

Charlotte, Citizenship & What Matters Most  
Remarks to the Senior Scholars at Queens  
Providence United Methodist Church, Charlotte, North Carolina  
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By Mark Peres

### Introduction

Thank you, Walter, for your introduction. Thank you to everyone who is here, especially to my wife and daughter, my nephew, and my friends in the audience. It's nice of you to come out.

Senior Scholars represents lifelong learning and community gathering. I've sat in the back and watched presentations. I've imagined what it would like to up here. It's an honor for me to be on this stage.

My presentation is about three passions I have: city life, citizenship, and what matters most. This morning I'd like to tie these passions together and present a challenge to you.

### My Story

I'd like to begin with my story. My mom and dad are immigrants to this country. They moved here in the 1950s from Brazil. They believed in the American Dream and worked very hard. My dad imported and exported goods from overseas and we always lived in port cities. We moved around often. I was born in San Francisco. I left California when I was two years old, but San Francisco has

remained in my imagination as this wonderful place of natural beauty, art and innovation. My family moved to New York when I was a child, and I grew up in Rego Park and Forest Hills in Queens surrounded by people from all other the world. My friends were black and Puerto Rican and Jewish and Japanese. I loved playing on the streets of the city. When I was 10 years I moved to Rio de Janeiro. I was exposed to a stunning and unique cosmopolitan city with great wealth and poverty. When I was 12 years old, my family moved to Miami, another stunning and unique place of incredible contrasts with one of the most ethnically complex populations in the United States.

It seemed we packed our bags every two years, moving from one city to next, from one neighborhood to the next. I learned to get a sense of a place.

I went to Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, and studied history and philosophy and religion. When you study those disciplines, you learn about Athens and Jerusalem and Rome and Venice – and the importance of those cities and the contributions they made. On campus I took to heart values of citizenship and service. I went to law school afterward at the Florida State University College of Law in Tallahassee. In the years that followed I lived in more cities: Boston, Houston, Washington, D.C., Miami again, Ft. Lauderdale, and travelled to London. I became fascinated by how cities shape us and how we shape cities. But in all those cities I found it hard to make a difference in what those places were and or were becoming.

In 1999, my wife and I, and our one-year-old daughter, moved to Charlotte. We had met friends in Florida who were from North Carolina. I did not want to practice law anymore and I wanted to start a web-design business. It was the first

wave of the Internet and a lot of professionals were launching Internet-based businesses. Our friends persuaded us to start a business here in Charlotte. I had never been here and had a distant sense that it was a family-friendly and sensible town that was very different than South Florida. They sent us a video of Queens Road before we arrived, and my wife and I imagined all of Charlotte looking like Myers Park. We rented a small house in SouthPark and I rented a small office in the Odell building and settled in. I did what small-business owners do and gave out my business card at networking events and met a lot of people who loved this city. I quickly fell in love with Charlotte too. The people at the center of things were easy to access and they were interested in me and I was interested in them, and together we were interested in what the city could become. It didn't take long for my wife and I to decide to make Charlotte our forever home.

In 2001 the dot.com bubble burst and my small business didn't make it. I had to re-invent myself. We struggled for a bit before I went to work at Citigroup as a financial advisor. Meanwhile, I became more involved in the city. My wife and I moved to a new development in First Ward called the Garden District and we built a home in uptown. The Center City became our front yard. The closer we were to the skyline and urban life and new construction, the happier we were.

How we thought of ourselves and the stories we told about ourselves became important to me. I was really interested in online media and thought of myself as a writer. We had the Charlotte Observer and *Charlotte* magazine, but I saw an opportunity to do something different. The contribution I thought I could make was to help tell the story of Charlotte and the people of Charlotte in a way that reflected my interests and values.

In 2003, I launched an online magazine called Charlotte Viewpoint. My vision for it was CBS Sunday Morning meets The New Yorker Magazine about Charlotte on the web. I wanted to produce a beautiful and smart publication that elevated public discourse. We started very modestly but over the next ten years we published hundreds of articles, Op-Eds, reviews, and stories. We published photography, videos, poetry and fiction. We held events and hosted gatherings. We launched the careers of a whole new young group of writers, editors and artists. I thought about Charlotte and what made a good city and what was possible in a city every day.

In 2006 I joined the faculty of Johnson & Wales University and I am there now. I teach courses on leadership and ethics in the College of Arts & Sciences. Every day I interact with students who are a cross-section of America. They share with me their hopes and dreams and the contributions they want to make. Ensuring the success of a university campus in the center of our city and building a city where my students want to stay is important to me. There is an old adage that if you want a great city, build a great university and wait 200 years. At Johnson & Wales, we have 185 years to go.

