

# On Loyalty

*Some critics complain that Americans have made a fetish of Polonius's pompous admonition, "To thine own self be true," forsaking loyalties to family, community, and faith in the name of personal freedom. Yet in the modern world, the author says, the ancient virtue of loyalty imposes different obligations—and many are striving to fulfill them.*

*by Alan Wolfe*

Americans profess to love loyalty, even as they design institutions that actively discourage it. Corporations, professional sports teams, and universities bestow the biggest rewards on those most willing to move elsewhere. Young people are encouraged to serve their country with promises of benefits to be obtained when their tours of duty are over. Term limits leave politicians with no strong reasons to be loyal to the electorate—and vice versa. Whatever the theory, the practice could not be clearer: the loyal, when they are not the losers, are the suckers.

If ever a virtue were designed to be honored in the breach, it is loyalty in a society that worships the market in economics and freedom in politics. Loyalty, after all, is more a feudal virtue than a capitalist one, evoking images of knightly chivalry and codes of *omertá*. Not only was the United States created through a singular act of disloyalty, it has been continually replenished by immigrants willing to break bonds of family, faith, and country. The largest mutual fund company in the United States calls itself Fidelity, but it grew only by

weaning its customers away from their old-fashioned Christmas club accounts at the local savings bank. You do not build a country on the values of mobility, entrepreneurship, and dissent by placing too high a premium on loyalty.

The wonder is that critics have been bemoaning the lack of loyalty—"the central duty amongst all duties," as the philosopher Josiah Royce called it—since the United States was founded. Often there was good reason to do so. "My country right or wrong" cannot serve as a moral injunction if, as during the Civil War, the question is which country is mine. Open societies, as we discovered during the Cold War, are indeed likely to find enemies within. Religious pluralism encourages multiple loyalties. Hyphenated Americans have at least two. Global capitalists often have none. Precisely because it values loyalty so rarely in practice, America must pay fervent homage to it in theory.

Perhaps that explains why Americans seem to be experiencing one of their periodic loyalty panics. "Thanks to the decline of old money and the old-money ethic of civic responsibility," the late Christopher Lasch wrote in 1995, "local and regional loyalties are sadly attenuated today." Lasch



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pointed the finger of blame at upwardly mobile professional elites, whom he portrayed as “turning their backs on the heartland and cultivating ties with the international market in fast-moving money, glamour, fashion, and popular culture.” Not only have these elites contributed to a gap in local loyalties, but their lifestyle contributes to a decline in national loyalty as well. “It is a question,” Lasch wrote, “whether they think of themselves as Americans at all. Patriotism, certainly, does not rank very high in their hierarchy of values.”

Lasch is not the only critic to accuse Americans of insufficient appreciation of loyalty. William Bennett’s *Book of Virtues* (1993), a blockbuster effort to invoke a lost world, includes loyalty as one of the virtues he hopes we can recover. Social critic Barbara Dafoe Whitehead writes that we are living in a “divorce culture,” in which loyalty to spouse and children is severely tested by the siren calls of self-fulfillment and liberation. There are other criticisms. The problem with our politics, according

to many political scientists, is that we no longer have parties and political machines capable of imposing discipline by rewarding loyalty. By focusing too much on the bottom line, business consultant Frederick Reichheld claims, American companies are losing the advantages of what he calls “the loyalty effect,” the benefits to be obtained by being faithful to customers, employees, and investors. And by concentrating on race and ethnicity at the expense of loyalty to the country as a whole, according to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., we risk the “disuniting” of America. Left or Right, the lament is persistent: a society that neglects loyalty will either self-destruct or be unable to offer its members anything worth living—or dying—for.

Still, one wonders whether accounts of a current loyalty crisis are fully justified. Knowing that they live in a society dedicated to freedom, the critics are quick to soften the stringent requirements of loyalty. Don’t get me wrong, Whitehead assures her readers: “We must assume that divorce is necessary as a remedy for irretrievably

broken marriages.” Aware that champions of competitive market capitalism will dismiss loyalty as idealistic and impractical, Reichheld stresses that “loyalty-based management is a rational, viable strategy for generating cash flow, profits and growth.” Bennett writes that loyalty “is very different from being a rubber stamp. Loyalty operates on a higher level than that.”

No claim on behalf of loyalty is put forward without somebody else making an equal and opposite one on behalf of freedom. The marital bond? Defending individual freedom, the Cato Institute’s David Boaz is more sympathetic to feminists and gays who challenge marital ties than he is to Christian conservatives who celebrate them. Indeed, Boaz questions whether the state should be in the business of recognizing marriage ties at all. John M. Hood, of the John Locke Foundation, thinks that corporations serve the public interest best by single-mindedly pursuing profits without worrying about loyalty to their workers and customers.

