



Quotidian Acts of Courage and the Possibilities of Democracy

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*It is actual resistance that worries tyrants, not lack of the few hands required to do the dark work of tyranny .
-- Milton Mayer, 1955*

This paper is part of a [collection](#) of papers commissioned by [Braver Angels' Citizen Scholars Council](#) for discussion at the inaugural Council Symposium, held in Philadelphia on June 25, 2026, before the Braver Angels Convention.

The charge was to explore, from different perspectives, what “courageous citizenship” is, and whether there are parallels with this mission and the last lines of the Declaration of Independence: “We pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

The Convention adopted a pledge for our time: “I pledge to be a courageous citizen — to choose curious listening over contempt, to build alongside those with different politics, and to embrace our shared duty to renew America's civic culture.”

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Abstract

*Drawing on Milton Mayer's (1955) research into the perspectives of German townspeople in the aftermath of World War II, this paper explores what it means to be courageous---or not---in response to moral challenges. It concludes with a consideration of ten of the twenty lessons Timothy Snyder recommends in *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (2017).*

Seven years after the end of World War II, an American journalist, Milton Mayer, moved to Germany for a year with the hope of gaining insight into how common townspeople had come to choose Nazism. He struggled at first to put those he encountered at ease—the country was still under American occupation, and Mayer was only beginning to learn German. Despite these obstacles, Mayer eventually persuaded ten German men from the same small town to speak with him for between 12 and 40 hours over a period of six months: one a shopkeeper, another a salesman, all prior Nazi party members.

Mayer entered into these conversations with an anthropological curiosity in all that he, as a fellow human, shared with these men and with spiritual convictions with respect to the sacred value of all. As Mayer (1955) put it in the foreword to the book he would write upon his return home,

I wanted to see this monstrous man, the Nazi. I wanted to talk to him and to listen to him. I wanted to try to understand him. We were both men, he and I. In rejecting the Nazi doctrine of racial superiority, I had to concede that what he had been I might be; what led him along the courses he took might lead me. ... I really believed that there was “that of God” in every one of them. (pp. vii-viii)

As he listened to these “small men,” as he calls them, recount memories of their lives during the 12 years of Hitler’s rule, Mayer came to feel that many of the decisions they had made sounded like those that many others, perhaps most others, would make. He came to question what distinguished these average Germans from average folk one might find anywhere —say, back home in the United States.

A Sense of Coherence and Belonging

While Mayer did discern troubling characteristics particular to these men of this particular time and place, he was more taken with the ways in which these characteristics had been animated by needs and impulses common to all. Above all, he came to realize how deeply Nazism had spoken to an underlying human need to belong—to experience oneself as a trusted member of a recognized social organization.

From the beginning, Hitler and the members his high command had sought to harness the unmet needs of the Weimar years for a sense of moral order and political stature. They created grand and affecting displays of their members’ discipline and commitment and welcomed all “Aryans” to join their ranks. One’s standing within the party was based upon how early and with how much conviction and enthusiasm one had signed on rather than upon one’s current social status.

Many of the country's impoverished country folk found this disruption of deeply rooted social mores exciting. Relatively stable social hierarchies had endured until that time within the small towns of Europe. In Germany, as elsewhere, teachers, priests, and ministers enjoyed a commanding social status; their counsel and determinations were requested in controversial matters and regarded as authoritative by all. Everyone socialized in accordance with their established social stations.

The Nazis welcomed all those possessing the favored profile—Christian, healthy, heterosexual—into a brotherhood of equals. This was to the particular advantage of the uneducated, who were more likely to be viewed as reliable Nazis than their social superiors whose schooling was thought to represent a potential threat. One of Mayer's participants, the teacher, spoke of this cultural reorganization in the following way:

For the first time in my life, I was really the peer of men who, in the Kaiser time and in the Weimar time, had always belonged to classes lower or higher than my own, men whom one had always looked down on or up to, but never *at*. (p. 105)

In brutal contrast, there was nothing the unfavored could do to earn inclusion or even to be left in peace. The Jews of Germany had always been positioned as foreigners in a Christian land. The dualistic construction of Christian revelation into good and evil, into "saved" and "lost," had forever classed them as existing outside the social and spiritual covenants that bound all others. Their irremediable exclusion served to accentuate the uncomplicated bonds of shared identity that Nazi membership offered others.

