

Loyalty

**Dispatches from
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Monument to the loyalty of the Hebrideans

Standing above the crofting township of Airidh a' Bhruaich, this monument commemorates the fact that Charles Edward Stuart [Bonnie Prince Charlie] was not betrayed by them when he was on the run after Culloden and landed here on 4 May 1746, in spite of a bounty of £30000 on offer. (Photo: [MJ Richardson](#))

Editor's Note

Gaither Stewart explores the various forms that loyalty may take and in doing so raises questions about various

relationships in our lives. For loyalty is perhaps the most bid for, but also most personal forms of connection and commitment. Much like trying to explain the multitudinous meanings of love, loyalty may not embrace and eschew love. I think that among the problems with our grasping what seems to be basic human concepts and attributes, is that the blasted English language is pitifully sparse when it comes to certain areas of the lexicon - certainly those things pertaining to life and relationships being a major one. This then loads immense amount of meaning, as well as ambiguity, onto a shakey platform of a few conjoined letters.

The quality of loyalty has played an important but perplexing role in my life, both positive and negative, which for many years has prompted countless nocturnal ruminations about the reasons for my concern for what at first glance might be considered banal. Along the way I have experienced that loyalty is often confused with sense of duty to which, in my opinion, it should not be reduced. Instead, rather than a quality related chiefly to duty, obedience or obligation, I have come to relate loyalty more easily to love. Nonetheless, in my experience too much loyalty has been a curse, a cross to bear. As a result of my family background, religious and typical American South, as well as the ideological environment of the second half of the twentieth century in which I became closely involved, I have been infected with a powerful sense of loyalty. The quality of loyalty as I intend it includes—by some complex extension in my mind almost a perversion—discipline and severity and, above all, love. Thus, although at times a handicap and an impediment, loyalty remains ethically desirable

The objects of our loyalty—the persons, ideas and nations to which we are loyal—inevitably change, yet the abstract quality of loyalty remains unchanged. When I declare that loyalty, isolated simply as a quality, is not evil, I would still forewarn that you must always be prepared to abandon the effigies, false idols and gods to which loyalty is attached, such as voting Progressive or Conservative, come hell or high

water, or opting “loyally” for the lesser evil in life’s choices. For in the everyday when life might seem humdrum, things inevitably undergo sudden and unexpected changes. You go along giving and taking in life, and suddenly you are jolted awake to discover that either you are out of joint with life or the life you are living is out of joint with you.

What then has happened? What has happened is that the objects, persons, faiths, ideas, nations, the iconographic objects in which you believed and to which you have adhered, have changed. OR, you might come to understand they were never what you were taught and believed they were. Furthermore, as you can see in public life, the objects of your loyalty can themselves become disloyal. Nevertheless, once the *quality* of loyalty inheres in you, it does not change equally as easily. You are loyal to a person you love and you try not to betray that love, (though you often do), which is the same as betraying yourself. It is the loss of yourself. It is precisely because also the loved one betrays easily; the cynical and suspicious Tuscan says that he anticipates the other’s betrayal and betrays first. Similarly, nations. America today is not what I once believed it was, certainly not the place I believed it was when I was young and understood nothing. What is more, I now know it was always rotten; my uninformed and unfounded sense of loyalty had blurred my vision. Now, experience, my distance from it (distance is often a necessary condition to understand the essence of anything) and the possibility of free information have changed both my views and my very relationship with that former object of loyalty. Once people did not have the possibility of knowing what was really happening. Today, if you put your mind to it, you can get an inkling of the true nature of the object of your loyalty, in this case of warlike, imperialist, capitalist America—not that many people in these times of too much information seem to want to know or do not care enough to even search. Some people simply cannot bear the truth. But it is possible to know of the lies and cover-ups,

of the cheating and corruption, of murder and assassination and of the wars for the benefit of a few and to satisfy the macabre desires of a handful of professional soldiers and arms merchants of death led by pathological maniacs. Today I am no longer staggered by the bizarre history of the artificial "flower wars" of the Aztecs, farces conducted not to kill in the fighting itself but in order to gather prisoners-victims for human sacrifice to the gods on the killing stones of their pyramids in order to intimidate and demonstrate Aztec power. I sense a close parallel between America of today and what happened to the Aztec empire at its apex which coincided with the beginning of its decline.