Two years ago, I started a podcast called On Life and Meaning. I was inspired by the courses I teach and by the On Being radio show on NPR. I was also inspired by Mike Wallace. In the late 1950s, long before 60 Minutes, Mike Wallace had an interview show. He would sit one-on-one with a guest, asking questions while smoking Parliament cigarettes. You can watch the interviews today on YouTube. The interviews hold up 60 years later. I thought I could have similar conversations. So I started the podcast. I talk with artists, writers, civic leaders, executives, entrepreneurs, innovators and creators. I talk with them about their

work, lives and higher purposes. The conversations are thoughtful and intimate. I write an essay afterward inspired by each conversation. This week marks the publication of our 99<sup>th</sup> episode with 1 more to go.

I mention my story because it informs what I'd like to share about Charlotte and the lives we lead.

### Charlotte

I've lived in Charlotte 20 years. It certainly is a place that invites obsessive analysis by those of us who live here. We might have the highest degree of navel-gazing of any city in America (if that's not actually true, it certainly seems that way). I have contributed to it and made a public career out of it. We talk endlessly about ourselves.

Michael Graff, a freelance writer, wrote this in *The Bitter Southerner* about Charlotte:

I love Charlotte... But Charlotte's the talkin'-est damn city in the state. I lived in Greensboro for two years and never heard people argue about Greensboro's identity. Winston-Salem has a little edge, and that's cool, but Winston-Salem doesn't constantly ask people if it's cool...Raleigh's consistent troll is that it isn't Charlotte. Which brings us back to Charlotte, which maybe used to talk about Atlanta, but now really just talks about Charlotte.

Of course, Michael couldn't escape talking about Charlotte while complaining about people who talk about Charlotte. And I find myself in the same dilemma as I talk to you.

Because we are constantly talking about ourselves, Charlotte invites comment from instant experts who have been here less than 15 minutes. I was just at a panel discussion...about Charlotte...when during the Q&A, a person raised his hand said, “I’m from the Bronx...and I just arrived today...and this is what I think about Charlotte and what Charlotte should do...”

There is so much to unpack in that statement. One, he’s from the Bronx...and he let everyone know he’s from the Bronx...because presumably the Bronx has perfected good government and quality of life...Two, he just arrived today, and everyone on the panel who was talking about Charlotte, most of whom had just moved to Charlotte, found it perfectly reasonable that our man from the Bronx had an understanding of Charlotte based on what he saw in one afternoon...

Which is exactly what everyone feels qualified to do when they move to Charlotte.

That is quintessentially our city: in the minds of people who come here, Charlotte doesn’t pre-exist. The city is an abstraction without importance until that person arrives...and the history of the city begins upon the moment of their arrival. We share no objective past, only personal subjective experience. People will say something great is happening in Charlotte because they are now here, as if nothing great happened in Charlotte before they arrived. We start our clock every day.

This is great because we are an open city that leans into the future. We are constantly on the make. On the other hand, whereas in some cities the past never goes away, in our city the past doesn’t exist.

By the way, this insight that the past does not exist here, is what Alexis de Tocqueville and foreigners have long said about America...we're a very busy place.

The emphasis on the now is so much the case that a friend of mine was offended by residents of the city who pointed out to her that they were native Charlotteans. She wrote an Op-Ed to the Charlotte Observer about it. She said she found it unwelcoming and an affront to her newcomer status when a person mentioned that they were native-Charlottean. She may have been rightly offended by the words and tone of what someone said, but I suspect that there are many native Charlotteans who are just excited to share what they find special about themselves in a city attracting 100 new residents a day. Long-time residents of the city, perhaps many of you, have a perspective that is often underappreciated by the instant experts in our town.

So everyone has something to say about Charlotte, that is our peculiarity, that is our personality, and in the scheme of things that may not be a bad thing, because all that talking therapy, and that's what it is, talking therapy, does have us churning up issues and seeking insight so we might progress as a city. Now, some people like to wallow in therapy, dig up grievances and past harms, and insist that we study all the connections and permutations of things. Let's put a task force together and really give the issue its due. The process is as important as the product, they say.

Other people prefer to avoid reflection altogether, finding the hard conversations we need to have very hard to have. They are anxious to get on with it. We need action, they say, as if action without some new insight is going to lead to any new

action that doesn't repeat what got us into the mess to begin with. I suspect that the tension between reflection and action will remain our lived experience in Charlotte. It's who we are.

So, what do we know from all this analysis about our city? Here are some common descriptions about Charlotte:

On the positive side,

- Charlotte is ordered and tenacious. Our town was named for a queen, in tribute to authority, but found its identity as a hornets' nest of independence and revolutionary resolve. That tension is constant: Charlotte is a city of conformity that also thrives on change.
- Charlotte draws people who want to make the city better. It welcomes service (if not always dissent) and ambition. We attract people who aspire for more.
- People come here to live well and make money. We have beautiful homes, beautiful streets, wonderful amenities, ideal weather.

