

# Citizenship for a New Century

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It is always a pleasure and honor for me to address this congregation in this special place: a playful balance of sunlight and song, community and self-reflection, in a delightful curvature of space. My visits here remind me of Black Elk's observation that the power of the world always works in circles, and that everything tries to be round.

My subject today is a circle of sorts, a giving and receiving relationship, a membership with others, myriad relationships that make us human and whole, healthy beings. I'd like to make the case for a renewed and revitalized citizenship in and with the worlds of nature, community, and politics. It's all one world really, the Great Tao or the Spirit that moves through all things. But we are increasingly living in a world of divisions and subdivisions, and distractions. We forget about the connections that give us everything from basic sustenance to emotional well being, to the political stability that makes possible the freedom of choice and all of the goods and services we collectively call culture.

Citizenship is an ancient ideal that identifies human happiness and fulfillment with our inherently social nature. From the Greek philosopher Aristotle to Thomas Jefferson, to contemporary writers like Wendell Berry, the good life is measured by the extent, depth, and quality of our relationships with others: family, neighbors, community, government, and the natural world. Our engagement in these relationships is the practice of citizenship.

Aristotle said it best: we are social animals. From our mode of reproduction, to our long dependence as children, to our bodily architecture and language, we are born to be with others, to seek out others, to depend on others. This social life is complex and multi-faceted, but it's natural, almost automatic.

Our readings and meditation today describe important aspects of our social life. Pericles' "Funeral Oration" is one of the clearest expressions of how a city and its citizens support each other, and how individuals have both private and public lives. He says "Make up your mind that happiness depends on being free, and that freedom depends on being courageous." Athenians are free to enjoy their city and their freedom because they are willing to defend them with their lives. He says further: "We do not say that a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all." The civic life is a participatory life that requires on occasion great

sacrifice, but it also provides great freedom and the cultural and social conditions that allow us to flourish as socially inclined human beings.

John Berger's poem and St. Francis' canticle are earthy testaments to our reliance on sun and soil, and the remorseless workings of life and death for our sustenance. It's one big family. The French peasants that John Berger lives with and writes about understand, in the words of Gary Snyder, "the play of the real world, with all its suffering, not in simple terms of 'nature red in tooth and claw' but through the celebration of the gift-exchange of our give-and-take. To acknowledge that each of us at the table will eventually be part of the meal is not just being realistic," says Snyder. "It is allowing the sacred to enter and accepting the sacramental aspect of our shaky temporal personal being." This is citizenship too, the interplay of civic relationships in a city the size of the universe, but always and everywhere in the here and now of a particular place with others.

If my use of the term citizenship seems odd or foreign, it is because what we Americans understand this concept to mean is quite narrow and limiting.

There was a historical moment during the American Founding when the ideal of citizenship first developed in Athens might have become a reality. But Thomas Jefferson's call for a traditional republic and a nation of yeoman farmers practicing participatory democracy in ward-republics was rejected in favor of a republic that James Madison defined as a mere "scheme of representation." Madison's republic was a limited, representational government committed—thanks to the efforts of Alexander Hamilton—to the expansion of commerce and manufacturing. Individuals with well-protected rights and meager civic duties seeking self-interested material gains became the ideal to which early Americans adhered, and to which many of us still adhere today.

We are currently in the midst of a presidential election year, and if you listen carefully, both the major candidates are appealing to us not as citizens, but as consumers. Whether it's health care, education, or a big tax-refund, we are being asked to vote for one candidate over another because of what he will give us. Not since John Kennedy's inaugural address have Americans been asked to give as much as they get. It's a "vote-and-leave-the-governing-to-us" republic. We are fast becoming—or perhaps we've already become—not "America the Beautiful", or "America the Free," but "America the Mall," completely preoccupied with our stuff and the machinery that keep the goods coming.