Photo credit: [Stuart Seeger](#)

In another sense, however, a display of loyalty (and its companion, love) toward us serves to overcome many of our own negative qualities. At difficult times in my life three friends showed such a degree of personal loyalty—and I believe love—to me that afterwards they could never disaffect me. For one, I could do no wrong. Whatever I did was right whether or not it was an error. He was loyal out of love. Another's loyalty to me derives from his generalized loyalty to our past together, greater than our almost total disagreement on our social or political opinions. Though we have barred many subjects from our dialogue; yet loyalty, his above all, remains intact. The loyalty of the third at a time in my life when loyalty to me was costly and potentially risky linked me to him for life, whatever may happen in our relationship.

On the other side of the scales, loyalty's antonym, betrayal, changes everything; in my case however betrayal that was once used against me turned out to be the necessary spring that brought to pass my social transformation, changing positively my life story in the same sense that for the believer the Judah's kiss of death was necessary for the birth of Christianity. Paradoxically, however, in some situations too much loyalty is unnecessary, if not negative, a block to the unraveling of your life story.

Though we should not forget the disloyal ruses of America's "elected" leaders, elected by one of the world's most undemocratic electoral laws, as a rule we ignore the bizarre electoral system, the Constitution and democracy itself that sow the ground for the disloyalty of our leaders. The object of Americans' national loyalty has switched the cards on the table; yet we ignore the change America has undergone while continuing to defend it, root for it, hang out flags for it, when all the while we should be attacking it and doing our best to bring it down.

Loyalty!

You might then wonder about the nature of loyalty to a certain socio-political idea. To an ideal. In general, I have concluded, we speak too much about loyalty to nations and to ideas: to the chimera of a nation, to the distortion of an idea. Especially when in reality the object of our loyalty never actually existed, it often lives and flourishes in naïve and uninformed minds.

On the other hand, the most neglected loyalty is loyalty to our real selves.

At the kitchen table of his unpretentious four-story East Side town house in New York, Kurt Vonnegut once suddenly shouted at me through the blue of smoke and scotch fumes "doodley-squat," an expression that he loved to define "the nothing the poor

don't have", one of the onomatopoeic words spicing his novels to exemplify his reflections on nihilism. At some point, he said that for him nihilism is making sacrifices for a cause in which one does not really believe. Courage and heroism for a cause are "out".

Vonnegut and I concluded that that nihilism in the Nietzschean sense is decadence and ethical qualities such as loyalty appear doomed. Ideals like "freedom" and "democracy" and "family" and "our values" and "love" as used today have become symbols of that decadent nihilism. It is enough to compare these forms of nihilism to true Socialist values of honesty, solidarity, brotherhood and lack of prejudice that have survived intact since the nineteenth century, for that matter since early Christian teachings, to reject nihilism. For nihilism in the end means also intolerance. Inevitably it comes to mean also unconditional love for the comfort and ease that reassures "loyal" citizens of the constituted order of things.

Italy is the prime example. My Italy of four decades: Italy, beloved of northern tourists, the fantasy land of romantic love and mandolins and pasta and romantic nights on sleepy lagoons, Italy is and has been since the Roman Empire, ugly, mean, ferocious, nihilistic. North against South, bourgeois against the worker, and today industrial against agricultural. In no other country in Europe—except perhaps the Balkans—are historical cleavages so ferocious. Italy has remained one of the geographical parts of Europe most emblematic of nihilism at work. The country—just barely a nation—where the quality of loyalty is derided and betrayal exalted.