On the less positive side,

- Charlotte is segregated by race and class. Our businesses are segregated. Our schools are segregated. Our neighborhoods are segregated. Indeed, this audience is segregated. The redlining was intentional and designed.



- Charlotte has low social trust. The Charlotte way of getting things done through public-private partnerships is code for many residents for top-down decision-making. An unintended consequence is resentment and distrust between racial and class divides.
- Charlotte has low economic mobility. The city is last among peer cities for people trying to escape poverty. Economic disparities are deep and entrenched.

My lived experience is on the positive side of that balance sheet, that's why I live here, and I suspect that's why many of you do to, but the negative side of the balance sheet is awful and unjust for too many of our residents. The strengths and weaknesses of our city give us our charge as citizens.

### Citizenship

Which brings us to citizenship. What is citizenship? Well it certainly is the status of a person recognized under law as being a legal member of a sovereign state or belonging to a nation. The legal status of our residents is a big deal. It impacts everything. Go to any citizen swearing-in ceremony and you will see how meaningful citizenship is to immigrants who become new Americans. It's an incredibly emotional experience. Men and women are crying as they recite the Oath of Allegiance to our nation.

Here is the Oath by the way:

*"I hereby declare, on oath, that I absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of*

*whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen; that I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I will bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by the law; that I will perform work of national importance under civilian direction when required by the law; and that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; so help me God."*

How many of you have made that pledge to the nation? Have many of you have not? Immigration is a good thing. It is a marvelous thing.

But I'd like to talk about citizenship differently. I'd like to offer a definition of citizenship that applies to everyone, regardless of legal status. I define citizenship this way: *citizenship is participating in the creation of the world you want to see.* As a philosopher, I would call bringing forth the world you want to see an act of moral imagination.

Now there are some grand examples of acts of moral imagination: there is the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus started a movement based on an entirely new vision of society, of who is first and who is last, and who will inherit the earth. That vision brought down the empire of Rome. The most famous modern-day example of a sermon on the mount is Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech in which he offered an entirely new vision of society and a beloved community. His vision brought down Jim Crow America.

The great thing about citizenship is that we all have the same opportunity to create the world we want to see on a less grand scale. When we call for change and take

action to create something better, we are exercising moral imagination. We are engaging in citizenship. We are citizens when we lean into the place that we are in. We do it every day when we pick up litter, when we read books to school children, when we invite people who are different from us to our dinner table. Here's how I think we can do more:

Charlotte is working on many issues:

- Transportation
- Affordable Housing
- Public Education
- Livable Wages
- Social Trust
- Economic Mobility
- Business recruitment and retention
- Our natural and built environment
- Deepening and broadening the arts and sciences

A whole host of exciting things are happening. These issues are an opportunity for each of us to offer ideas and to get on board. We are served when ideas move and swirl and collide. Things get interesting and possibilities present. One question to ask yourself is: how are you contributing to that ecosystem of ideas? How might you act as a particle accelerator of ideas?

There is one more thing we can do which may be the most important and critical thing for us to do as citizens of this place. In fact, it's the one thing I think we must do in Charlotte.

And in setting this up I'm going to compare us to Atlanta...go figure.

I was at a panel discussion in which Ryan Gravel, who proposed the Atlanta Beltline, noted that Atlanta contributed the civil rights movement to the world. The legacy of civil rights is both a challenge and opportunity for Atlanta. Ryan said that the great contribution Atlanta can make to the world going forward is to become the Beloved Community that Dr. King envisioned. That aspiration focuses the work of the city and becomes a devotion.

Great cities are places of culture and commerce in service to humanistic ideals.

This begs the question for us: what is it that Charlotte has contributed to the world? What is the highest ideal of who we are and might further become as a city? *What aspiration might become our devotion?*

We have a planning process underway called Charlotte2040 that presents us with an opportunity for a city-wide conversation about the best version of ourselves spoken in human terms. But I don't think the Planning Department should be driving the conversation. I think the people in this room should be driving the conversation.

Here are three ideas that are in the air that are grounded in our history that we have an opportunity to weave together to become a singular aspiration:

- Conscious Capitalism
- Charlotte is Creative
- Community Engagement

One, Charlotte is a business center. It always has been. Doing business is our strength and we would be very smart to continue to do it well. We are consistently ranked as one of the best cities in America to do business. We have a gleaming skyline because of it. But the world is desperate for new forms of capitalism. We need to reconsider our relationship to what we own and how we treat nature and fellow creatures. Our planet and biodiversity are at risk. Our banks and businesses here in Charlotte have an opportunity to model socially conscious capitalism that improves conditions for everyone. Conscious Capitalism emphasizes stakeholder alignment and corporate social responsibility. We need a world in which corporations are as intentional in using their vast wealth and power to serve society as they are in building shareholder value. We should demand it.

