Gates Public Service Law Program Speaker Series

Eric Liu
The Art of Public Leadership

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Michele Storms

Hello everyone, thank you so much for being here. My name is Michele Storms I’m the Assistant Dean for Public Service here at the University of Washington School of Law. I see some familiar faces of law students but I know we clearly have some other folks from other parts of campus and from downtown and I’m so grateful to have you and glad to welcome you. This is a talk I’ve been looking forward to, this is something very special.

Let me tell you a little bit about Eric Liu who’s our speaker according to the prepared remarks and then I will add my little personal bit. Eric Liu is really a nationally known and prominent person. He’s an educator, author, civic entrepreneur. He’s the author of The Accidental Asian and Guiding Lights. He’s co-author of Imagination First and The True Patriot. All of which I would recommend. Pick the one that sounds most interesting to you and read it by all means. He’s also the founder of The Guiding Lights Network, which is an organization dedicated to promoting great citizenship and also to the True Patriot Network which is dedicated to promoting progressive civic values. Eric served as a White House speech writer and was Deputy Domestic Policy Advisor to President Clinton.

Eric currently lives in Seattle. He teaches civics at the University of Washington and hosts the acclaimed television interview program ’Seattle Voices’ on the Seattle Channel, you should check that out too. He serves on the boards of the Seattle Public Library, The League of Education Voters, Swedish Medical Foundation and is a graduate of Yale College and Harvard Law School and a proud Seattle Public Schools parent, of which I was once too, but we’ve moved on from public schools.

Those are the things I was told to say about him and which I am happy to share with you. I just want to add a few notes of my own having had the wonderful opportunity to meet and work with Eric a little bit over the years. You know they say what makes you a leader is that people are willing to follow you. And following you is often because you are able to inspire a vision and engage people in ways that are important on matters that you care about. I think that he really embodies that in so many ways and the specific example that I just want to refer to that has been really moving to me in my life, is the Guiding Lights Network.

There’s an annual Guiding Lights Event, he’ll probably say something about this, but the way the event describes itself is, ‘The weekend is a uniquely creative annual gathering that offers inspiring speakers, informative conversations, practical hands-on workshops, networking and engaging art and performance in a playful, collaborative atmosphere that leaves you fired up for more.’ That’s how they describe themselves and I find that in itself inspiring, but what I want to say more about it is that it is an incredible atmosphere of intellectual curiosity of sharing, it’s interdisciplinary, multi-generational, multi-cultural, inclusive and as advertised, it truly is playful. I wasn’t able to go last year, but the year before, I attended workshops with as much variety as prison reform, one on
alternative dispute resolution in an international context. And I just barely missed the yoga workshop because it was in conflict with something else. Really, I’m talking about a great diversity of things, but what I think about and how inspired I am by that event is that someone, Eric Liu, had an idea and really pulled together a team to help produce something that was entirely about building community, bringing people together and accomplishing really positive aims in the community and for our world and that is highly inspiring which is why I am so excited to have you join me in welcoming Eric Liu.

Eric Liu

Michele thank you so much for that introduction and I want to thank all of you for coming this afternoon for what I hope will be a conversation. I want to actually keep my remarks relatively short and then hopefully just have a great discussion here.

I want to start by acknowledging Michele and Dean Kellye Testy here at the law school. It’s not an accident that we’re here I think there’s a great vision in the course of being implemented at the Law School that’s both about training the students who are here at the UW Law School to be both thinking of themselves and practicing as leaders and not only lawyers. But also really connecting the dots between what goes on at this part of campus with what’s going on all around the University of Washington and in the community beyond, both here in Seattle and elsewhere. And it’s just really because of the vision that Kellye and Michele and others have had here that I’m here today. This conversation is part of an intentional set of activities that take the form of courses and other such gatherings like today that are all about trying to infuse this campus with a more intentional sense of what it means to lead. And that is indeed partly the topic that I wanted to speak to a bit today. And I really just wanted to frame it up because I really think that everybody here, I know a lot of you are students here at the Law School, but I also see people here from across the community and different sectors as well. I aim to give some remarks that are not only for lawyers, in fact not even meant primarily for lawyers, but are meant for us as members of civic life, members of the community.

I want to start my remarks just by reflecting on where we are right now. This is a pretty extraordinary time for us all to be alive, awake, aware and engaged. The kinds of tectonic shifts that I think are going on in politics and economics all around the country. Some of the shifts are unwelcome and scary. Some of the shifts we have no idea what their ultimate consequences will be, but we are for sure in a moment of transformative change. And I think one of the most interesting instances of this and it really doesn’t matter what your politics are and where you come from, is over the last couple of years we’ve had the rise first of the Tea Party and now of the Occupy Wall Street/99% Movement. Though people in both camps seem often taking pains to say, ‘we’re not like the other.’ I actually look at these things and think that they are quite two sides of the same coin. They are very much part of the same general phenomenon that is shaping civic life and public life right now. And that is a phenomenon of lots and lots of people in this country. By the way, I’m just going to bracket this conversation today to be about this country because if we were to look around the world even more obviously at the Arab Spring and other similar movements that are bubbling up the same dynamics, I think, are at play.

Here in the United States what you have in both the Tea Party and Occupy/99% is the sense that lots and lots of people whether it’s literally 99% or not are feeling like this game is rigged. Are feeling like the ways that one is supposed to exercise voice and power and influence in public life were long ago decided by a small handful of people whose control of the machinery of government, politics, money, the whole interlocking set of things has cut the great majority of Americans out not only from participation but from the very promise of what American life is supposed to be. The very promise that if you work hard and play by the rules, you ought to have a fair shot. And there
are people on both the left and the right today who are working as hard as any Americans have ever worked, who are playing by the rules in ways, that people haven’t played by the rules and who are feeling like they are not getting a fair shot. And I think that one of the most interesting things that we all, whether as citizens, as citizen leaders, as students, as teachers, have to reckon with is what is this feeling, this force that’s swirling around the country right now? How do we articulate it? How do we capture it? What do we do with it? How do we respond to it? And for me I think this is one of the most important, live case studies of what it means to be leading in public right now.

