

2026 Academic Symposium – Authoritarianism, Truth, and the Fragility of Democracy
Pre-Symposium Discussion

Please note that during the pre-symposium discussions, participants will use a common text for discussion and debate, Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. Ten copies of Snyder's text are on two-hour library reserve. All members of the Marian community are invited to access this text throughout the fall semester in preparation for pre-symposium discussions. If persons prefer to buy their own copy of the text, the essential information is as follows: Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Crown Publishing, 2017), ISBN: 978-0-8041-9011-4. Hard copies of the text can be purchased for as little as \$7.99.

Discussion Questions and Debate Points from *On Tyranny*, Pages 1-41

Please note, during the first pre-symposium event, attendees did not have the chance to discuss all questions listed in the reading guide for October 1. Drs. Leichter and Szromba have included a handful of such questions that were not addressed at the first meeting. If you like, please consider them for discussion on October 22.

- 1) As an epigraph to *On Tyranny*, Tim Snyder quotes the Polish philosopher, Leszek Kołakowski: "In politics, being deceived is no excuse." What is Snyder signaling to his readers in opening his book in this way?
- 2) Snyder asserts that "history can instruct" (9) and "history can warn" (11). How so? What does Snyder mean by this? How can history help guide all of us to live meaningful and fulfilling lives?
- 3) One of more annoying, myopic, and unthinking characteristics of Americans is that we take democracy for granted. Because Americans have lived in a democracy for the last 200+ years, we mistakenly believe that:
 - Democracy cannot fail.
 - Democracy is or should be the normative standard of government for all persons.
 - Human history can be easily understood as a slow but always steady march towards democracy.Snyder warns us that we are wrong about these assumptions. How so? Why?

Discussion Questions and Debate Points from *On Tyranny*, Pages 42-82

- 4) In chapter six, Snyder addresses the dangers of paramilitary groups in politics and public life during the twentieth century. What are these dangers? How is it that a paramilitary group in Fascist Germany "began as an organization outside the law, became an organization that transcended the law, and ended up as an organization that undid the law"?
- 5) Snyder begins chapter seven by stating: "If you carry a weapon in public service, may God bless you and keep you. But know that evils of the past involved policemen and soldiers finding themselves, one day, doing irregular things. Be ready to say no." Are there irregular things that policemen and soldiers are asked to do in our own time? What are the dangers that inevitably accompany such irregular things?
- 6) Snyder suggests that one way to resist authoritarianism, to protect truth, and to preserve democracy is to "stand out." How far and in what ways are students, faculty, staff, and administrators at Marian University willing to "stand out."

- 7) In chapters nine and ten, Snyder addresses the use of language and the identification of truth. He concludes this section of his text by stating: “Post-truth is pre-Fascism.” What does he mean by this? How is the preservation of truth essential to the life of democracy and resistance to authoritarianism?
- 8) Why is it that “We find it natural that we pay for a plumber or a mechanic, but demand our news for free.” What are the shortcomings of forming our political judgement “on the basis of zero investment?”
- 9) What do we make of Snyder’s recommendation that we “make eye contact and small talk”? Are such seemingly insignificant gestures really all that important?