to legitimacy is not violent chaos. It is everyday politics. It is democratic argument but this then brings me to the second source of my doubts.

[00:43:52] Democracy about seven or eight years ago a friend told Jenny and me about a movie that we had to watch.

[00:44:01] It was called Idiocracy many of you have seen it. It's about someone who gets transported from our time to America. Five hundred years from now when the society has become so lowest common denominator so commercialized and entertainment saturated so obsessed with immediate gratification in short so democratic that the public consists of lobotomized manipulable fools who live among mounds of trash and broken cities while voting for idiots watching a TV show called our my balls. It's kind of funny. But even though it's kind of funny we hated this movie. It was so over the top and heavy handed so blunt in its satire and such a demonstration of the very thing it meant to satirize we could hardly finish it. Of course this film today is understood as prophecy. A vision of the present Mike Judge the man who made the film and who's also the creator of Beavis and Butthead and more

recently the much more subtle and equally biting satire Silicon Valley on HBO has been quoted saying he could not have foreseen how quickly the nation's public life online and off would resemble Idiocracy.

[00:45:21] I think that's overstated but not by much what concerns me today is not that so many people are civically uneducated and illiterate in power. What concerns me is that so many of those same people don't think they are Tom Nichols author of the new book The Death of expertise has put it well. He says we have a culture today that doesn't just tolerate ignorance. It glorifies it Nichols describes a Washington Post poll after the 2014 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Most Americans could not locate Ukraine on a map. But what was surprising was that the more inaccurately people guessed Ukraine's location

[00:46:01] The more certain they were that the US should intervene militarily to be expert today is suspect because experts are elites and elites are presumptively bad because elites are always looking down on non elites. This was the view of many Trump voters. It was the view of Trump himself as he staffed his administration but it's a view that precedes this president and is in evidence at the local level everywhere in this country and of course it expresses the essence of both Jeffersonian equality and Jeffersonian hypocrisy. The idea that no one's better than anyone else

[00:46:43] So don't act like it.

[00:46:44] If you are I know I keep coming back to the Federalist Papers but we live in times that underscore why matters. Madison and Hamilton were always wary of both Jefferson and democracy. We we live in a time now when Donald Trump can say he is the most persecuted politician in history. And while a thin layer of educated folks like us. Will crack up at that. And means on Twitter and Facebook mocking him tens of millions of Americans. Look to his Twitter feed as not just news but has truth.

[00:47:19] Believe him and tens of millions more have no basis from which to question him. With a democracy. As with any complex system. Inputs. Are magnified as outputs. In that sense. Our national government is highly representative. It's reflective of a populace. That doesn't know history. Doesn't know science doesn't know ethics. Doesn't know art doesn't know math

[00:47:48] Doesn't know civics and doesn't know it doesn't know. The result is so-called leaders and citizens alike who do not know their own minds who are fed thought patterns and talking points and rhetorical postures. And who believe that particular participation means just regurgitating. Those patterns points and postures what I'm saying

[00:48:13] Is that I've been doubting whether democracy works at this scale anymore. Whether the people of the United States are in fact capable of self-government one of the projects I've launched recently out of the Aspen Institute is called the better arguments project. It's based on the premise that there are deep philosophical philosophical divides that define American civic life between for instance a Hamilton view and a Jefferson view of the role and size of government between equality

and liberty between pluribus. Unum. And that what we need today is not fewer political arguments but less stupid ones. And so we're designing. A framework. For the five or six core American arguments these enduring tensions populated with history and science and ethics and art and math. And civics and we're building public events and educational partnerships. To spread this idea of better arguments. Truth is as we've been developing this project

[00:49:21] I have sometimes feared that it's too late.

[00:49:25] It seems a flimsy wall against a great wave of Idiocracy. I'm doing this from the Aspen Institute for Pete's sake a bastion of elitism. If ever there was one but I'll tell you. I'll tell you what has pulled me out of this doubt what has pulled me back into belief doing the work and remembering. That while a democracy governed by majority rule. It is moved always by minority will in every instance

[00:50:02] In every single instance of significant civic change. It is the majority that bends eventually to a minority so I've been on the road for many months many weeks on book tour and I've met so many people across this country who embody this Whitman esque. Spirit of the possibilities of our country.

[00:50:24] A teenage activist from the Zuni Pueblo in New Mexico was activating pottery makers and other artists demand to demand respect and a voice in local government an intergenerational interracial group of D.C. residents meeting in the basement of a Jewish community center to learn from the ACLU how to make sure city government better protects refugees and immigrants.