When I talk about leadership in public, some of you know, and some of my former students are here. I taught a seminar here at the Law School called simply ‘Lawyers as Leaders’ and it was a very experiential kind of course, really trying to get folks to just feel what it means to lead in this moment. One of the messages that we had throughout this seminar was that to be a leader is not simply to be a matter of title or station or externally bestowed authority. Every single one of us wherever you are in your life’s journey, wherever you are in your professional path, wherever you are in your life and family everyone of us at this moment has a capacity that’s only partially been activated to lead. And this is one of the most important just conceptual things to put on the table and make sure we are all on board with at the outset because I think one of the reasons why we invented this seminar in the first place at this law school, at law schools and professional schools all around the country right now, there’s just an increasing emphasis on mastering the trade and a decreasing emphasis on what it means when you practice that trade to show up as a citizen. We are in the law school building named after Bill Gates and Bill Gates Sr. who wrote this wonderful book called Showing up for Life which is a compendium of life stories and life lessons from him as child, as parent, as civic leader. And to me that title: Showing up for Life defines quite succinctly the essence of what it means to be a leader. It’s not necessarily about running a big project, it’s not necessarily about even having lots and lots of followers. To lead is simply to say, ‘something is going on around me that could use agency, that use intervention, that could use some active leading forward, to improve, to connect, to make something, to make one plus one equal three. And I will actually take that act of leading forward. I will connect those dots. I will ask the framing question. I will ask why not, or what if? I will try to paint a picture of what it could be. I will try to bring people together.’ These dimensions of what it means to lead in public are things as I say, that all of us no matter our station, no matter our life stage not only are capable of but I think in this moment of flux and of change right now in this moment we have not only the opportunity, but the obligation to be sharpening our game and to be thinking about how in lots of little ways, everyday, we go about leading.

A lot of what I both speak and write about as Michele alluded to a moment ago, I put under the broad rubric of civics. Civics is a word or just as an idea has this kind of narcotic effect of putting people to sleep immediately. It sounds very boring and very fifties and I mean in part to imbue that word and idea with a sense of purpose and passion and stimulus. What I mean by civics is the teaching of how to be an effective and engaged co-owner participant of our democracy. I want to explain and unpack for you. There are kind of 3 pieces that go under this rubric that I call civics and one of those pieces in particular is going to frame up what I want to talk about in terms of public leadership. When I describe civics I break it down into this three point structure of values, systems, and skills.

So to be thinking about what it means to be in public, to be a voice in public to be an activist, or an advocate or an actor in public in the first place about the values component. What is it that I believe and why? And again, for those of you who are law students, when I was a law student I can tell you for sure no one ever asked me that question: what do you believe and why? In my most recent book The True Patriot, which I co-authored with a friend and colleague, Nick Hanauer is a book that is about reinvesting the idea of patriotism with something other than just mere flag waiving- chest-
thumping-jinglism but saying what is the moral values content of putting country before self. If you unpack that idea and take it seriously, it leads you to think about values like sharing of sacrifice, like mutual obligation, like service to others, like deferral of personal gratification for some greater good. It does not lead you to let the market sort things out. It does not lead you to everyone on their own, every man for himself. It does not lead you to as long as I don’t actively hurt somebody, I should be able to do whatever the heck I want. And that book tried to lay down a foundation of values to articulate for ourselves, me and Nick, what we believe and why. What it was that kind of orients the way that we try to move in public life and in civic life. And that is true of the ways that I tried to work when I worked for President Clinton and it’s just as true for work that I do when every month I’m at a board meeting of the Seattle Public Library and we’re worrying about budgets and library branches and hours. It’s all the same thing. It’s a different scale but it’s all the same thing. What are the values that under-gird this? So civics is on one dimension about values.

The systems piece, the second piece is simply about understanding the systems that make the world go round. So when most people hear the word civics they have a keyword in their mind that keys the phrase, ‘how a bill becomes a law’. And that is indeed one of the systems that one ought to as a member of the democracy ought to have some command of, how a bill becomes a law. The process and the machinery of self government in a republic and the making of legislation and law. But there are so many other systems that if you want to be an active, engaged, knowledgeable citizen, it behooves us to gain command of as well. For a guy who was steeped in DC and politics, I noted something in myself over the last couple of years is that I go first to the business section. I go first to understanding what’s going on in the market here and abroad. Not the stock market, but just the dynamics of what’s happening more broadly because that’s as I’m beginning to see on issues like inequality has so much to do with what is driving out politics. But understanding the market, is a think that quite frankly, not just kids in the K-12 system, but adults like us are rarely asked to be able to do. There are other systems, the natural ecosystem. Having some grasp and understanding of the laws that govern that and our place in it. Systems of faith community, systems of family. Understanding all the ways in which these systems intersect and interlock and themselves form a complex adaptive system. That notion of seeing the world through and thinking that way, something I’ll return to in a bit when I get into the nuts and bolts of some of this civic leadership stuff.

The third chunk, though is skills. Just the hard skills of how to be an effective citizen. How to advocate, how to make an argument, how to rebut an argument, how to negotiate, how to navigate conflict, how to work in diverse settings, how to bridge different gaps of understanding, how to frame an issue, how to paint a picture that will inspire people. The Guiding Lights weekend that Michele mentioned, this conference that we have every year in March at Seattle Center on the Art of Great Citizenship is nothing but experiential conferences on all of these how to’s that I just listed. How to actually get better at all of these things. We’re not born knowing all of these things. By virtue of having worked many years in politics and journalism, and the world of ideas, I now have got that tool kit, but I think it's incumbent on everybody in this room to take stock of what’s in your tool kit, to ask what's missing and to figure out how you can fill it and then to figure out how you pass on to someone else the knowledge of how to use it.

