

A week or so ago Rachel Maddow talked with Timothy Snyder, a professor of history at Yale University about a little book he'd written a couple of years ago. We listen to the Maddow podcasts the day after the shows are aired. She mentioned that she had purchased many copies of Snyder's book and had given them away. After hearing a description of his work, we decided to do the same, though not at the same rate as Rachel Maddow.

This small volume is filled with information that every American should read, remember, and take to heart. *On Tyranny*, subtitled "Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century," is a practical, easily understood guide to help the average citizen of this country protect our democratic form of government and keep it from eroding and being supplanted by authoritarian autocracy. It shows a way for any and all of us to take individual responsibility for the civic health of our country.

In the Prologue to the twenty lessons, Snyder references Aristotle's warning that inequality brings instability and Plato's belief that demagogues exploit free speech to install themselves as tyrants. The author goes on to warn of the tyranny of both fascism and communism. He emphasizes that our democratic heritage does not protect us from these threats.

Lesson 1: DO NOT OBEY IN ADVANCE. Snyder describes "anticipatory obedience," a phenomenon by which ordinary people do the presumed bidding of their leaders even before they are asked or directed to do so. He uses as an example the experiment carried out by psychologist Stanley Milgram in 1961. Using volunteers who were told they were taking part in a study on "learning," the subjects were seated at a table with a glass window in front of them. On the other side were others who were supposedly part of the study. The idea was that, upon direction of the scientist, the first group were to administer—via controls in front of them—electrical shocks to the people on the other side of the glass. When given the prompt, the volunteers did as commanded, administering more and more severe electrical shocks, even to the point of terrible pain and even unconsciousness of their "partners" on the other side. In reality, those folks were not receiving any shocks at all. They were part of the subterfuge, "playacting" distress.

Milgram was astonished that ordinary people, when commanded to do so, could be so cruel and unfeeling as to continue to shock others whom they did not even know, even to the point of apparent death. When an "authority" makes a rule, people tend to obey.

I would like to believe that I would have been in the minority—those who refused to inflict pain and suffering on others when commanded. And there were some people who did refuse to obey the directive. This is a lesson for all of us. There must be a good reason for obeying a command from above. Protecting our health and that of others by wearing masks and keeping ourselves at a distance from each other is an understandable reason. All of us should see this easily. But, there is no reason for us to submit to unidentified persons in unmarked vehicles on the assumption that they are legitimate law officers. Accepting this is a good example of "obeying in advance." We should not do that.

Snyder's book goes on to discuss nineteen more "lessons from the twentieth century." Next week--DEFEND INSTITUTIONS.