Going Along to Get Along

This bifurcated conception of one's potential eternal destiny had historically conferred enormous psychic power upon local pedagogical and religious authorities; townspeople had generally sought to stay within the cultural parameters established and enforced by those they viewed as their moral and intellectual superiors. The Nazis proved skilled at coopting this reflexive obeisance, moving quickly to enforce draconian consequences for those daring few willing to challenge their decrees. At the same time, they required little else of most Germans, at least for the first seven years of their rule, before they invaded Poland. As Mayer recounts,

The German community—the rest of the seventy million Germans, apart from the million or so who operated the whole machinery of Nazism—had nothing to do except not to interfere. Absolutely nothing was expected of them except to go on as they had, paying their taxes, reading their local paper, and listening to the radio. (p. 57)

When a band of local Nazi sympathizers burned the town's synagogue one night during the Krystallnacht violence of 1938, their Christian neighbors had only to rise and continue on with their days. By then, it went without saying that the perpetrators would face no criminal consequences. When a subsequent newspaper notice spoke of male Jews being removed from town "for their own protection," Christian townspeople had only to look away.

By this time, assets denied to deserving Jews had long been filtering into the hands of their Christian neighbors, whose material fortunes rose reliably throughout that early period.

Eventually, even those who had resisted entering the Nazi party began to find ways of justifying the move in their own minds. Some told themselves that if enough decent people joined the party perhaps they would be able to reform it from within. One of Mayer's participants told him that he had believed that the party's worst excesses had been the work of bad seeds, most of whom had joined the party in its early days "when it was irresponsible and attracted the most reckless elements" (p. 175).

Furthermore, those who continued to resist Nazi membership were increasingly viewed as suspect, rendering them more vulnerable to Nazi intrusions. Joining the party was seen as a means of insulating oneself from the doubts and accusations of others, particularly as the lines between what one could or could not still safely say and do were not entirely clear—such as what literature one could still teach. The potential severity of consequences following perceived signs of disrespect encouraged all to err on the side of caution and served to collapse the space available to talk matters through with others.

One of the scholars Mayer came to know spoke of feeling reluctant to speak out against early troubling signs and situations, such as when a qualified Jewish academic's application for an available post had been dismissed out of hand. He did not want to be the first to speak. Yet, once he had allowed that first disturbing deliberation to pass without comment, he found himself even less inclined to object to subsequent transgressions. As Mayer recounts,

"You see," my colleague went on, "one doesn't see exactly where or how to move. Believe me, this is true. Each act, each occasion, is worse than the last, but only a little worse. You wait for the next and the next. You wait for one great shocking occasion, thinking that others, when such a shock comes, will join with you in resisting somehow. You don't want to act, or even talk, alone; you don't want to 'go out of you way to make trouble.'" (p. 169)

A sense of powerlessness

Ignorance and naivety regarding the escalating violence of the Nazi pogroms was also widespread. To some degree, this can be traced to the lack of attention and reflection the vast majority in any nation devote to events that do not directly touch upon their lives. Under authoritarian conditions, the absence of trustworthy information only reinforces this commonplace reality. No one really knows what to believe anyway and people are understandably wary of pushing for more reliable and extensive reports given the risks of being perceived as difficult or oppositional.

Mayer came to believe his participants' claims that they had had no idea Jews were being systematically murdered. The official story provided when their Jewish neighbors were removed had been that they were being given land elsewhere so that they could return to earning their living with their hands rather than by managing money. Apparently, the notion that the lives and livelihoods of entire families had been upended on these grounds had not troubled them greatly.

In such circumstances, however, even the more politically aware and morally sensitive can feel unsure of what to say or do to oppose such a state action. Mayer raises the example of the U.S.

federal government's relocation of Japanese Americans after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. As he asks, "what did we expect the good citizen of Minneapolis or Charlotte to do when in the midst of war, he was told, openly and officially, that 112,000 of his fellow-Americans, those of Japanese ancestry on the American West Coast, had been seized without warrant and sent without due process of law to relocation centers?" (p. 75).

Indeed, when one of Mayer's participants, the bill-collector, learns of this history he asks Mayer what he had done to oppose this relocation at the time. When Mayer told him he had done nothing, the bill-collector exclaimed triumphantly that this supported the very point he wished to make: in a similar situation, Mayer had not expressed his opposition publicly, despite his having had reliable information that this relocation was occurring. When Mayer objected that the Japanese citizens had not been murdered as Jewish citizens had been in Germany, the bill-collector replied, "And if they had been, what then? Do you not see that the idea of doing something or doing nothing is in either case the same?" (p. 81).

FASCISM TODAY

Those of us living in the U.S. today under the second presidency of an aspiring autocrat are likely to hear disturbing resonances between our own experiences and those Mayer documented. Although our democratic institutions have endured for longer than those of the Weimar Republic, and although Democratic state officials, many judges, and innumerable activists continue to resist, our democratic institutions are being systematically undermined and dismantled.