So values, systems, skills is how I try to break down this understanding of civics. And if we’re going to talk as I want to now about leadership in civic life, leadership in public. What I’d like to focus on in particular on the values piece of my triad there. If we had a couple hours of just pure discussion, I’d go deeper on all three. But I want to focus in particular on values. One of the things that motivated Nick Hanauer and me to write The True Patriot was this frustration that we had across the board politically. I’m a democrat, I’m a progressive, as with Nick. Our frustration was as much with our fellow progressives as it was with the conservatives and Republicans who at the time we wrote the book in ’07 held power in the national government. And our frustration was basically that
across the board, very few people were able to articulate from a values perspective, why they were 
leading. There were so many candidates in the ’06 an’08 cycle who if you asked what they stood 
for, they could rattle off a list of policy positions. I stand for this health care, I stand for that thing 
on regulation, I stand for this thing on education. Which is wonderful, I stood for many of those 
things too, but it’s not answering the question. It’s not answering the underlying prior question of 
what you believe and why. So Nick and I have actually written a new book that will be out in about 
less than a month. For those of you who are interested, come tell me afterwards and we’ll get a 
copy out ot you. It’s called The Gardens of Democracy. The Gardens of Democracy builds on this 
foundational layer that we tried to build with The True Patriot. Our argument is this in a nut shell: 
that for so long, virtually from the beginning, the way that Americans have thought out, have 
conceptualized and therefore behaved in the realm of politics and economics has been through the 
metaphor of a machine. Just think about this for a second. Think about our discussions of the 
economy. So much of our language of the economy in popular conversations and certainly in the 
profession of economics is language derived from the late nineteenth century physics of how an 
economy works. So we think of the economy as this self-correcting equilibrium system. The very 
idea of equilibrium is a physics kind of language. We think in mechanistic terms of inputs and 
outputs and you have this whole picture. The same is true in thinking about the role of government 
and how government works. And this is where Progressives and Democrats have been somewhat at 
fault at least since the New Deal, of conceptualizing government as a vending machine. Put in your 
coins called taxes and you press a button and you get a benefit that comes out of the bottom. And 
this idea that machines are the way we think about the way that things work. This has been 
dominant in left and right for, as I say, from virtually the beginning. And there are some ways in 
which that metaphor which has its roots in enlightenment thinking and trying to make sense of a 
complex in these mechanistic terms, it’s served its purpose for some time, but in our view, again at 
this moment of crisis and transformation, that metaphor no longer serves us well. And that its long 
past the time for us to shift to a metaphor instead of the garden.

So if you think for a moment about the economy. One should no more let an economy simply ’self-
correct’ than one would let a garden self-tend. Gardens require gardeners. Now the gardener 
doesn’t just by standing there by forces of his or her will make plants grow, but the gardener weeds, 
the gardener seeds, the gardener feeds that garden. The gardener makes broad level choices about 
what ought to live. The gardener makes judgements about what is in the first place healthy. And 
that is in many ways the argument we’re making not only about the role of government, but the role 
of citizens. That we need to be thinking of ourselves not as passive consumers of what pops out of 
the vending machine where our recourse as citizen is just to be cranky customers and call customer 
service and say I didn't like the thing that came out of the machine or I put in two quarters and I 
only got one quarter’s worth of candy. But rather as gardeners, people who are charged with the 
cultivation of the thing. And when we don’t cultivate the thing goes to seed. When we don't weed, 
or seed or feed, when we don’t tend, we get exactly what we deserve in a garden as in 
self-government.

So this metaphor of thinking about life and thinking about civic life through the lens of a garden 
really frames up the argument we’re trying to make. And the values that we try to articulate in the 
book, it’s a short book like The True Patriot was but it’s a very complex one. It brings in a lot of the 
kind of latest science about complexity about ecosystems and all this stuff, but we’ve tried to boil it 
down into three or four simple precepts. And I want to name these precepts for you because they 
provide a moral frame, I think for what it means to lead in public. And they’ll provide, I hope, some 
grist for the conversation that then we’ll have.

So the first precept is this: All self interest is mutual interest. Now again as Americans we have been 
steeped from minute one, in this kind of Millian kind of John Stuart Mill kind of vision of individual
autonomy. Kind of atomizing life, again so long as I do not actively harm you, I should be able to do what I want to do. And we think about self-interest in the economy in the same way. There is actually term of art for the way in which economists imagine people behave in an economy: homo economicus. In which all of us are assumed to be perfectly rational, extremely selfish and highly calculating agents, bouncing off of one another atomistically in competition for resource. And what we’re trying to argue in this book that goes to this notion that all self-interest is mutual interest is that we are not perfectly rational, calculating, selfish beings. We are emotional, approximating and reciprocal beings and it’s a big difference. It’s a big, big difference. And you can see on the boarders of the field of economics, that field is beginning to change itself, and there are people thinking about behavioral economics and people are trying to rejigger the language for that. But without getting into that detail, the point is simply this: the more you understand the world as a complex, adaptive system, the more you see an economy not just like an ecosystem, but in fact as an ecosystem, the more you realize that there is no way for me to cleave off my interests from your interests. There is no way for the one percent to continue to live in a little bubble and let the ninety-nine percent starve. There just is no way. What happens after a while is that the whole becomes sick and even the one percent goes down with it. And so this first precept of all self-interest is mutual interest. Another way to put it of course is just age old is what goes around comes around. And that kind of thinking about how we are connected in choices and consequences and faith is something, it’s not traditionally been American, but if America’s going to have another century as a healthy republic, it’s going to have to quick become American. And we’re going to have to adapt it in our own ways.