[00:50:47] Three eager millennials who are leading Apple shop and historic center in Kentucky that uses filmmaking and media to unleash untapped creativity in these ravaged Appalachian communities ex gangbangers in Chicago were organizing youth in the back of the yards to engage in city politics. Sixty something activists in San Francisco's Chinatown. Were mobilizing to preserve the clout of that community. Glenn Beck followers in Dallas. Who are committing now. Thanks in part to the example that he and I have tried to set on air together. To re humanizing politics. One relationship at a time all the jeremiads about Idiocracy and the dumbed down American people are accurate perhaps about the current state and threat of public ignorance. But what they don't take into account. Is that things change and they change when people are invited to be the change I'm reminded of a passage in Edmund Wilson's *To the Finland Station* a sprawling intellectual history of the idea of revolution it spans from the storming of the Bastille in 1789. To Lenin's arrival at the Finland Station in St. Petersburg in 1917. Wilson describes how Karl Marx who had been raised in authoritarian Prussia and who'd never really been among the workers he so championed based his catastrophic prophecy of a war between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie on a false assumption.

[00:52:26] Quote The Armageddon that Karl Marx tended to expect Wilson said presuppose the situation in which the employer and the employee were unable to make any contact whatever the former would not only be unable to sit down at the same table with the latter on the occasion of an industrial dispute.

[00:52:45] He would be inhibited from socking him in the jaw until the class lines had been definitely drawn and a proletarian army fully regimented in other words.

[00:52:55] Wilson concluded Marx was incapable of imagining democracy at all. Wilson meant

[00:53:04] Was that Marx was unable to imagine a contest for relative advantage among competing interests unfolding within a structure of laws and tribunals and elections and popular mobilizations that could change the game. The story and the equation of power Marx was unable to envision workers not his

[00:53:23] Inner vessels for dialectical materialism but as living citizens exercising and demanding and wielding their own power. Marx was unable to imagine democracy because he was blinded by his fixed. And ultimately dehumanizing notion. Of what the proletariat was and whenever I get down on my ignorant fellow Americans I realize I too

[00:53:51] Am sometimes unable to imagine democracy. I too. Can be blinded by a fixed dogmatic image of people in all their inglorious idiocy my condescension in those moments isn't worth a damn. The only thing that is. Is my willingness to grapple with the complexity of what I think is other people's simplicity to see. As Mary cadet did what Sonia Sotomayor was and could be not what she read or had read what matters now is my commitment to joining the work of facing ourselves and our deficits and giving others the space to do the same. So that from there. From that basis of equal humanity we can learn what we need to learn to argue better

[00:54:43] To build better and only take some of us not all of us. We were more than a few if less than the many we were truly committed to living like citizens and not idiots yet it's hard it's tempting just to retreat to like minds. Into minds of like levels or styles of cultivation

[00:55:12] And it's not just me. I'm so tempted increasingly so many of us are beginning in this age of Trump to indulge fantasies of secession of self segregation into safe and welcoming bubbles. Which brings me to the final object of my doubts the Union last month. I saw the West Coast premiere of an imaginative satirical play called Wellesley girl

[00:55:40] Ben Phillips from citizen university and shouting we heard from leading us in song were part of the company that produced and performed this play. It's set in the year twenty four sixty five. Incidentally around the time that Idiocracy. Takes place in this play an environmental catastrophe has reduced the entire United States to four little towns in the Boston suburbs. Outside of which the water has become undrinkable. And it is assumed there is no life. There are several hundred survivors. And so each one is a member of Congress. But one surviving lawyer in these towns is the Supreme Court. There are in this future humanoid robots living among them. But they don't get to vote and the people who do get to vote are all at odds with each other because they've been contact by by someone on the outside. Friend or foe they don't know and they can't decide whether to preemptively attack. The Outsiders. Or to welcome them. One of the most thrilling things about this ingenious played by

Brendan Nelson. Is that it forces us to imagine. If we were each colonists in a small experimental society where every action and no mission had life or death consequences. Even in what seems to be a homogenous setting

[00:57:05] There is so much cause for discord and difference in aspiration so much that this tiny nation such as it is these four Boston towns can barely hold itself together. That play reminds us again. Of the fiction. Of legitimacy and the imaginary nature of any nation these people in this play are acting out of a habit of obeying the Constitution and following parliamentary procedure and it's funny and touching and pitiful all at once. That they pretend