As Tom Snyder (2017), a historian of 20th century European authoritarian movements, has documented, Hitler's early moves provide the playbook employed by aspiring authoritarians today: consolidate power, demonize some already marginalized group(s) of people and blame them for present problems, undermine independent democratic institutions such as the courts, the press, and one's political opposition. And as Mayer anticipated, one divines in the response of today's members of 21st century democracies some of the same human tendencies that Mayer discovered in his participants from mid-20th century Germany.

A Need for Coherence and Belonging

The underlying conditions for fascism include a disorienting sense of incapacity and alienation. Great numbers of people come, for some combination of economic and social reasons, to feel as though the ground beneath them is no longer secure. Though devastating financial precarity is essential to the mix, so too is a sense of having had one's rightful place in the world somehow stolen away.

We come into the world needing others; we long to be counted as members of our native social groupings and to be seen as worthy in the eyes of those upon whom we rely. Historically, this sense of belonging has been rooted in shared blood and heritage. Today, those of us living in pluralistic democracies are compelled to rely on something else entirely, something still new in the political annals of humanity—a shared set of political ideals.

Although these democratic ideals are widely understood to imply specific political forms, such as fair and regular elections, multiple competitive political parties, and duly elected governing

bodies, the social mores and moral commitments that underlie them are less widely recognized and appreciated. The philosopher John Dewey (1916), who comprehensively explicated these mores and commitments, also forcefully argued that democratic countries need to invest boldly, creatively, and persistently in inculcating these mores and commitments within all young people during their impressionable years of schooling. Dewey well understood that that the continuing health of any democratic society, particularly one as diverse as the United States of America, could not be taken for granted but rather must be actively and sensitively nurtured.

Yet today, the guiding democratic ideal of equality for all remains as aspirational as in Dewey's time. Americans have proven more inclined to grant their fellow citizens basic freedoms, such as freedom of speech and religion, than they have to view them all as their equals. The United States' distinctive historical evolution, resulting in what likely remains the most culturally diverse nation on the planet, has multiplied the barriers for some to believing, as Mayer did, in human equality.

Although the United States was founded in opposition to the divine authority of an English king, an Anglocentric elite dominated the levers of cultural and political power throughout the country's foundational years. Two and a half centuries of race-based slavery have proven more devastating still to achieving a sense of social and political equality among all. As the scholar Eddie Glaude (2016) has put it, "[p]recious ideas like 'all men are created equal' were congenitally deformed by the idea that some men and women are valued less than others because of the color of their skin. The value gap was baked into one of the foundational principles of this country" (p. 9)

As in Germany, where inherited patterns of residential and social segregation created distinct social worlds, allowing distrust and prejudice to fester, the entrenched residential and social segregation between Blacks and Whites in this country perpetuates a similar cultural schism, allowing the same kinds of ignorant and divisive generalizations to endure. Currently, the Trump administration is moving purposefully to reverse gains made toward cultural integration in the decades since the civil rights movement and has also weaponized tensions over immigration, demonizing and abusing Hispanic citizens and non-citizens alike. As in Nazi Germany, queer people have been targeted, with a particular focus now on those identifying as trans and gender fluid.

We do, though, have greater resources today for recognizing and resisting these tactics. Due to the work of scholars such as Snyder and others we understand how readily any broadly embraced bifurcation of humanity into favored and unfavored—upon whatever grounds—leaves a people vulnerable to a government's cynical manipulation of their insecurities and fear. We understand that there are specific moves that all those wishing to eliminate institutionalized distributions of political power always make. Based on this knowledge, Snyder (2017) distilled, at the start of Trump's first presidency, twenty key lessons to which his studies of authoritarian takeovers had led.

These lessons were presented in the form of actions that the democratically minded anywhere can undertake to oppose authoritarian takeovers of their countries. I only have space here to consider ten of the most relevant to this discussion. In relation to addressing the human need

for coherence and belonging within the context of a modern pluralistic democracy, one could highlight the following three: make eye contact and small talk; contribute to good causes; be a patriot.

Snyder's brief elaborations on the lessons he assembled foreground the role that even small daily actions can assume in sustaining and strengthening democratic relations. Connecting casually with those you encounter by meeting their eyes and exchanging pleasantries sustains a sense of normalcy in non-normal times. When one extends oneself further by reaching out to those commonly seen as marginal—the unhoused, the poor, those whose social identities place them in risk within a given social space—one can help to create a sense of ease and safety as well as belonging.

By involving oneself in organizations that are doing good work in the world, one can connect with admired others, people who may have organized their entire lives around a sense of calling to build toward better futures for others. Again, the moral fabric of democratic life can be strengthened through our contributions to their efforts. When Snyder speaks of being a patriot, he is speaking of the responsibility we can all assume for imagining, believing in, and actively striving to enact a more fully realized democratic society. “Set a good example of what America means for the generations to come,” he says, “They will need it” (p. 111).