The second precept which really goes to our idea of what it means to be a citizen is this: Society becomes how you behave. And again, I want you to just sit with that for a moment because the mythology that we have in public is that my individual acts are inconsequential in the grand scheme of things, so if I’m a jerk, my jerkiness is going to be canceled out by someone else’s goodness. Or even worse, there is kind of a mythology that is a market language mythology that somehow a million privately selfish acts add up to a common good. And this idea that society becomes how you behave makes you think a little bit differently. So just to use a very prosaic example that I experienced on my way over here if you’re driving somewhere and you’re trying to enter into traffic. If you see someone entering into traffic, you have a choice and you can be either courteous or discourteous. If you choose in that moment to be discourteous and say look it’s a dog eat dog world out there I’m late. I gotta go. Sorry dude I’m not letting you in. That’s a choice. And that’s a choice that we rationalize by saying many millions of people are making such choices and it doesn’t matter, but if you thought instead, that my discourtesy would, in fact make the entire society discourteous, you might think a little bit differently. And our point here is that not only as a matter of morality, but as a matter of science, that is in fact the case, that behavior is contagious. That the way that we live when we’re connected in networks is that my discourtesy spreads to you and to you and to you and to you. My civility or incivility spreads equally rapidly. There are great, great social scientists now Nick Christakis at Harvard and other people who are writing fantastic books about this. About how not just things like this kind of behavior, but things like happiness and obesity and other things turn out to be hugely contagious across social networks in these ways. And so if we were to think about society becoming how we behave it places a great responsibility on us. And a responsibility that we as Americans are generally not encouraged to bare or think about.

A third precept that I think is really one that is again central to this, is a precept that we used to frame up the section of our book that is about the economy and this is particularly apt for this 99% moment that we’re in right now. And the precept is this: we’re all better off if we’re all better off. We’re all better off if we’re all better off. And what we mean by this is simply that there is no way, as I say, for me to say that my good fortune is wholly separable from your misfortune. There’s no way for someone in the 1% today to say, look the fate of the 99% in a perfectly efficient market is
precisely what they deserve. If they’re poor, then they deserve to be poor. And so it is not my
care either as a matter of taxation policy or philanthropy because the market has spoken. And
that worldview which is still prevalent today, still the dominant kind of soundtrack of our politics
and economics is something that we have to actively, actively undue. And the idea that we’re all
better off if we’re all better off one way to kind of conceptualize this is what I’ve called Henry Ford
economics. When Henry Ford was getting going and starting building Model Ts and the rest, he
made a very interesting choice. He decided to pay his assembly line workers more than the market
at that time demanded that he pay them. Why did he do this? He didn’t do this because he was just
some charitable soul who wanted to do good by his workers. He did this because he understood that
his workers, building those model Ts if paid well enough were going to become his best customers
buying those Model Ts. The best way for a capitalist to ensure that there is in fact an economy to
get rich off of is to ensure that there are customers with purchasing power and with demand and
with money in their pockets to sustain an economy. And so it may have seemed in the short term
that it was against Henry Ford’s interest to pay his workers more than he needed to. But it wasn’t. It
was wholly within his interest and it set in motion this hurricane of prosperity. You pay your
workers more, they can buy your cars. The more cars you make, the more workers you can hire.
And this is a cycle that got set in motion with that industry in this country. And that is the story of
any industry that ends up thriving. We’re all better off if we’re all better off. And if you think about
today the language that we have in all these debates about what do we do about the economy? And
one of the ideas you will hear against that is well no, the rich are job creators. If you tax the job creators,
you kill job creation so don’t do that. And politicians of my party and the other party are terrified of
that. They are terrified of going anywhere near that sounds like you're killing job creation. You’re
punishing job creators. You’re punishing success. And I think the thing that we’ve got to do again,
both as a moral values matter and as an argument in fact is remind folks that the only job creators in
this country are the middle class. The only job creators in this country are customers. A rich
business person does not create jobs. If I had a lot of money and I have a great business, killer
business idea, I could initially set up shop. I can initially hire you and you and you and say I’ve
created five jobs. But if the rest of my community has no money in their pockets, does not have any
disposable income to actually buy whatever it is I’ve come up with, those five jobs I created and
made a lot of fanfare about will disappear as will my company in very short order. Customers create
jobs. Demand creates jobs. And so we’re all better off if we’re all better off. And this is both a
practical economic argument and as I say, about the very notion of mutuality the very notion of
what it means to be all in it together.

This brings me to the final precept that we have in this book and that is simply that freedom is
responsibility. And again this runs a bit against the grain of what we think of in American life. We
think of freedom as ‘don’t treat on me.’ We think of freedom as the removal of encumbrance on my
liberty to do whatever the heck I want, don’t tread on me, don’t take my guns, don’t tell me what I
can do with my body. Left and right, there is a language in American life about rights. Our view is
that a language of freedom that is about rights only, quickly collapses. In fact, we’re seeing that
collapse in slow motion right now in this country and one thing that our founders and framers
understood. There’s a great, great book called Inventing America by Gary Wills. It’s one of his
lesser known books about the Declaration. And unpacking phrase, by phrase what Jefferson wrote
in the Declaration and tying it to the Scottish Enlightenment and the kind of values mindset that had
kind of formed Jefferson. And one of the simples ideas and most powerful ideas as he formed the
Declaration was the idea that rights are duties. Not rights are set against duties, not balanced against
duties, but rights are duties. To have a right to do something is to incur an obligation to do it well
and to sustain that right for others who come behind you. Freedom is responsibility. And it’s only if
you’re in a one transaction kind of thing where you’re never planning on seeing people again, that
freedom is not responsibility. If I was ever going to see you all again, I could sell you something
right now, swindle you, take your money and be gone. I would be free to do so. You would have freely parted with your money and you’d never see me again. But if I knew I was going to see you here tomorrow afternoon and you would be saying, hey Eric what did you do with all my money? I would understand that that freedom is not simply the removal of encumbrance upon my actions. That freedom is about mutuality, again.

These simple precepts that I’ve been outlining here are, I my view, they provide the frame, the architecture on a values level for what it means to lead in public. There are many things that we can talk about when we get into the discussion piece here on the skills side and on understanding systems about what it means to lead. In the seminar we did earlier this year on Lawyers as Leaders, we did a lot that was about the skills piece. How to advocate and how to frame things and so on and so forth. But it all begins with these values. It all begins with a predisposition to think in terms of values and to communicate in terms of values and to paint a picture about how we are all in it together and what we’re doing here together that starts here with an emotional values laden kind of appeal. Before you go here to talk in stories about economics and complex adaptive systems.