All of which suggests that lamenting loyalty lost is the wrong way to frame the right issue. Clearly the critics have touched an important nerve: in their haste to leave marriages, religions, firms, jobs, workers, cities, and one another behind, Americans give themselves over to spirals of discontent. Loyalty is an important virtue because honoring it establishes that there is something in the world more important than our immediate instincts and desires. When we are loyal, we stay put, determined to fight for improvements in the situation we are in rather than leave it for some imagined alternative. Whatever freedom we may lose in so doing, we gain that grounding in reality that comes from confronting, rather than escaping, what makes us unhappy.

But it is also true that in America one can never pose the question of loyalty without qualifications. In a society as diverse and decentralized as the United States, there always will be, and there always should be, many outlets for loyalty. And in a society as committed to individualism as

this one, any plea for loyalty that does not allow for voluntary choice is likely to be ignored. If we are ever to have loyalty, it will not be of the traditional kind. Loyalty must be recast in terms compatible with liberal and capitalist values or there will be no compelling conception of loyalty at all.

## II.

Joshua Royce, whose 1907 lectures at the Lowell Institute in Boston were published as *The Philosophy of Loyalty* the following year, was among those rare students of the subject who understood the necessity of recasting the problem of loyalty in individualistic terms. The Harvard professor was contemptuous of utilitarians who posited that human beings coolly weigh the costs and benefits to the self before acting. “Loyalty,” as he put it, “never means the emotion of love for your own cause, and never means merely following your own pleasure, viewed as your private pleasure and interest.” But if Royce shares little with contemporary libertarians, he also sounds remarkably unlike contemporary communitarians, or at least those of conservative stripe. Using a term that jars the modern ear, Royce insisted that, to be loyal, an individual must find his own “cause” and then seek to honor it in his own way. The traditionalist whose fidelity consists in following a cause defined by someone else is not loyal, in Royce’s philosophy.

For Royce, we live inescapably within a paradox: “I, and only I, whenever I come to my own, can morally justify to myself my own plan of life. No outer authority can ever give me the true reason for my duty. Yet I, left to myself, can never find a plan of life. I have no inborn ideal naturally present within myself. By nature I simply go on crying out in a sort of chaotic self-will, according as the momentary play of desire determines.” Our only hope of dealing with this paradox lies in the principle of being loyal to loyalty. If you are loyal to a cause whose effect is to make

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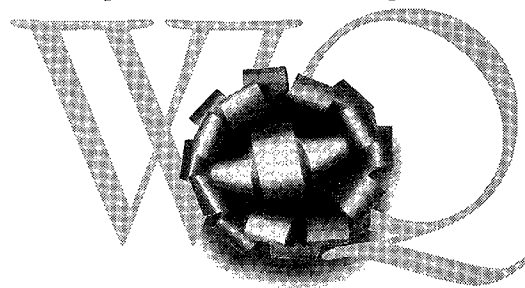
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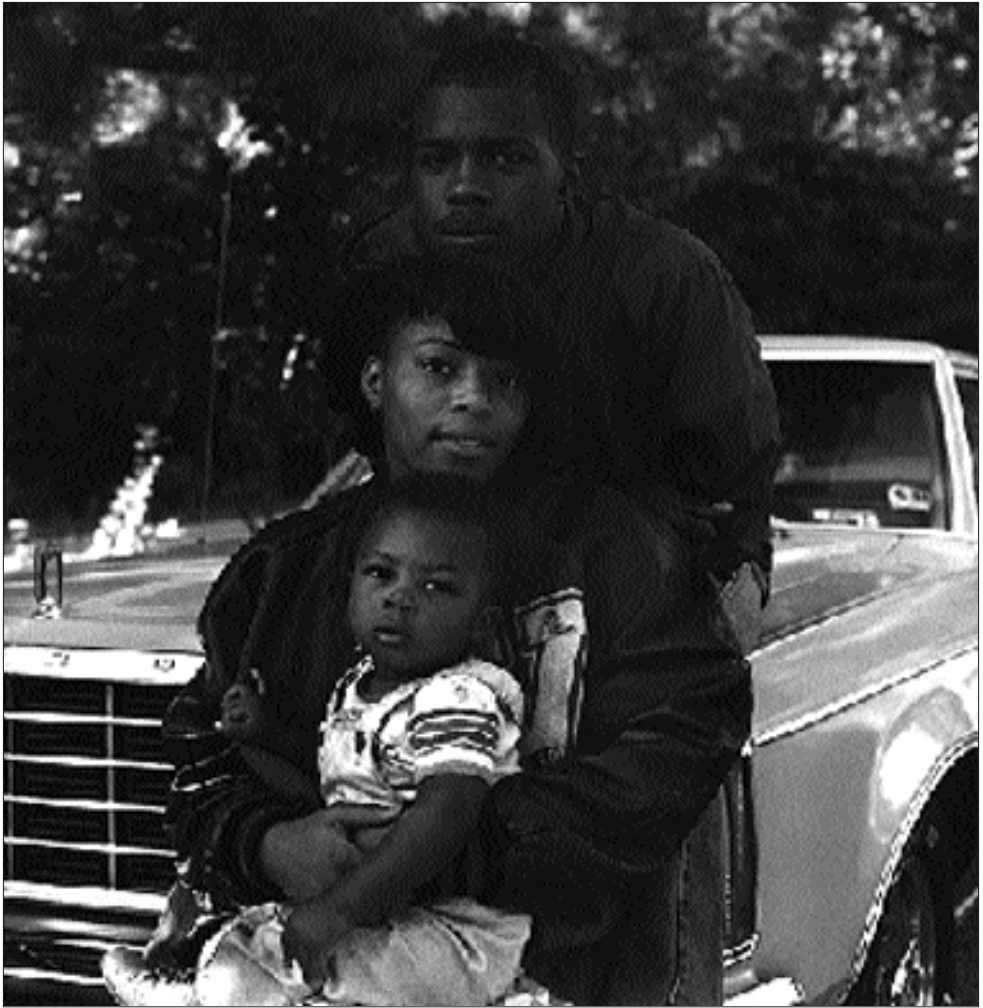
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Vance County, North Carolina, 1988