[00:57:40] To sustain the idea of the United States of the Union now. Anyone who's heard any of my prior civic Saturday's sermons knows that I worship at the altar of Lincoln I believe deeply in the union. And so when I tell you now that I've begun to doubt. That faith

[00:58:02] I hope you'll recognize how serious this is for me why have I begun to doubt. Well for one thing post-election. You can't get into a conversation among other progressives without someone making a sort of joke. About how the West Coast should just secede

[00:58:18] Or how Washington should merge with British Columbia and become Cascadia or how blue cities should band together and are in an archipelago of progressivism and form their own federation their own league of cities separate from the rest of the country I have hated such talk. I've never joined in but it's everywhere. I'm also influenced by the articles and polls I see showing that Trump voters. By and large are just digging in despite the evidence of catastrophe and that the more he screws up or screws them over. The more they defend him. Indeed perversely the more they seem to identify with him. When I see that. I sometimes have a deep visceral reaction let them go. Let them go. These fools who feel far more foreign to me than many foreigners and when I observe the bottomless cynicism of congressional Republican leaders who are so committed to cutting taxes on the wealthy and deregulating the economy that they are willing to tolerate every single one of Donald Trump's threats to the republic. I must admit. I sometimes think we still have a confederacy. It's no longer all South of the Mason-Dixon line. It's in the Rust Belt and New England mill towns. It's in the Mountain West and inland California. It's in the United States capital. It exists wherever people are committed to a Confederate notion that Capitalism is about reducing labor costs to as close as zero as possible that white supremacy is a fine basis for a nation that government is only an oppressor

[01:00:04] And never a liberator when I see these neo confederates. I again sometimes think let them go let them make their own nation see how long they last let them try to play at independence let them see how truly dependent they are how deeply dysfunctional how backward and lost they are without the union and then I catch myself I realize I am one million miles away from the man I worship I am one million miles away from the self-control the compassion. The capacity for forgiveness a subtle and profound humanity of Abraham Lincoln I am one million miles away. From the rigorous idea that Lincoln held. Of why the union mattered Abraham Lincoln was not a fetishist. He didn't like the union as a totem or an object of religious worship. He believed in Union because he knew as did the framers of the Constitution before him that this union meant death. For everyone he believed in



Union because he knew that the Civil War was not just a territorial conflict. It was perhaps first and foremost a conflict within each person's soul. It was perhaps first and foremost a conflict. Within our hearts Lincoln knew it was no more possible to cut off the south from the north than it is for the human spirit to cut off hate. From. Selfishness. From altruism that if we have honesty and integrity we know each of us is all these things

[01:01:59] And when I catch myself like that when I catch myself indulging that spirit of let them go let them go. Let me sever them. From the body. I see articles. Like a one in today's New York Times about the removal removal of Confederate monuments including a statue of Robert E. Lee from the centre of New Orleans I read the words of Mayor Mitch Landrieu of New Orleans. Who said quote to literally put the Confederacy on a pedestal in our most prominent places of honor

[01:02:37] Is an accurate recitation of our past. It is an affront to our present. And it is a bad prescription for the future. And the article in The Times closes. Quoting an advocate for removal. A 43 year old contractor who said as he watched the Lee statue getting taken down. It happened just like that that contractor's name amazingly is John Calhoun. Of course it didn't happen just like that. It took one hundred and thirty three years this union like reunion. Unfolds slowly but the cascading effects of both can feel immediate let's imagine that the West Coast recedes. From red ignorant America how soon before Bakersfield California. And Wenatchee Washington and Pendleton Oregon start saying hey we're not part of this left coast. We want out. Imagine that Seattle secede from the rest of Washington. Well then. I'll tell you what. It'll just be like Wellesley girl. The differences within will be inescapable richer neighborhoods. Will want to secede from poorer ones denser younger neighborhoods will want to secede from stodgy or leafy ones what that. Medrano east of thirty fourth avenue. Will want to secede from a drawn out west of Thirty fourth North Capitol Hill from South Capitol Hill Madison Park from Madison Valley what then. People who own their own homes

[01:04:27] Will want to secede from those who rent and so on and so on and so on. There is no end to the impulse for disunion we can slice things in half infinitely until we get to the living human heart then. We realize there is no achieving this dream of purity and homogeneity that drive secession. The lesson of the entire American experiment

[01:04:59] Is that it is far better to struggle with the difficulties and dissatisfactions of union than to chase the illusory and unattainable safety of secession. We live in a time of creeping disunion and it remains possible that we will just fall apart rather than choose to come apart. But that possibility is what makes me shake off those heavy blankets of doubt. That possibility that our generation might by simple neglect

