

The background of the entire page is a collage of American flags, showing the stars and stripes in various orientations and colors (red, white, and blue).

OCTOBER 3, 2017

# DREAM BIG: DEMOCRACY MATTERS

LESSONS FROM  
A PUBLIC FORUM



CAMBRIDGE PUBLIC LIBRARY  
FOUNDATION

As U.S. citizens, we can count on the system to protect us against the storm of politics today.

Or can we?

Sharing insights from his book *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, author and historian Timothy Snyder encouraged a packed audience at the Main Library to question this assumption. The exchange was part of the Cambridge Public Library Foundation's **DREAM BIG** series, which convenes thought leaders and citizens to explore the role of public libraries in a democratic society.

Snyder has no doubts about the centrality of this role, asserting “it’s in our public universities as well as in our public libraries that this nation is going to either be saved, or not.”

Training a lens on democracy, he observes that it is “not some final achievement” but rather “an admission of human error,” designed to accommodate our mistakes and allow a course correction. Democratic institutions and rule of law require our vigilant attention, he cautions, for “we, in fact, are the institutions.”

*On Tyranny*’s “master lesson” for sustaining democracy—Do not Obey in Advance—demands awareness. As the author explains, the transition to authoritarianism depends on people looking away and adapting. Today, he warns, “our whole notion of what checks and balances are has changed.....we have already adjusted to a different understanding [of] what democracy looks like.”

Snyder flags gerrymandering, voter suppression laws, the Citizens United decision, and other institutional challenges eroding democracy. Add racism and income inequality to the mix, and “American democracy is an aspiration, we’re not there yet.....we’ve run the experiment asking how well does democracy do in those circumstances, and the answer is ‘Not so well’.”

The historian points out that “Democracy failed in Europe in the 1920s, ’30s, and ’40s, and is failing not only in much of Europe but in many parts of the world today.....A nationalist will say that ‘it can’t happen here,’ which is the first step toward disaster. A patriot says that it could happen here, but that we will stop it.”

“Use history to get out in front,” he urges. “If you see these historical patterns, then they allow you to act in the moment.” With the twenty lessons in *On Tyranny*, he spotlights parallels between past and present, offers prescriptions for action, and delivers an emphatic wake up call for Americans.

WGBH commentator Callie Crossley led a lively discussion with Snyder. While interrogating “what do we do now....how do we turn it around?”, she also suggested a spirited answer with a quote from Malcolm X: “Power in defense of freedom is greater than power in behalf of tyranny ... real power comes from our conviction which produces action, uncompromising action.”



CALLIE CROSSLEY  
Host/Executive Editor of WGBH  
Radio's "Under the Radar with  
Callie Crossley Show"

TIMOTHY SNYDER  
Levin Professor of History,  
Yale University



We invite you to view the author's presentation, and subsequent dialogue with Crossley and the audience, on our website.

With **DREAM BIG**, and support for other CPL programs, the Library Foundation contributes to the nonstop work of democracy. As Director of Libraries Maria McCauley reminds us, “our libraries are places where learning, the exchange of ideas, endeavor, and contemplation take place.....where staff facilitate finding facts, foster inclusivity and social justice, and uphold the principles of privacy and intellectual freedom.”

Please join us in supporting the democratic mission of Cambridge Public Library:  
[www.cplfound.org](http://www.cplfound.org)

View a video recording of the full program, **DREAM BIG: DEMOCRACY MATTERS** at [https://archive.org/details/Dream\\_Big\\_-\\_Democracy\\_Matters](https://archive.org/details/Dream_Big_-_Democracy_Matters)



**DREAM BIG**, a program of the CPL Foundation, features thought leaders who explore the dynamic environment in which public libraries currently operate. Established in 2015, the CPL Foundation supports Library programs that EDUCATE, INSPIRE and RESPOND to the needs of our diverse community. To join our efforts, visit us at [www.cplfound.org](http://www.cplfound.org).

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