And so that is the meta-message that I want to leave you with here today. That the art of leading in public is the art of capturing deep underlying values that people respond to. That people are wired to respond to. We are wired. There is a great moral psychologist called Jonathan Haidt, who has written a bunch of books about the science of morality. And he’s got a new book coming out in a few weeks time that I’ve had a chance to see. And he’s got this acronym WEIRD, which I don’t remember all of it, but it’s Western Educated Industrialized, something, something about societies like the United States that actually WEIRD in their moral composition. That we in our hyper-individualism. in our hyper-don’t tread on me-ism, in our hyper-pull yourself by your own bootstraps-ism are an outlier when you look at most human societies and most human societies have figured out in this way that we are deeply hard-wired for reciprocity and mutuality to structure themselves. So one of the things that we have to do in an American context in order to lead effectively in public is to try to marry the language of our particular inheritance, which is an inheritance of throwing off oppression and tyranny with this moral truth of responsibility. This is the great challenge for us. And I think for people here in this room who are students it is a challenge for you to kind of see what you’re learning through that lens. That every skill you’re learning whether it’s on federal taxation or torts, or whatever it may be, is about how to practice these values in a somewhat more effective way. For those of you who are leaders and activists in the community, it’s a similar thing. It’s figuring out how we engage people on this values level to have a discussion about what we are and who we are right now.

I want to close just with this simple story. One of the things that I had a chance to do last week was to speak at this conference that was held in Seattle. It was a national conference called the National Immigrant Integration Conference. It happens I think every year somewhere in the country and this year was hosted here in Seattle. I spoke and MC’d this session where you had people from the civil rights era, from today’s immigrants rights movement, people from all over the country, people who were long time citizens, descendants of the Mayflower, and people who were undocumented and who are now openly undocumented immigrants on stage there talking about what it means to define America. At the end of the evening, what became so clear to me over the course of this was that we can talk about policy, we can talk about politics, but in the end, it is about values driven stories. Stories that we tell about who we are. And it starts with literally, who you are. What’s your story? Who shaped you? What was your path? What formed your sense of beliefs and obligations? And then it becomes the next concentric circle of what’s our story? If we as a room here today were to spend the rest of the afternoon and evening telling our story, what a rich and multi-threaded tapestry of story that would be. And we would come to some common cords of connection about our values and about what it is that moves us to be for something other than just ourselves. And you
take it to the next level, the next scale up and it is a circle of community and a circle of country. And our ability to tell a story to ourselves and of ourselves that is bigger than what we are as a country right now is absolutely vital. It is always an important thing because we are always in the United States, temporary trustees of a legacy that is not promised to anybody. But it’s particularly important at this moment right now where that legacy is actually in peril, where the propositions that this country is dedicated to are themselves becoming the thing of cynicism, and dismissal and a bit of a joke. Where the very promise of an American dream and an American idea, people are checking out of and opting out of. This is one of those moments right now where we have to express articulated value-driven ways tell our stories. And if we practice doing that first in twos and threes and then in thirties and forties and then in larger scales we will be practicing leadership. This is not leadership in terms of field marshal, or coach on football field telling you to march and take this piece of ground. This is leadership in terms of showing up for life. Recognizing that when you show up for life it’s rapidly, wildly contagious and that when you don’t show up for life it’s rapidly, wildly contagious. So that there is no such thing as deciding just to kind of not participate. Non-participation, non-assertion of ownership is as good as an active of renunciation. An active act of passing your share and proxy to those who would undermine the promise of this country. So I hope that for all of you as you think about wherever you are in your life-stage and whatever you will carry with you as you leave this room would lead in that way with story driven by values and realize that each one of you is a powerful node in a great web and a great network of contagion. Thank you very much.

Yes sir,

Audience 1

So I wanted to ask you how you view this issue of us seeing ourselves as a we Inaudible when you were talking about we’re all better off if we’re all better off. I’m thinking about when you were talking just at the end about defining that we because I think that’s part of the issue in someways is that there are elements and when you’re talking about underlying values there’s issues for example of race or of nationality that become about we and they and what I see sometimes and maybe it’s kind of a negative aspect of leadership that you’re talking about we see leaders who are promoting this idea of we but in a negative way. We are being undermined in this way and they’re whether it’s China or whether it’s immigrants or another group so how do we get into talking about we in a way that’s not Inaudible

Eric Liu

That’s a great question. Could everybody hear the question roughly?

Michele Storms

Please repeat it a little bit.

Eric Liu

I’ll repeat it a little bit. The question is how do we define, the definition of we is often abused. That people make we’s that are smaller and are used to set against a they an other, whether it’s of another party or of another race or another region or another part of the planet, whatever it may be and how do we reckon with that.