Despite America's current healthy economy and the personal freedoms that are unrivaled anywhere in history or in the world today, I believe that the American experiment of combining minimal democracy with maximal consumption and personal freedom has failed. We are increasingly disconnected from each other, and frequently disenchanted with each other as well. Despite using more energy per person than any nation on Earth, statistics show that we are not better educated, not living substantially longer, and not any happier. Our habits and routines engage us less and less in the natural world.

We have painted ourselves into a corner where freedom is defined as freedom from others, where we must increasingly depend on ourselves and on all of our gadgets to get through the world. At times this corner feels safe and secure, and we might even begin to believe that each of us is independent from the world, an undivided individual free from outside pressures and interference. Free from our dysfunctional families and our annoying neighbors, and the opinions of others. Two hundred channels of TV freedom, the internet, cybershopping, cell phones, beepers, palm pilots; our very own house, car, boat, camp, bank account, and retirement fund. Our very own personalized universe.

We are beginning to resemble the Cyclopes in Homer's *Odyssey*. They were the one-eyed giants who kept to themselves. They were entirely self-sufficient, and did not care a jot for their neighbors or for social conventions. They were strong and independent, but also mean-spirited and one-dimensional. Their one eye gave them sight but not vision, and certainly not a depth of perception that included others.

This little corner of individualism that we know so well—and the political and economic systems we have created to support it—are all of them illusions. A simple experiment may suffice. If you insist on considering yourself fundamentally separate from others and the world, just cover up your nose and mouth, and see how long it takes for you to give in and gasp. This gasp is the most basic and profound counter-argument to the view that human beings are individuated and independent from the world. This in-breath is the symbol of our connection with—and dependence on—a world that is greater and larger than ourselves: a world of others. This in-breath is the gift of life, a taking. Our out breath is the return, a completion of the gift exchange, a symbol and circle of giving.

This give and take of breath is, of course, at the core of our life. It is the first cycle outside of the womb, but it is followed by many others: the cycles of food, family, play, learning, and loving. Giving and taking. Circles within circles. Relationships. Awareness of others. Ethical responsibilities. Groups within groups. Participation. Health. Wholeness.

What I mean by citizenship is the sum total of these relationships with others. Citizenship for a new century is a call to rethink and reinvigorate these relationships. It calls us on us to consider our public lives to be as important as our private lives. To recognize that health is a matter of balance and interplay between myriad beings and cycles; that our neighbors can be more than voices beyond the fence; that politics is figuring out how to live with others in a world of limited goods and good will.

We can become citizens of this place by opening our senses to, and enhancing our awareness of the world of nature. Open space protection, wilderness corridors, wild patches on our suburban laws, gardening, birding, and just plain walking are some of the few openings to becoming, in Aldo Leopold's words, plain members and citizens of the biotic community.

We can become citizens in our communities, neighborhoods, churches, schools, prisons, and hospitals by becoming more engaged with one another. It starts with eye contact and

name recognition, but it must proceed to genuine and frequent interactions. The out breath of our community life is action. We are all of us teachers and role models; all of us agents of change.

And then there is politics. At the national level there is not much room for participation, but the local level is today in America much like it was at the Founding: vibrant, active, and often boisterous. A genuine civic life is not complete until we are willing to participate in the day-to-day dealings of government, whether in our schools, churches, or towns. If you've ever been to a school board meeting, you know that it's not always a pretty sight. And it certainly takes up a lot of our evenings. But it's a powerful force too, and it led Alexis de Tocqueville to observe in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, that America's grassroots democracy is "an all-pervading and restless activity, a superabundant force, and an energy which is inseparable from it and which may, however unfavorable circumstances may be, produce wonders."

Citizenship for a new century is the restoration of the numerous and dynamic relationships we have with others: it is effort and enjoyment, private and public, giving and taking, freedom from others and freedom with others. Citizenship is the in-breath and out-breath of community. And it's available to all of us at this very moment and at every moment. In our countless relationships with others—ecological, social, and political—we engage in the practice of citizenship. Our civic lives are shared, and so too are our successes and failures. We create, support, and inspire one another. As citizens we feel at ease in the world of cycles, this curved universe we call home, where everything tries to be round.