

Democracy Matters 3

Lesson Five: Remember professional ethics.

In moments when elected leaders set a bad example by seeking to subvert the political process or even the rule of law itself, it falls to the rest of us to do our part to protect society by making sure that we are doing our work in a manner consistent with our professional ethics.

Would-be tyrants never take over by themselves. They need willing accomplices that, whether through ignorance or cowardice or malice, can be persuaded to bend rules and break with established norms to undermine existing power structures in service to their masters' goals.

Professional codes of ethics offer a powerful defense against such maneuvers because they enable everyday people to understand themselves not as isolated individuals confronted by forces beyond their control but as members of groups guided by (and obligated to) commonly held interests, norms, ideals, and professional rules.

If each of us know what our business is, commit ourselves to doing it well, and has the courage and conviction to abide by our professional ethics, this will go a long way toward keeping things functioning and civil. Students, this includes you. Your studies are preparing you not only to join the workforce as employees, but also the wider society as citizens. Make sure you are one of the decent ones that pulls your weight. Treat your studies seriously and make a special study of the ethical principles your chosen profession commits you to.

Lesson Six: Be wary of paramilitaries.

Most governments, most of the time, look to monopolize the use of violence. If only the government can legitimately use force, and this use is constrained by law, then peaceful, democratic forms of politics become possible.

By way of contrast, when agencies beyond the state also employ violence, it quickly becomes impossible to carry out democratic elections, try cases at court, design and enforce laws or manage any of the other “quiet” business of government. Armed groups start by degrading the political order and all-too-often end by dramatically transforming it for the worse.

(Adapted from Snyder, Timothy. *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. Vintage Digital, 2017.)