I guess there’s two parts to my answer. The first is just to keep on telling a story of a bigger we. There are always going to be leaders among us, self-appointed or elected by us who see short term
advantage in dividing. That is human nature. That is the behavior of people. At the same time what we have an opportunity to do right now is to practice and to model for each other the art of searching out some common cord. So let me give you a live example right now. I mentioned Occupy and the Tea Party. My friend Larry Lesig who’s a law professor at Harvard and right now has a new book out called Republic Loss. It’s a great book. It’s about campaign finance reform and more generally about the corruption of our politics the seeping now taken for granted corruption of our politics and the promise of this democracy by money power, by organized money. And by a system which is now completely don’t blink an eye common place for any member of any elected body to tell you that they spend three to four hours a day dialing for dollars, this is just what people do. So Larry Lesig’s out there and on one level, his book which just came out a few weeks ago because this whole 99% movement is kind of about the evils of concentrated wealth and power. And so, Larry could have made an easy choice as a guy trying to sell a book right now. He could have pitched hard left and said, dang right my book is all about how the Tea Party is evil, the right wing is evil, and you Occupiers are right that there’s just this bad stuff going on. What he did instead which I found more interesting and it might not have helped him in book sales is he said look I am a liberal but I’ve actually spent a lot more time than anybody else I know with members of the Tea Party, with leaders of the Tea Party right now. I have found that there is one huge piece of common ground that connects members of the Tea Party patriots and activists of the 99% Movement and that is this disgust with the ways in which the game is rigged. This disgust with how a few people with lobbyists and with power and access to get heard can decide what issues come up for a vote, can decide who gets bailed out, can decide what our policy priorities are. And that though these two entities may disagree on almost every possible remedy for our social ills and problems, they can totally agree that the game as rigged currently does not work for most Americans. The thing that they ought to be trying to come together on is how we un-rig that game and change the rules of the game. And once we have rules of the game and campaign finance and elections where it is a fair fight where it is a level playing field, then you can have your arguments about whether to have a conservative approach to health care or a liberal approach to health care. Then you can have your arguments about whether you can do this left wing approach to education or this right wing approach. And so he made this case and he got a lot of push back. People from the Occupy Movement said no we don’t like that, we don’t want to do that. And people from the Tea Party said we have nothing to do with those Occupy people, those are anarchists and hippies and people getting arrested and we are law abiding and du, du, du, du, du. Larry alone isn’t going to be able to pull these two groups together, but we, all of us, in our own ways, everyone of us somewhere in our extended family or our extended circle of friends or people we live near knows people who do not agree with us. So we have a simple choice of whether we’re going to lead in a way that’s like I know you and I don’t agree on 90% of stuff but are there some underlying things that we can, again, as a matter of principle, find that we have some common ground. And I think that’s a habit that has long, long atrophied in American life, not just by the people who are elected and the people who are on Fox News and MSNBC, but by just us in everyday life. And look anything I will say as an answer to a question like that is no silver bullet. The best we can hope for, it’s taken us thirty plus years to descend into the kind of not just inequality that we have today but the raw, uncivil, short-termism, self-seeking civic life that we have. And it’s going to take another bunch of years for us to unwind that but I think that it begins with us being committed in our networks and in our circles to try to find that kind of common ground.

Audience 2

So a lot of your writings your most recent writings, talk about citizenship and patriotism at the national level. How do those ideas apply, can they apply at a more local level? Or is it the case that we now commonly understand ourselves only as citizens as a nation state and there is no conception of ’community citizenship’?
Another great question and I’ll just repeat it. It is the question about citizenship and that a lot of what I’m both talking about here today and have written about is about our notion of what it means to be a citizen at a national level. And I want to take pains to say that when I’m talking about great citizenship I am not talking about our documentation status. I am not talking about where you were born. I know lots of people who as a matter of legal documentation status are not United States citizens who are better citizens in a sense of showing up for life than people whose families have been here generation after generation who under the fourteenth amendment got it as a matter of birth right.

But the question was is it the case that today is it only about a national civic identity and is there anything left at a local level, does this mean anything at a local level? And I actually would say, it’s almost the reverse. I think people have a stronger intuitive sense of what this stuff means closer to home. That some of these national debates, the more national our politics, the more you go up to a national scale, the more we become like spectators and consumers. And the more this becomes a show for us to watch or a game for us to cheer at. And that’s especially so in the campaign finance system we have where for most of us our main ability to influence anything is to be one of x-tens of millions of votes in a big national election. But it is especially in the local that these ideas of how to lead in public, that all the precepts that I was describing that this idea of great citizenship comes to life. It is on a human scale, on a scale of a group of people who I might see again. In Wallingford, or in the U District, or in Columbia City, wherever you may be and live that practicing these precepts and not practicing these precepts where you very vividly feel the difference in outcomes. So I mentioned that I’m serving on the board of the Seattle Public Library, to me the Seattle Public Library, it’s not just because I’m on the board and I’m here to cheer-lead for them: governed locally, rooted in the life of every neighborhood, in this city there are twenty-seven branches. There’s a central library downtown and then twenty-six branches all over the city. And because we’re a book-loving, book-crazy city people in each of the neighborhoods are crazy about their branches. And so when a few years ago, the city went through this two hundred million dollar bond measure to renovate or build or re-build all of the libraries in our system, there was incredible outpouring of participation and voice about how what people’s hopes and dreams for this branch that was going to get made or remade. People showing up who had never participated in some kind of public civic gathering being willing to come and do one of these exercises in say Chinatown, in the ID, and say I would like to have this in my branch, I would like to have more newspapers in my native language. Or I’d like to have more materials of this kind and can you make sure you do that? Can you make sure we have programming and speakers that speak in our language or translators, can you make sure you do that that were very different from what you got in Ballard, or in High Point or in West Seattle. In every one of these neighborhoods, people felt this ownership of the institution but also this ownership of each other. The sense that hey, we who showed up for this meeting, we make each other, we form each other. It was as vivid as you can get. In this very emotional palpable way of people being proud not only of their library but proud of the fact that they put in input and something happened that reflected their input.

You send an e-mail to Congress today. You send an e-mail to a presidential candidate today, who knows, right? But if you sent an e-mail or showed up at a meeting, a hopes an dreams meeting for this new branch of the library and said I really think and so do five of my friends think that we should do X in this branch, there was a decent chance that X was going to happen. And that to me is just one instance. There is an anthropologist named Robin Dunbar, I don’t know if any of you have heard of, who is famous for an idea called the Dunbar number. In which he has looked cross-cultures in all different civilizations through different periods of history and finds that the maximum number of meaningful relationships that anyone of us can sustain is about 150. It kind of maxes out
around there. And it turns out over history that that ends up being about the number that a lot of meaningful chunks of social organization have been built around. So a company in the marine corp or in the military, in the army is about 150-200 people. Precincts are about 150 families in politics. So those of you who are on Facebook I bet this room has people who have hundreds, a thousand Facebook friends, but really, you’re probably only keeping in close touch with or care a lot about 150 of them tops.

One of the ideas that Nick and I put in this new book Gardens of Democracy is that at the local level, we should be finding ways whether through government or not through government to be organizing ourselves in Dunbar groups to be doing things in our communities that are just at that scale of about 150 people. And it can be about revitalizing the neighborhood school, it can be friends of the playground, it can be whatever. But just finding opportunities where you can be in chunks of 150 doing stuff so that you feel the stuff in a very vivid human way. So long way of saying it’s actually at the local that I think this has to, society becomes how you behave is a charge to do this locally. The old slogan of think globally, act locally actually may turn upside down. I actually think, think locally and then network globally. So if there are people in every neighborhood in Seattle really taking ownership of their neighborhood and the life of that, then they can network with one another. Then they can make sister-neighborhood relationships with other neighborhoods in other parts of the world that are coming up with new ways to do urban chicken farming or waste water disposal, whatever it is. But is about rooting ourselves in a place first.

