

“On Tyranny” by Claire Prontnicki

When I was a kid, I was a real scaredy-cat. I wasn't allowed to watch scary movies about monsters or ghouls or aliens, because I would invariably think these things were under my bed, waiting to get me... which didn't make my bedtime easier on anybody.

However, war movies – particularly films about World War II – were somehow considered to be wholesome viewing for the whole family. I expect they were supposed to instill national pride and patriotism. At any rate, I never worried about Nazis lying in wait under my bed, or outside the window, because we lived in **America**...home of the good guys...where Nazis *weren't allowed* to round you up and take you away, because the good guys had won the war.

I grew up during the Civil Rights movement, and the Environmental movement, and as a teenager, I was naïve enough to believe that, although there were imperfections in our government, they would just keep getting ironed out. Although there were setbacks (like Watergate, and the Vietnam war), I figured that we would learn from these things, and make new laws to keep them from happening again.

Over the years, it slowly became clear to me that not everyone had been brought up the same way I had, and not everyone shared my values. For instance, I realized that for some people, the Civil Rights movement must have seemed like an attack on the natural order of things. But I thought that these were the outliers, the exceptions to the rule. I apparently had a pretty sheltered life.

So when the current political situation blew my assumptions all to bits, I was in shock and felt I'd been completely blind-sided. No laws, no system of government was going to save us from people who had no regard for laws, or for the common good. All the emergency brakes and safety valves that I'd taken for granted, had been dismantled. I felt like we were all drowning. with no life raft, and no land in sight, and there was nothing we could do.

The first piece of flotsam that came floating by was this book, ***On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century***, and I grabbed onto it. It was written by **Timothy Snyder**, someone who had been paying attention while I wasn't and who knew his modern European history. The kind of power grab that we're seeing now, has happened before, in multiple times and places.

On Tyranny is a short, direct book, divided into 20 short chapters, each highlighting something we can do to resist tyranny, and make it a little harder for an aspiring dictator to destroy our democracy. Here are a few samples:

“On Tyranny” by Claire Prontnicki**Lesson #1: Don't obey in advance**

“Most of the power of authoritarianism is freely given. In times like these, individuals think ahead about what a more repressive government will want, and then offer themselves without being asked. A citizen who adapts in this way is teaching power what it can do.” (p. 17)

The word “obey” here confused me at first; how can you *obey* a command that hasn't been given yet? But we **can** have a sense of what an oppressive government wants to see and hear, and what they **don't** want to see and hear, and then react in the way that we hope will keep us on their good side.

If you try to avoid trouble by taking down your Ukrainian flag, or removing your Rainbow bumper-sticker, or not wearing your Every Day is Earth Day T-shirt, **you** may know that your values haven't changed, but as these **signals of dissent** start disappearing, other people may find it easier to believe that there **is** no more dissent – or shouldn't be.

I've heard that some people are cancelling their subscriptions to certain left-leaning magazines, because they're afraid that having their names on those mailing lists will make them a target. And maybe it will; we don't know. We each have to decide for ourselves how much risk we can take.

An immigrant in danger of being deported, or someone whose government job is the sole support of their family, might not want to risk attending a protest rally, or writing a letter to the editor. Maybe there's something less visible they could do, like putting stamps on postcards for a mass mailing. Each of us needs to do what we can do, without making it easier for democracy to be dismantled. Closely related is...

Lesson #4: Take responsibility for the face of the world.

“The symbols of today enable the reality of tomorrow. Notice swastikas and the other signs of hate. Do not look away, and do not get used to them. Remove them yourself and set an example for others to do so.” (p 32)

The Sound Of Music was another of the formative influences of my childhood, and I think of the scene when Captain von Trapp and Maria return home after their honeymoon, to find a huge red swastika flag displayed on their house. Uncle Max explains that “yours was the only house on the street that didn't have one”, and says “We've got to get along with these people” (meaning the Nazis). But the captain angrily ripped it down. He refused to pretend that Nazi occupation was acceptable, that it was something they just had to get used to.

“On Tyranny” by Claire Prontnicki**Lesson #2: Defend institutions.**

Public institutions--like schools, libraries, historical societies, labor unions, local newspapers--each represent some part of our common culture. Taken together, they define what we value in our society, what we consider to be normal and acceptable, and what we believe about our collective past.