[01:05:32] And fatigue just let the United States come undone. That possibility is enough to get me to sit up and so this. Is my resolution both in the sense of what I am resolved to do. And how I mean to resolve my doubts. About the legitimacy

[01:05:55] Of our democracy and our union I hereby resolve to imagine my country and to do everything in my power to create it. Among my teachers. In this work are 80 high school students I

met two weeks ago when I was on the road they were mainly students of color from tough backgrounds in Boston area schools and all of them were participants

[01:06:24] In a wonderful program called Facing History and Ourselves. They were the most have reason to be cynical about the American idea and the American dream. They more than most have cause to doubt the American promise and they. More than most. Have decided just to live it. And challenge it

[01:06:48] And change it. An inhabitant. One student a strong voiced young black woman from Tech Boston Academy asked me how young people like her could claim their power and civic life. Before I could answer she told me about how in her history class. After reading Howard Zinn she got an assignment to write an alternative history of her neighborhood in city history from the street level that would include all the people and lies and unsung stories and dissenting views. That are usually excised from legitimate history I passed looked at her and I told her

[01:07:33] She had just answered her own question.

[01:07:36] She is writing a new America no less than Terry Tempest Williams did with an anthology of poems called testimony she is writing herself into the story. She is the story of renewal with eyes wide open of One Nation as indivisible

[01:07:57] As hope is from hurt and as doubt is from faith. So are we all we are the creators of this story this is our time. Start right.

[01:08:12] Applause applause it really didn't make me cry.

[01:08:20] I have a family members who are not happy about that statue of Robert E. Lee coming to him. Hard to be there when that was going on. But I love them very very much.

[01:08:40] I look forward to forging new conversations with them because they also love me very very.

[01:08:49] Thank you. That was beautiful. Thank you.

[01:08:57] Thank you all. It's it's good to feel vulnerable in community. All right. So I'm just going to help us close that. We're gonna have. A sit together again for some moments of silence. But before we do that let me just tell you we're kind of social our. We have plenty of coffee and tea and not plenty of snacks but enough is always enough after we have silence and we sing together again. Do you are going to. For those of you who would like to stay. We have an hour where we can have what we call our civic Saturday listening circles not talking circles although you will be talking it is a time to really exercise your listening muscles and we will be using that theme of where do you see renewal or any theme that you felt you might want to talk about after hearing your beautiful sermon and the way we do this is just self organizing during social circle if you would like to be the leader of a circle. Just

stand up here in front. Get a cup of coffee get a snack and just stand here and raise your hand and five or six people seven people can join you find a place to sit. Turn to each other stand go in the library and have your conversation with one another. And when it's over it's over. The people who show up are the people who are supposed to be there.

[01:10:35] Ok so now if you just again said to yourself take a deep breath exhale and just sit together and for about 90 seconds we're gonna sing together again which is a wonderful thing.

[01:10:59] Beautiful song by Ben King and his friends that are up there. It's a great way we can show our unity and our support for one another and our love for one another. There's a lot of great versions of this song. So. If if you're singing a different melody than I am singing that's OK. That's not a problem

[01:11:25] I'm just saying what's in your heart.

[01:11:33] When. No. Yes. And the land. Is dark. And

[01:11:44] Is here. They. Lie will. See. Oh well

[01:11:53] The free.

[01:11:55] No. Whoa. The free justice no. Oh yeah. As you stand stand by me. So does this. Stay

[01:12:12] With me. Oh.

[01:12:15] Stay there. Me. Oh stand

[01:12:23] Stand by me. If the sky. Should

[01:12:34] Zoom. Oh the man's a. Oh to the sea. Whoa

[01:12:48] Whoa whoa.

[01:12:53] Said she just has no. Oh as you stand stand by me. So let. Me just say bade me. Stay

[01:13:17] Stand by me Stand By Me.

[01:13:22] Oh no.

[01:13:27] Oh just pay me. Oh stand. Stand by me Stand by me

[01:13:41] Stand by me oh. Oh. And stand by

[01:14:04] Thank you thank you to the Seattle Public Library the Seattle Public Library Foundation to DaVita to Abigail to me to and to all the staff that helped put this on. Thank you for being here.

[01:14:16] Coffee treats and civic circle. Can we give one more warm round of applause for citizen university for civic Saturday

[01:14:36] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.