You had a hand.

**Audience 3**

First of all thank you for coming today. I love your four tenants especially the first one. I want to sort of challenge you, though and take issue on, I feel like, I want to sort of put in the context in the first rule which is sort of that our long term interests are the same, that’s how I heard it.

So it seems like the Tea Party/Occupy dynamics are two heads of the same coin. I totally don’t like that, I guess. I feel like just going back a few decades, we looked about Dr. King and everybody said hey Dr. King don’t talk about Vietnam, we need you to focus on this, this is what we have to focus on. And that’s just sort of the dynamic we have between the Tea Party and Move On. I feel like those are sort of diametric old school paradigm of us versus them. I feel like those are sort of diametric old school paradigm of us versus them. I feel like the Arab Spring, the 99% movement is modeled after Arab Spring, is something new, it’s a third option and there are so many more options that it’s not sort of opposed diametrically because I feel like we’re moving to something new. And me at least as an Occupier, on the weekends, feel like that we are disgusted with the Democrat/Republicans paradigm like it’s an ancient way to solve problems and it’s this is something I feel like that is new and kind of related to your precepts.

**Eric Liu**

So I agree completely, actually. But I want to articulate what I think is the source of your discomfort. So his comment was that my precept that all self-interest is common interest and that Tea Party and Occupy in some ways are two sides of the same coin brought this gentleman some discomfort as somebody who has been involved with the Occupy Movement because in his view two things: number one, they’re not the same one is fighting for something that you believe in and one is fighting against it. And for the second thing, this whole idea of Republicans versus Democrats is part of an old paradigm of thinking about politics and public life that Occupy is perhaps breaking. On that last point, actually, that’s one thing that I would agree with you vigorously on. This is what I’m excited about this moment right now. I think Occupy even more than the Tea Party represents the beginning of the end of the duopoly structure of our politics.
Audience 3

I think both Fox for example Fox and MS-NBC treat the Occupiers like they’re dirt. Like something that both Republicans and Democrats can kind of agree on that nobody wants to touch these guys.

Eric Liu

I think that’s true at a certain establishment elite level, but I think people across the board are coming to see that there’s much more to it than that. Initially the media did try to both, not just Fox News, but even CNN and mainstream media tried to characterize Occupy in dismissive terms as hippies, fringe, anarchists, WTO, da,da,da,da,da,da, that kind of thing. And now there is a reckoning and a respect. Look here’s the plain fact, we’ve had in this country in the last five or six weeks since Occupy really got going in earnest more conversations in this country, more discussions in the media, more active contemplation of action in Congress and in national politics about inequality than we’ve had in the previous two decades combined, period. Frankly if I were in Occupy, I would declare victory right now. I would not get into a winter of camping out in places and have it become a physical occupation. I would say we have re-framed the national conversation. We’re going on hiatus in the winter and if by the spring time this country has not moved on in equality we’re coming back. But that’s a tactical thing put that to the side. I think you’re absolutely right that there is this disgust. Let me be very clear when I say that all self interest is mutual interest, I am not saying can’t we all get along. I am not saying can we all just split the difference and find a mushy middle that we can all be friends about. I think there are ills that need to be named and the ill that is most prominently on my mind right now is this ill of a thirty year non-accidental, intentional transfer of wealth from the middle class and lower classes in America to the very wealthy. This did not happen by accident. It wasn’t the weather. It wasn’t just something that came upon us. This is thirty years in which, driven more by Republicans than Democrats but certainly exceeded to by Democrats and in some cases by my old boss President Clinton encouraged to coddle Wall Street and to coddle the 1%. I don’t know if you all know, you probably do because you’re part of Occupy. Just some basic statistics and facts in 1980 the top 1% of American accounted for about 8% of national income. Today they account for almost 25%. In 1980, the bottom 50% of Americans accounted for 18% of national income. Today the bottom 50% account for 12%. On current course and speed, thirty years from now in 2040, the top 1% will account for more than half of the nation’s income and the bottom 50% of us will account for 6% of national income. Now you could call that third world, but by that time we will have already collapsed. Because no society, no human society, no organic living thing can live with that kind of imbalance. Systems in that kind of imbalance tip over and die. And that’s just one statistic. Statistics about the fact that the wealthiest 400 families in the United States account for more wealth than the bottom 155 million Americans. Four hundred people:155 million people. That’s just a snapshot, to me what’s more compelling is the trend line. While this has happened, that between the 1950’s and today tax rates for the very wealthiest Americans have gone down from about 51% to about 17%. So these two things are connected you lower taxes on the wealthy and the wealthy concentrate more wealth. And the more that that happens, the more of a vicious circle you get into. Because when the super wealthy feel like they can live in a bubble cordoned off from everybody else well they stop caring about the common investments. There was an ad in the paper, I don’t know if any of you saw this in Sunday’s New York Times. It was a full page ad by Audi. There’s a picture of the new Audi A8 facing you and in front of the car were a few potholes, stylized potholes and the headline of this ad was something like America is underfunding its road construction budget by over $450 billion. In the new Audi A8 you won’t have to feel that at all. So that was just offensive to me on so many levels, ON so many levels. It’s not just the belief system embodied in that, it’s the audacity. The tin ear, the shamelessness to think that you should be public about talking and thinking like this. In 1980 the average CEO in the United States made 42 times more than the average worker. Today the average
CEO makes 531 times more than the average worker. This is partly about market mechanisms and about winner take all politics and technology, blah, blah, blah. But what it’s really about is our norms have broken down. In 1980, someone who could have made a lot more than 42 times the average worker would have just felt like it was unseemly to do so. That it was kind of disgusting to do so. To consume so voraciously, to sort of eat one’s own young in a way. Today that kind of moral hesitation has disappeared. And why? Because folks in that 1% live in a bubble where they don’t get challenged, they don’t hear about the cost. They think that if I just get an Audi A8, it’s someone else’s problem that no one’s filling the potholes. If the schools are breaking down, that’s someone else’s problem. Why does UW Law School, why does college anywhere especially private college today cost as much as it does? Because it can. Because it can, because there are people out there for whom money is no object and they will bid up the price of tuition and institutions respond to that because it can. There’s this 1% now whose distorting effects on our whole economy and our politics are so profound and that is not just a bummer, it’s an evil.

