

THE VIRTUE OF LOYALTY

By Gabriel Moran

The word virtue was largely replaced in the 1960s by the word value which is nowhere as rich in connotations and depth of meaning. Value came out of economics and was chosen for its simplicity: how much do you think something is worth. The idea of virtue goes back to Greek and Roman times; Cicero coined “virtue” to translate Aristotle’s word for “excellence.” The Latin word is rooted in the words for man and strength. Christian writers took over the whole pattern of virtues, aspects of which did not blend perfectly with biblical notions of good and evil established by a divine covenant.

Loyalty, like love and truth, is a virtue, a “habit” that shapes a person’s life by giving it a second nature. Virtues involve the person’s intellectual, volitional and emotional powers, although some virtues apply mainly to the intellect and others to the will and emotions. The chief intellectual virtue was prudence. It governs the virtuous life and requires an understanding of complex situations. The idea of intellectual virtues slowly disappeared and moral virtues were left rudderless. Virtue became thought of as something acquired by training of the will, done mechanically without any thinking about the complexity of situations.

Loyalty is a virtue that clearly has to be chosen but it also requires an intellectual grasp. While truth is an intellectual virtue and love is a moral virtue, loyalty can be seen to be both which gives it a powerful place in the pattern of virtues but also the danger of being misunderstood. To whom or to what should one be loyal? Is there a hierarchy of loyalties so that one loyalty can clash with other loyalties?

Loyalty refers to allegiance to a cause that is worth committing oneself to. Loyalty is not to an individual but it is also not entirely impersonal. Loyalty is to a cause that involves a group of people who to some degree already embody that cause and are working to bring about the full realization of that cause.

There is a danger on one side of conceiving loyalty too abstractly and on the other side too individualistically. To say that one is working for the cause of humanity does not seem to be practical unless one can point to some group’s effort on behalf of a more humane world. In contrast, to think of loyalty as unconditional devotion to an individual is to lack the communal or social context that genuine loyalty must have. A man may say he is loyal to a boss or a president but implicitly that has to be insofar as the boss is working to achieve the purpose or cause of the organization. The loyalty should not be to the boss as an individual.

Everyone acquires their first experience of loyalty in the family. An individual may be estranged, family members might have petty quarrels and grudges, but seldom does all loyalty to family disappear. We carry that sense of loyalty to other groups throughout life. We might be loyal to a neighborhood, to a political party, to a baseball team, or to a restaurant, each of which tends to be thought of in terms of a family. Even a bunch of mobsters maintain the language of loyalty to the family. Where loyalty continues to be frequently spoken about is in reference to patriotism or loyalty to one’s country. In modern times, especially if religion does not provide an ultimate loyalty, the nation-state makes the strongest demand upon a person’s loyalty. Anyone who is judged disloyal to his or her country would be almost cast out of the human race. A few people

manage to switch national loyalties but they choose to do so patiently over a long period of time or else they flee a country trying to destroy them.

The nation claims to be the family writ large. The word nation comes from the word for birth. Some countries have a myth that traces all the people of the nation back to one set of parents. A cynical European saying is that a nation is a group of people who are joined by a mistake about their origin and a hatred of their neighbor. Blood and soil are what nations fight wars over; the homeland must be defended even if the blood of some must be shed for the survival of the many.

The United States of America was never a nation in this sense. It cannot claim to be an extended family; it is rather a gathering of strangers that claims to be united by devotion to ideals. But that is a tenuous union that has to be constantly reinforced by rituals of patriotism and war. Its wars have almost never been in defense of its land. It sends its young men to die in another part of the world for the express purpose of defending ideals. It is especially violent when it goes to war because an ideology does not have the limits that a piece of land does.

Abraham Lincoln referred in the opening lines of the Gettysburg Address to “a new nation conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Lincoln thought that the Constitution was simply a box to preserve the truths of the Declaration. Would he change his mind today in view of right-wing politicians who wield the Declaration against the unity of the United States? The “tea party” takes its name from an event before the United States was invented. The group with the presumptuous name of “freedom caucus” is intent on being free from the existence of the U.S. government.

From the beginning of the country, race, the “family” of white people, was one of the main glues of unity. Repeated waves of immigrants have been a constant challenge to the country’s unity. The Naturalization Act of 1790 defined an American as a “free white person,” a gross rejection of the proposition of equality on which the country was supposedly built.

Whiteness might have seemed simple when it was defined as not Africans and not natives of America. Northern Europeans (except the Irish) usually qualified as unmistakably white but everyone else had shades of non-whiteness. Immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe went through a period of being classified as not of the white race. Asians were permanently classified as not white because they did not “look like us.” In World War II all Japanese Americans were suspected of being disloyal; there were no concentration camps for German Americans.

The United States of America will probably have its greatest crisis when it becomes obvious that it is no longer a country defined as white. Then the country will finally have to decide whether all its Fourth of July rhetoric has anything to it. “Whether this nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure.”

Until the 1940s one glue that held the country together was Protestant Christianity. Few people would wish to re-establish “Christian America,” even if that were possible. What did look possible for a short while was that a religious coalition of Jews, Protestants and Catholics might provide one basis for national unity. When they act jointly, as they sometimes did in the 1960s, they can exert a force for good and national unity but each group now seems turned inwardly,

concerned with its own problems. White evangelical Protestants have not distinguished themselves by seeming to place politics above their professed religious belief. Only black evangelicals seem to have some life and are willing to stand up for justice. If more Muslims are allowed into the country they might give a spark of life to somnolent Christians. In any case, a religious basis of loyalty today has to find a place for citizens who do not identify with any traditional religious group.

Loyalty to one's religion is supposed to hold a higher rank than loyalty to the nation-state. But commitment to religious ideals does not hold up any better under pressure than do moral ideals. The loyalty has to be expressed through and with families and communities. Judaism is in the strongest position in being based upon family; astoundingly, Jews were able to maintain a loyalty of blood lines even without a native land. The great threat to Jewish survival is not persecution which they have endured for centuries but intermarriage.

The New Testament challenged the basis of loyalty to the family. Jesus' shocking words were that a man has to hate his father and mother before he can be a disciple of Jesus. The prophet from Nazareth was challenging the limits of family loyalty; Jesus' words, removed from that context, are dangerously individualistic. The church as a community is supposed to provide a new kind of family and it sometimes has. No one is loyal to defined doctrines, the Apostles' Creed or even to Jesus. Christians can be loyal to a community that is committed to the cause for which Jesus lived and died.

Not everyone is loyal to a religion but it does seem that people need to have a cause that transcends loyalty to the nation-state. Otherwise, a person has no basis on which to criticize national policies. Stephen Decatur famously said: "My country! May she always be right, but right or wrong our country." Carl Schurz added the needed corrective: "My country right or wrong; if right, to be kept right, if wrong, to be set right." Decatur was not necessarily wrong; he was stating the fact that it is our country. But an inference often drawn from his words is that we should approve whatever our country does even when it is wrong.

There has been intense debates about E. M. Forster's saying that "If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country." If I were offered that choice I would choose to betray neither. If the cause is just for which my friend is at odds with the country (e.g. protecting immigrants who are asking for asylum), I would stand with my friend in loyal opposition to the government. If my friend's cause were unjust, I would stand with legal authority and appeal to my friend's better interests. Loyalty never requires betrayal; it requires discernment of a truthful community in which individuals love their neighbor, including the people who do not look like them.