

Your Loyalties Are Your Life

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Back in May of 2019, an Opinion piece in the New York Times caught my eye. It was by one of my favorite journalists, David Brooks, with the headline “Your Loyalties Are Your Life.” “What a great sermon title,” I mused. Shameless, as ever. Well, it turned out to be a great sermon topic, too.

In his piece, Brooks shines a light on the central idea of a philosopher named Josiah Royce. He lived and worked and was a friendly colleague to William James at Harvard around 1900. As Brooks explains: “James and Royce admired and learned from each other, but their philosophies were different, too. James was pragmatic and tough-minded, looking for empirical truth. Royce was more idealistic and tender-minded, more spiritual and abstract.”

“They differed on the individual’s role in society. James’s emphasis was on tolerance. We live in a pluralistic society and we each know only a fragment of the truth. People should give one another enough social space so they can be themselves. For Royce, the good life meant tightly binding yourself to others — giving yourself away with others for the sake of a noble cause. Tolerance is not enough.” James’ influence is now enormous — deservedly so. Royce is almost entirely forgotten.” “And yet,” argues Brooks, “Royce is the philosopher we need today.”“

In an age of division, fragmentation and isolation, hamstrung by a pandemic, Royce is the philosopher we don’t know we have. He is the philosopher of binding and connection.” Why does Brooks believe this? Because Royce’s central guiding concept is a “loyalty to loyalty” Zing! This idea set off so many bells, intrigued me, and here we are.

If your loyalties are your life, whom or what do you value and how will you cherish them? This past week, my beloved daughter turned 30 and my cherished granddaughter is now a smiley 2-month old the following quote from the scholar Cornel West rang particularly true: “We have to recognize that there cannot be relationships unless there is commitment, unless there is loyalty, unless there is love, patience, persistence.”

As I see it, and building on West’s wise assertion, there are four spheres of loyalty: to self, to intimate relationships, to communities (such as Beacon) and to country and civil society.

A mature, grounded loyalty to loyalty begins with the self – becoming self-actualized as a whole person of many parts through deep and intentional reflection and self-interrogation. This is not always easy in a society that scrutinizes our flaws and encourages us to do the same.

Self-loathing is rampant, self-loyalty is abandoned. Yet, we can grow in commitment to ourselves without becoming self-absorbed, following the slow process described by May Sarton in her poem: *Now I Become Myself*.

“Now I become myself,” she tells us.

“It's taken Time, many years and places;
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces,
Run madly, as if Time were there,
Terribly old, crying a warning,
"Hurry, you will be dead before—"
(What? Before you reach the morning?
Or the end of the poem is clear?
Or love safe in the walled city?)
Now to stand still, to be here,
Feel my own weight and density!”

Can you hear the fearless intimacy with self in these lines, the intentionality of connections made slowly (in the words of fellow poet, Marge Piercy?), the loyalty to becoming? Please, don't overlook the word “slowly” here, because slow growth creates strong roots, real intimacy, from self to others.

And then how do we build on that self- discovery? “We weave real connections, create real nodes, build real houses,” in Piercy's words. Some of these loyal connections are bred in the bone, but they are not guaranteed – the many broken and estranged families and marriages in the world can attest to that. And yet, even these blood connections are made slowly, even if they do have a heads start, a leg up to loyalty.

In Frank Bruni's New York Times gem from April 2014, entitled “Tolstoy and Miss Daisy,” (that Char shared earlier), we gaze through the window of a vintage Cadillac at just such a poignant and moving familial loyalty unfolding.

We come into the scene as the 79- year old patriarch in the tale remarks: “My firstborn granddaughter (Leslie) , come all this way to drive me. Can you believe it? “I can,” replies Bruni, “because her father (my brother) set this up to happen. Leslie is the return on an investment that he made across many decades, with so much of his time and so much of his heart.”

“He, my mother, my own grandparents and my aunts and uncles wanted the compact that they’d established — the covenant that they’d built — to endure.” “Tolstoy wasn’t on the mark,” Bruni remarks. “Not all happy families are alike. But all happy families — or, more accurately, all close ones — have this in common: Their bond is forged not by accident but by intent. They make a decision. And their actions follow their resolve. In other words, they are loyalty to loyalty, come hell or highwater, or pandemics or flat tires.”

What is our next tier of loyalty? From here, the family moves into the world, past intimates and forges on into beloved communities, the ones we value, like Beacon. Back in March, in one of our first virtual worship services, I shared a reading called “Why Do You Come, John?” by my colleague Rev. Victoria Safford.

I’d argue that the character, “John” in that reading exemplifies the notion of loyalty to loyalty within his church community. Rev. Victoria asks him: “Why do you come, John? In all kinds of weather, when you’re well and when you’re not, when you like the guest speaker and when you know you won’t, why do you come every Sunday?” His answer was straightforward, just like the man himself. “I come,” he said, “because somebody might miss me if I didn’t.” John also considered it a duty and privilege to welcome newcomers, adapt to changes and growth, and chat with folks at coffee hour.