And so I agree with you, this is not just about can’t we all get along. Nor is it about, for me, demonizing the 1% as all evil people. This agenda of policy making and tax preferences and everything else that our congress has had a hand in. for me you think about the New Deal, and you have a picture in your mind. This was a program, there was somebody, a president, FDR that had this whole thing. They had a whole bunch of policies underneath it it was very deliberate. Well what we have now is the raw deal. There’s no one person you can point to to say this one person is the mastermind of it but it is every bit as much a planned intentional thing getting exactly the outcome it was designed to get. And so I think part of what we have to do in this country right now is to foster these conversations about inequality and about what’s going on here and how it hurts all of us Republican or Democrat, 1%, 99% 92%, whatever you are. A different metaphor we use in this book is the metaphor of circulation. So one way I quarrel with Tea Partyers or the anti big government right is on this idea of government spending. Government spending is a bad word. Spending is a bad word. And that’s partly because we’ve come in this country to buy into an idea that when you spend something, when government spends something, it’s like they’re taking your tax dollars in a big pile here and setting that pile on fire and so it’s all extinguished in one use. And I suppose like spent ammunition that is an idea of what spending is. In our view it is not spending, this is circulation. When government collects tax dollars it collects them in order to recirculate them through the body. What we have in the United States is a situation where 24% of our blood supply is clotted in this grotesquely deformed big toe. And for a while the big toe can feel like I’m rockin’ this is great, I feel healthy, I got all the blood I need and more. But after a while this is bad for everybody. It’s of course it’s bad for the rest of the body because after a while the rest of the body atrophies because it’s not getting enough blood. But what people forget is that when the rest of the body dies, the big toe dies too. There is no way to sever our interests from one another that way. So that’s what I mean is telling that story about how we are interconnected and telling that story the 1% and its defenders to say that it is in your self-interest. We are not asking for altruism. We are not asking saintliness, it is in your self-interest to be willing to be taxed so that we can invest in the middle class and set back in motion this kind of virtuous circle of the Henry Ford economics that I’m talking about.

And for us, wherever we stand in our roles in life, when you’re there on Saturday at Westlake, I hope I have infected you. I truly hope I’ve infected you. I hope wherever you are, at dinner tonight, I hope when you go to the next public event or something or in your seminar tomorrow, I hope I have infected you. And that some of what I’m talking about here, these precepts, these metaphors, these ways of thinking about how we’re connected will inform and influence the way that you start engaging other people in conversations. And start painting this picture and telling this story. It’s what’s happening it’s how the Arab Spring came to be, there was no one catalyst and I think it’s how Occupy is I think going to be sustained whatever happens in a give plaza. Because we and
many more like us are now beginning to be infected with this idea that it’s not just immoral, it’s stupid to have this kind of inequality. At the end of the day it’s un-American because our whole promise is to have a fair shot for everybody.

Are we out of time?

**Michele Storms**

Yeah, we are.

**Eric Liu**

Well thank you so much for coming to this conversation. I’m very happy to stick around a little bit if you have any more questions or comments. Thank you let me tell you two things. Two things for you to follow up on. One is The Gardens of Democracy if you’re interested on it when that book comes out I guess we can put a piece of paper here put your e-mail address on it and we can send you a copy of that book. Part of our aim in writing this is to, we think of ourselves as pamphleteers, yes we are selling the books in traditional retail channels, but when we find folks who are engaged and active and activated and want to spread these ideas, we want to put the ideas in your hand. That’s one thing. The second thing is to the extent that you’re interested in this whole 99% moment and movement right now. One thing that Nick and I have been doing to help fan the flames of what’s happening in Occupy is just to create resources. So we’re trying to create intellectual product that anybody that cares about this stuff can use. So we’ve created this website called www.wearethe99percent.us and it’s just a compendium of facts, stats, infographics, charts, downloadable yard signs. Use them at will. Use them at dinner parties. Use them at Westlake Plaza. Use them in your staff meetings. Whatever it may be. And if you’re a Twitter person wearethe99prcnt is the handle that is also regularly just trying to broadcast out these facts. Our belief is that Occupy has been exciting, this 99% movement has been exciting, but it’s been exciting mainly as an expression of angst and that we now need to convert that emotion into making of arguments. If you feel like something is off like something is wrong in this country. Now you have to make an argument about why you feel that way and how we got here. And that will lead us down the road about what we ought to do about it. I just wanted to put that on your radar screens and again thank you so much for coming today. I’m sorry we didn’t have more time for Q and A because I suspect there are people in this room who disagree violently with me. And if you do I hope you’ll come and tell me and tell me because in that spirit I want to really engage and not stay in that little bubble.

**Michele Storms**

Thanks so much everyone. So I didn’t come prepared with a paper to pass around but again, I’m Michele Storms. I’m here at the Law School many of you are affiliated with. So if you write to me I can always pass on the e-mails too, to Eric to make sure that you can have that book. And with the website www.wearethe99percent.us is that percent spelled out?

**Eric Liu**

That one is spelled out in full.

**Michele Storms**

Spelled out in full. So that’s great. Hopefully your brain and your heart and your soul are afire, I know mine is. I told you I was excited that Eric should speak with us and I hope that you are excited too and I hope that we can in whatever sphere we’re in and however we connect with what
he has said can continue to show up for life because I think that’s really a good point that you’ve made and so much what it’s all about about being present on the issues that matter and that is I think in the art of public leadership it’s showing up and engaging with people. Thank you so, so, so, so much I wish we could have you like every Wednesday for an hour or so. Thank you again, please join me.