Going along to get along

A related human impulse to our need to belong—one that is particularly strong in the absence of a secure sense of belonging—is to avoid attracting unwelcome attention and thereby risk becoming a target of some kind. The first lesson on Snyder's list is to not obey in advance. We humans seem to be wired to adapt reflexively to new conditions on the ground. In the absence of an explicitly articulated moral framework or some other operating set of prohibitions, we will tend to align ourselves with the prevailing social and political norms of the moment.

A great deal has been said in the past year about how prevalent this phenomenon has proven among the law firms, universities, and businesses that the president has sought to intimidate into abandoning policies that displeased him, particularly Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Rather than oppose these unprecedented intrusions into matters over which presidents have no legal authority, many of these financially and politically powerful institutions chose to negotiate a settlement with the administration.

Another related lesson Snyder names is to stand out. Here Snyder (2017) cites Rosa Parks and Winston Churchill as exemplars, but other less demanding opportunities to exhibit independent thought confront us regularly. Standing out might simply involve saying something out loud you suspect everyone else in the room is also thinking. As Snyder says, “[t]he moment you set an example, the spell of the status quo is broken, and others will follow” (p. 51).

Perhaps less obviously, Snyder also emphasizes the importance of believing in truth. Everything cannot be relative in a society that believes in the value of all and so in the work of supporting human flourishing. We must not shy from expressing our understandings of what a commitment to equality actually means and entails. Democracies rely on their citizens' active engagement in collaborative, empirically grounded, and respectful deliberations in the interest

of identifying the most promising means and approaches for addressing practical challenges of all kinds.

Powerlessness

In the face of the U. S. president's continuing bald transgressions of civil and moral precedent and established law, many U.S. citizens today feel the sense of impotence expressed by Mayer's participants. Some of us have found ourselves waiting, as Mayer's professor friend did, for something definitive to happen. Meanwhile, the administration's transgressions mount, becoming ever more egregious, and our daily lives continue.

Though the demonstrations against the current federal administration have been larger and more numerous than any others in the nation's history, it is not unusual to hear people question whether they have accomplished anything in practical terms. In a world in which the only person who has ever sought to obstruct the peaceful transfer of presidential power has again become president, people understandably question how truly effective any opposition we can muster will be.

As Snyder reminds, however, our choice lies between acting and acquiescence. There are just the two ways forward. To the extent we can be strategic and thoughtful about what we choose to do, to the extent we can learn how to collaborate effectively with others, we may find that we can be more influential. Yet regardless of how influential our actions may or may not be, at that first crucial level of analysis, we can choose to position ourselves with those who have declined to acquiesce.

Three courses of action Snyder recommends for opposing the hate, division, and concentration of power perpetrated by tyrants everywhere include: defend institutions; take responsibility for the face of the world; and practice corporeal politics. In the case of the first, he suggests picking an institution, "a court, a newspaper, a law, a labor union" (p. 22), and becoming one of its advocates, learning how you can help to support those who make that institution run. Who, in this climate, is calling out the transgressions against your chosen institution? What can you do to fund and publicize their efforts? What other forms of pressure can you and perhaps others you know apply?

When Snyder speaks of taking responsibility for the face of the world, he is talking about the way your local world looks and sounds. He recommends that none of us countenance symbols of hate or allow demeaning metaphors or slogans to pass without objection, that we all do what we can to make the world feel safer and more welcoming for all. His notion of corporeal politics is similar: by corporeal politics he means politics that move our bodies into the world, that involve meeting and working with new people, unfamiliar people, people with whom we may not agree on everything but with whom we do agree on the importance of saving and strengthening our country's democracy.

CONCLUSION

I came back home a little afraid for my country, afraid of what it might want, and get, and like, under pressure of combined reality and illusion. I felt—and feel—that it was

not German Man that I had met, but Man. He happened to be in Germany under certain conditions. He might be here, under certain conditions. He might, under certain conditions, be I. (Mayer, p. ix)

We have learned from the stories Mayer recounts—and from recent experience—that it can be easier than we may have imagined to acquiesce to ascendent nefarious forces, to fold when folding feels more practical, perhaps better for business. Yet, these stories also invite us to consider the costs of doing so and the potential rewards of instead wielding what power we can marshal, however inadequate it may feel to the times, to oppose the incursions of those forces into our worlds. Snyder's final twentieth lesson is for all of us to be as courageous as we can.

Here I find the metaphor of moral fibers or fabric evocative. To what extent do our experiences of even loose threads in the moral fabric of our lives present us with decisions we need to view as consequential, both for us and for the others implicated? How are we to think about needed processes of repair in these different types of circumstances? Given an awareness of all that is at stake, how shall we think of what it might mean for us to bring our best selves to bear?

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