Repressive regimes like to *change* the narrative, to justify their policies and make them seem like the right things to do. The Nazi regime repeated their lies often enough to gradually make the oppression of the Jews seem publicly acceptable, at least to some.

One of the ways to resist this is to defend and support our public institutions. Subscribe to the newspaper. Read about what's being discussed by the school board. Support the library. Attend a city council meeting. (I find knitting helps me get through the really boring parts).

Lesson #8: Stand Out

“Someone has to. It is easy to follow along. It can feel strange to do or say something different. But without that unease, there is no freedom. Remember Rosa Parks. The moment you set an example, the spell of the status quo is broken, and others will follow.” (p. 51)

You've probably all been in group situations where somebody says something that hits a nerve. Maybe it's a demeaning joke, or a statement that's not quite true. And for a few uncomfortable seconds, you wonder if anyone is going to say something about it. But nobody does, and the moment passes before you realize that **you** should've said something. Most people don't like being the first to speak up, for fear that they may be the **only** one who does. But once the ice is broken, it often turns out that other people were thinking the same thing, and only needed someone else to go first.

Lesson #9: Be kind to our language.

“More than half a century ago, the classic novels of totalitarianism warned of the domination of screens, the suppression of books, the narrowing of vocabularies, and the associated difficulties of thought...Staring at screens is perhaps unavoidable, but the two-dimensional world makes little sense unless we can draw upon a mental armory that we have developed somewhere else...So get the screens out of your room and surround yourself with books...One novel known by millions of young Americans that offers an account of tyranny and resistance is J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*

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and the Deathly Hallows. If you or your friends or your children did not read it that way the first time, then it bears reading again.” (pp 61-3)

Lesson #12: Make eye contact and small talk.

Repression **thrives** on division. The more we separate ourselves into right vs left, rich vs poor, us vs them, the easier it is for tyrants to take control. Division is a distraction, so we don't see that we're **all** getting a raw deal. Splintered groups can be turned against each other, but *by supporting each other* we can put up a much larger resistance.

So, pay attention to the people in your neighborhood, the person who delivers your mail, the people who walk their dogs at the same place you do, the person waiting in line behind you at the grocery store. You never know when a casual bit of small talk might lead to some kind of connection, however fleeting. You may find you have something in common.

I've told this story a million times, so please forgive me if you've heard it already: A few years ago, I was waiting in a hallway at the State House. A bill about abortion rights was up for a vote that day, and the hallway was lined with dozens of women (and a few men) who were deeply divided into two camps. One woman holding an anti-abortion sign kept coming up to me and my friends and calling us murderers and whatnot, trying to get a response from us, and then she'd refute whatever we said. This went on for a while, until we just stopped reacting....

We were waiting a long time, and getting bored and quiet, when I found myself standing next to this woman, wondering if it was possible that we could talk to each other without arguing. So I said to her, apropos of nothing, “Do you knit?” She looked at me doubtfully and said “What?” So I asked again, and after a minute, she said that she did, but mostly crochets. I told her my experience with knitting, and how I found it more difficult than crochet... and she told me about how she makes stuff for her kids and grandchildren,...and we got on to talking about our kids...

Later on, when the people she came with were getting ready to leave, she came over to me and said, “Thanks for not demonizing me...Like I did to you. Neither of us had changed the other one's views on abortion, or even learned each other's name, and I never saw her again. But just for a few minutes, we managed to see each other as human beings, and it felt so good! And I like to think that if things got really bad, and either of us found ourselves in a situation where a crowd was turning into an angry mob, threatening violence against some scapegoats who were being blamed for the country's problems – the Jews, the immigrants -- Perhaps that woman and I would each be a little less likely to join in, and maybe we'd even speak up.

I'll finish by reading a quote from Pastor Martin Niemöller, a German pastor during World War II:

First they came for the Communists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Communist

Then they came for the Socialists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Socialist

Then they came for the trade unionists
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a trade unionist

Then they came for the Jews
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a Jew

Then they came for me
And there was no one left
To speak out for me.