

Democracy Matters 6

Lesson Eleven: Investigate.

In a world as complex and fast-paced as ours, it can be tempting at times to give up on the idea of truth. However, it's your ability to discern facts that makes you an individual. Similarly, it's our collective trust in common knowledge that makes us a society. The individual who investigates and asks questions is also the citizen who builds.

Recognize that much of what passes for "information" on the internet is there to harm you. Take it upon yourself to figure things out for yourself. Learn about websites that investigate propaganda campaigns (some of which come from abroad) and be wary of any sort of "bite-sized" news in which isolated bits of information are given to you with little or no context. Avoid anything that offers more opinion than fact or, if you can't do this, at least make sure the opinions you are exposed to are diverse and representative of all sides. (Bonus points if you include international sources that look beyond the left/right framing we get in this country.) Subsidize investigative journalism by subscribing to print media and spend more time with long articles. Rather than feed you their opinions, better journalists will offer context for information and give you what you need to interpret things intelligently and for yourself. Doing this work is hard but worthy of our investment.

Lesson Twelve: Make eye contact and small talk.

Though these small interactions may seem insignificant, they are actually quite important. For one thing, they help us understand who we can and cannot trust. In this sense, they serve a vital protective function. One day it may be that things get very difficult for you. If this happens, it will be good to know who in your life can be counted on to help and who can't.

Of course, these kinds of micro-connections offer broader protections as well. Through them, not only do we begin to break down social barriers, but

we also help to build toward greater social cohesion and, in so doing, enhance our ability to safeguard one another against the challenges we collectively face. Isolation, alienation, desperation, and fear act as poisons in our communities, eating away at the social fabric. By way of contrast, a smile or a kind word can offer a kind of immunity against these forces by reminding those who might be struggling with them that they are not alone.

At the end of the day, you might not always know who in your community needs to be reassured. If you make it a regular habit to affirm everyone, you can be certain that not only will some people feel better, but our communities will ultimately be stronger for it.

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