We can learn from him, even as we meet in non-optimal ways like Zoom and Youtube, during this pandemic that keeps us physically apart. John’s presence in our service is not meant to evoke guilt. I just think he’s a wonderful example of loyalty — a word and concept that has become all the more murky in our polarized and toxically individualistic society.

David Brooks offers us more of Royce’s perspective on this very danger. He tells us that “Royce argued that meaningful lives are marked, above all, by loyalty. Out on the frontier, he had seen the chaos and anarchy that ensues when it’s every man for himself, when society is just a bunch of individuals searching for gain. He concluded that people make themselves miserable when they pursue nothing more than their “fleeting, capricious and insatiable” desires. “So, for him the good human life meant loyalty, “the willing and practical and thoroughgoing devotion of a person to a cause.”

A person doesn’t have to invent a cause, or find it deep within herself. You are born into a world of causes, which existed before you were born and will be there after you die. You just have to become gripped by one, to give yourself away to it realizing that the cause is more important than your individual pleasure or pain.”

Wow. If only. Do these noble ideas about loyalty appear present in our country right now? In our government, especially at the top? Consider what we've heard over and over again about our President's idea of loyalty. "I need loyalty. I expect loyalty," he demanded from James Comey and just about everyone else who works for him or with him.

His definition of loyalty simple, cult-like, and blunt. Support me in what I do and say, or else. It is a form of allegiance not unlike "taking the knee" in Game of Thrones. Not an allegiance to causes or community, but to him, to Trumpism. Trump developed this self-interested transactional sense of loyalty as a child and then as a developer, cutting his teeth under the tutelage of two brutal mob-like operators, his shifty father Fred and his despicable advisor Roy Cohn.

One former White House employee calls it "allegiance plus thuggery." And where has this led us? To a society riven between rainbow LBGQT flags and MAGA hats, masks and anti-vaxxers. We are sick at our soul and loyalty is becoming no more than a Twitter #hashtag to belittle or lionize others.

This form of loyalty is not "patriotic." Colin Kaepernick, kneeling during the Anthem, is patriotic, BLM marches are patriotic, Tammy Duckworth is patriotic. These are fine examples of loyalty to loyalty – to a cause and community, regardless of the cost (which has been mighty high, indeed).

This morning, I stand here, not to persuade you politically. That's a private matter. Rather, I implore each of you to consider our collective responsibility as Americans, as true patriots, and as religious liberals to serve as guardians of our inalienable rights, by embodying and promoting an *authentic* patriotism which includes respectful and reasoned dissent and well-placed loyalties.

What is "patriotism" exactly? A UU veteran I know named Walter, who faithfully wears his American flag lapel pin. tells me that for him "patriotism is, among other things, love of country, pride in country, supporting our men and women in uniform." I couldn't agree more. However, I'd add that a mature, *evolved* patriotism includes a willingness to love America enough to hold our leaders and our citizenry accountable for their stewardship of our collective national interests.

Now, I have no objection to an uptick in national pride, as long as we examine the possibility that behind this trend may lurk something vitally different and quite toxic which is easily mistaken for patriotism; namely, the nationalism of "America First."

[Writing in *The Nation*, Joseph Sobran observes:] While patriotism is a form of affection, which is typically peaceful until forced to fight, nationalism is grounded in resentment and rivalry, and tends to be militant in nature and belligerent in style. The nationalist is rigid and has to prove his country is always right. He reduces his country to an idea, a perfect abstraction, rather than a mere home. The patriot can

laugh at his country, the way members of a family (or church) can lovingly laugh at each other's human foibles.

Patriotism is relaxed; nationalism is rigid. The patriot may loyally stand by her country even when she disagrees with its policies; the nationalist insists that she defend her country not because it's hers, but because it's right or "better" or "best" and all countries should resemble ours.

Right now, the churning pot of emotions and anxieties that have best us make it hard to parse out how to unify as Americans to restore and preserve a civil society, one of intentionally-crafted universal principles and loyalties.

Long before Martin Luther King popularized the phrase, Josiah Royce spoke of the "Beloved Community." "The loyal man serves," he tells us. "That is, he does not merely follow his own impulses. He looks to his cause for guidance. This cause tells him what to do. The cause gives unity and consistency to life. The cause gives fellowship, because there are always others serving the same cause."

"Beloved communities are genuine communities," he continues, "where individuals remain individuals but lean together into building a society that transcends their self interests. In his words, we 'build a city out of sight.'"

For Royce, the very moral core of an individual is understood in terms of the multiple loyalties that this person embraces. And, in Royce's spirit, Brooks suggests that "when evaluating your life, don't ask, "How happy am I?" Ask, "How loyal am I, and to what?"

Riding shotgun with Miss Daisy in a vintage Cadillac on a northbound highway, what would be your chosen destination? A random dinner with friends in the city or a sleepover with your Uncle Frank?

As the song tells us: "We will be known by the company we keep." Your loyalties are your life. Whom or what do you value and how will you cherish them?

We will spend some time in silence pondering that very question together.

Blessed be. Blessed we. Amen

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