Two, Charlotte is creative. Fifty years ago, city leaders put a stake in the ground to become a cultural center. They realized we did not have mountains, rivers, streams or an ocean, but we could have museums and arenas and performance halls. Becoming a cultural center became our strategy. Today there are bold and intentional efforts underway to activate the next stage of culture in this city: which is unleashing and connecting the creativity of everyday residents. Initiatives such as BOOM Charlotte, a 3-day festival that brings together artists and residents from all walks of life; Camp North End, a hub for artists, innovators and entrepreneurs; Creative Mornings, a breakfast lecture series that energizes connection; Music Everywhere, which showcases the musicians in our city; and Charlotte SHOUT, a weeklong celebration of art, music, food and ideas. Claiming the narrative that we are a creative place and showcasing just how much we are is one of the most exciting things happening in Charlotte. We need to support that effort.

Three, A Smarter Charlotte. Cities must constantly solve problems. They must regularly reorganize to provide essential services and reinvent themselves to confront threats and exploit opportunities. Charlotte has a long history of addressing its problems, sometimes reluctantly, sometimes belatedly, often under pressure, but we get to it. Community engagement is the means by which we access the full gifts and talents of our citizenry to address systemic issues.

Community engagement is a capacity of collective intelligence. We are working on a very big issue right now: We can take our rightful embarrassment of being last among major American cities in economic mobility and turn it into a momentum and capacity to address many complex issues. This year marks 400 years of slavery and racialization in our country. We have work to do to give all our citizens a fighting chance to flourish. We can model smart and inclusive community engagement.

Things we can do include:

- More and better civic spaces for human connection.
- More and better interfaith and inter-neighborhood dialogue.
- More and better infrastructure that moves people and ideas.

I imagine all of that woven together into a 21<sup>st</sup> century city of well-being and justice.

That may not be as elegant as saying the Beloved Community, but perhaps being a place where all citizens can become the best versions of themselves is saying the same thing.

### What Matters Most

Lastly, I'd like to turn to what matters most. What we devote our lives to and why, has been very much on my mind as I've had conversations with 99 remarkable people on my podcast for 99 weeks running. I've written 99 essays inspired by my guests that has gotten me thinking about this life journey we are on, while teaching my classes on *Global Ethics*, *The Good Life* and *How to Change the World*.

Now, one might think that I might have something profound to say about the meaning of life, and I want to be quick to lower expectations. In fact, the more of this work I do, the more theology and philosophy I read, and the more conversations I engage in, the more elusive answers can get. It leads to more and more questions, so forgive me if I don't offer you anything definitive about life and meaning, especially in a house of worship where it is wise to remain humble on these matters, but here are two insights:

First, everyone I know lives with doubt. The world is a confusing place and bad things happen all the time. We may be confident in our public life and act with authority in spite of our doubt, but everyone has her or his share of sadness and insecurity. The human condition is a tricky thing. We know we're going to die and everything can seem meaningless in the face of it. That can be very upsetting. Self-awareness is a feature and a bug in our operating system. My wife and I commonly look at each at night and say, "What's it all about, Alfie?" But that is the point. The full range of human emotion is our inheritance as human beings. Embracing depression and anxiety and worry and confusion and regret and the remarkable faculties of our brain and the joyful stirring of our hearts is what drives us to wonder and create and do great things.

In fact, I'd say the one thing that all my guests have in common is that they step into their doubt.

I have a quote over my desk at work that says, "In the cave you fear to enter lies the treasure you seek." Meaning in life is found in many ways, but it is certainly found in facing our insecurities and transcending ourselves. That deep dark cave for me is standing on stage. My friends know that I dread public speaking. I have my notes in front of me for a reason. But I know I am better person and can do more in the world by facing this fear.

Advice Number 1: You know what you are afraid of...you know what you are hesitant to do...and that's where your power lies. If you want a fulfilled life, do the things you are scared of doing that you really want to do.

Second, love fuels it all. The 99 people who I have interviewed on my podcast all know they are loved. Maybe not all the time, but most of the time. And that love empowers them to take risk. When you are loved for who you are and not what you do, you really are free to do anything. Whether their mother loved them, their father loved them, their grandparents loved them, a teacher loved them, somebody loves them now or they feel the love of God – and if no one loved them or no one loves them now they did the work to love themselves – and that love gives them the great strength and resilience to overcome challenges and be real and honest human beings.

Advice Number 2: The last words of the last song sung by The Beatles is: "In the end the love you take is equal to the love you make." So take and make love. That's really the only reason we are here. Thank you for your time this morning.