Still, even though the quality of loyalty is not held in high regard in general (except as applied to soldiers ordered to risk their lives by an ignorant and incompetent, warmongering state), loyalty persists. As I emphasized above, loyalty can be positive, a shoot from love and friendship: loyalty to loved ones, to friends, to the real human beings. Loyalty to

love itself. Yet in the West it is becoming harder to find even a family guided by loyalty and love, much less a city or a nation. And a world? Only a certain romantic youth and a handful of Utopians think that way. As a rule it is easier to speak romantically of loyalty to the past and to values—to any quality, just to avoid loyalty's link, first, with universal love and, second, with the word "betrayal".

One says there are two kinds of love: one, the absolute, the other relative. It is easy to forget absolute love for the individual in the name of relative love for humanity as a whole. At first, the former, absolute love, seems more important, and the latter might appear as a farcical and watered-down repetition of the former. Yet without love for humanity, absolute love cannot exist either; it cannot exist in a dry desert, solitary and isolated. I think that which most closely approaches the absolute love encompasses perforce loyalty. And absolute love, unique love, contains absolute loyalty. Love for and a loyalty to the exceptional, the singular and sometimes even the solitary exile. Perhaps only if you know absolute love and are loyal to it and the consequences of that kind of love, can you love everyone, everywhere.

Intervalle pour réfléchir.

La douce espérance de l'amour.

Le bonheur échappé.

Autre fois évadé.

I feel a need for love and loyalty in the same way I need truth—if only in order to be a decent human being myself. You have to know the truth, or a bit of it, to live a decent life. The problem is that truth like loyalty is an immense commitment. Not the truth in the "truth shall make you free" inscribed on the walls of CIA headquarters in Washington. I mean the love and truth and loyalty necessary to live a life worthy of a man.

I stop in rail stations and observe with special empathy new immigrants and exiles, the uprooted of the world, the emblem of the human condition. That empathy and curiosity have carried me to rail stations in my favorite cities of Rome and Paris and in Buenos Aires and Moscow, just to check on their inhabitants. I love immigrants in a personal and an absolute way, people forced to abandon their present and their past. I look at them and wonder if they think in terms of a nebulous past and a lost present. Do they think of their former homes and schools and friends? Is the place they left still "home"? Do they hang pictures of back home on their walls? Do they long for an irrecoverable past? Immigrants must be the same people they were at home but what they left behind quickly becomes their former world. Most immigrants are courageous; nonetheless, it is surprising that not more of them are suicidal. Most certainly loyalty and allegiance cannot exist in the vacuum in which immigrants are destined to live for many years. For them, too, the question would be, loyalty to what?

Maybe I am overly sensitive to the past and am not speaking only of loyalty. At the romantic age of twenty-one you do feel a loyalty to your brief past which then wanes as time passes ... and might vanish all together. Ethical deterioration? A brutal aspect of ageing, one might answer, so that I am not sure in which segment of our lives loyalty is strongest.

Loyalty.

The loyalty to which I was once chained has faded. Yet loyalty is a tenacious jailer. Loyalty to the past, loyalty to persons and often to ideas less important than myself are pure innocence which, it seems, *should* be redemptive. Most people do not believe in innocence; I always have, which however suggests that I have never known exactly where or who I am. While recommending continuous and minute appraisals of the objects of loyalty, in the end I strongly endorse the quality of loyalty itself, albeit with great prudence and the

proverbial grain of salt. At the same time I still wish I were not a prisoner of the limiting sense of loyalty which my upbringing inculcated into my DNA. Because innate loyalty to an object that has become or always was abject occurs because of misplaced loyalty to the quality of loyalty.

Most certainly in the struggle between guilt and innocence, and between loyalty and betrayal, I have never been peaceful. Walking along the lip of the precipice, you learn what loneliness is. Yet loyalty and duty and responsibility and love can save you from a leap into the dark.

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Our Senior Editor *based in Rome, serves—inter alia—as our European correspondent. A veteran journalist and essayist on a broad palette of topics from culture to history and politics, he is also the author of the Europe Trilogy, celebrated spy thrillers whose latest volume, [Time of Exile](#), was recently published by Punto Press.*

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