

Our practices keep our commitments alive

To resist the kind of society we don't want, we have to cultivate the kind we do.

by [Stephanie Paulsell](#) in the [July 4, 2018](#) issue



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For the past year, we have been living through a national seminar on the relationship between beliefs and practices. One after another, men who have supported women's political candidacies and called themselves feminists have been exposed as dangerous to women. Often, their professed beliefs in women's rights have protected them. Reporting on the recent accusations against Eric Schneiderman has revealed that women were sometimes urged by friends not to report the violence the former New York attorney general allegedly perpetrated in the private sphere because of the good he did for women in the public sphere.

Obviously, it's not enough to believe in the right ideas. Beliefs don't guarantee behavior. If we are going to undo our formation in misogyny, in racism, in a Christianity warped by nationalism, it won't be enough to think our way out of these

ideologies. Thinking our way out of them is certainly necessary—but we will also have to practice our way out of them, deliberately.

At Harvard Divinity School's commencement in May, the student speakers—Denson Staples and Lindsey Franklin, newly minted M.Div.'s—challenged us to bring more intentionality to our life together, especially in the classroom. It's not enough, they said, to gather a diverse community. We have to develop practices that don't replicate the old hierarchies. We can't simply believe that we are welcoming; we have to learn how to be welcoming. Denson and Lindsey called us to cultivate greater attention to the pedagogy diverse classrooms require and to who is included or excluded by the forms of education to which we are accustomed. They reminded me of Simone Weil's fierce insistence that a lack of attention in prayer cannot be made up for through "warmth of heart" or "pity." It's not enough to wish each other well and then carry on as before.

Timothy Snyder's book *On Tyranny* makes a similar point about our national life. The subtitle is *Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, but it could easily have been called *Twenty Practices for the 21st Century*. Snyder, a historian of authoritarian regimes, worries that Americans have seen liberal democracy as our inevitable future for so long that we are unprepared to respond to the possibility of an authoritarian future. It's not enough to believe that all will be well, he insists. We have to practice shaping the society we want and resisting the kind of society we do not.

Some of the practices Snyder commends are grounded in the public sphere: defend institutions, practice ethical conduct within your profession, be active in voluntary organizations. But many are grounded in private life. For example, he encourages the practice of making eye contact and small talk with people we encounter in the course of daily life. What people who were vulnerable under repressive regimes remember later, he says, is how their neighbors treated them. During the purges in Eastern Europe or Nazi Germany, a greeting or a handshake meant a great deal. Such gestures made those who were vulnerable to the violence of the regime feel safer. But when their neighbors averted their eyes when they met, or crossed the street to avoid them, those same people felt more fearful. And with good reason. People who are isolated in society are much easier for authoritarian regimes to harm than those who are held, seen, and remembered in community. Making eye contact and exchanging greetings are practices by which we recognize each other's humanity and knit each other into a shared life.

According to Hannah Arendt, Snyder notes, totalitarianism is marked by the destruction of the boundaries between public and private life. And so cultivating a robust private life is an act of resistance. Snyder suggests that we speak to people more often in person and try to use the Internet less often. He urges us to go to places we have never been before and make new friends. He encourages us to resist expressing ourselves with the slogans and phrases that everyone else is using, even those with whom we agree, and to cultivate fresh ways of saying what we mean. He recommends surrounding ourselves with books. Read fiction, read the Bible, read history, he says, and think with them about the world in which you're living.

These private practices are as important as their public counterparts because they keep us in dialogue with ourselves and others. A lively inner life combined with life in community, both with those around us and those who lived before us, will help keep us connected to our convictions when we are asked to accept exceptions to democratic norms. Simply understanding ourselves to believe in one thing or another will almost certainly not be enough to help us stay true to those beliefs. We need practices that keep our commitments alive and accessible inside us.

Cultivating gestures of care and a spirited interior life in the midst of a community—this describes not only the kind of political life Snyder hopes for but also the life of faith. As anyone who has tried to live that life knows all too well, beliefs don't guarantee behavior. But when we gather to pray, to serve, to share a meal in which there is enough for everyone, we have the opportunity to practice being the people, and the society, we hope to be.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Practicing for the society we want."