it impossible for other people to be loyal to their own cause, you fail to honor that principle. Your duty lies in committing yourself to actions that result in “a maximum of increase of loyalty amongst your fellow-men.”

In hindsight, Royce’s formulation appears hopelessly archaic. His praise of the samurai warrior as the embodiment of loyalty, read after the world’s 20th-century experiences with Japanese militarism, hardly seems compatible with his defense of individualism. When Royce tells his readers to avoid Hamlet’s problems—“Have a cause; choose your cause; be decisive”—he sounds as if the aesthetes of Boston needed to be persuaded of the manly virtues. “Missing in Royce is [a] sense of tragedy,” Columbia University law professor George Fletcher rightly noted in

his book *Loyalty* (1993). Too much of the Emersonian self—that unreal idealist whose individualism never seems tied to actually existing human beings—pervades Royce’s book. And his attempt to explain such classic metaphysical puzzles as the nature of truth, morality, or consciousness by reducing them to problems of loyalty is especially unconvincing.

Yet Royce offers a promising approach to loyalty nonetheless. In his lectures, he deals with what he calls “small American problems,” and one of them is the same problem to which Barbara Dafoe Whitehead addresses herself. “Fidelity and family devotion,” Royce wrote, “are amongst the most precious opportunities and instances of loyalty.” Because they are, “faithlessness can never become a virtue.”

Some writers in 1907 were already beginning to argue in favor of liberalizing divorce laws, and Royce argued that concern about an increase in divorce was justified. But that does not necessarily mean we should go back to tradition. “If the patriarchal family must pass away or be profoundly altered, surely we would not gain thereby unless there were to result a new family type, as rich in appeal to our human affections and our domestic instincts as the old forms ever were.”

Contradicting those who blame the passing of a world more steeped in loyalty on the rise of a new concern with the self, Royce warns against making sharp moral judgments. The philosophy of loyalty suggests to him that so long as someone is committed to a capacious cause, we have no right to pass judgment on that individual’s choice. It is right and proper to criticize another person for lacking loyalty to anything. But if that person “is unquestionably loyal to something, to his country or to his profession or to his family, I may criticize his expression of loyalty. . . . [b]ut my right to judge the choices of my fellow is . . . very limited.” Loyalty to marriage, it follows, can take many forms—sometimes, presumably, even divorce.

Yet it also follows that if one is contemplating leaving a marriage, one cannot rightly do so without finding a substitute loyalty to serve in its place. Giving up on a marriage should not mean giving up on loyalty. Divorce sought in the name of hedonism or economic gain would, by this logic, be condemned. Fathers who, in leaving a marriage, also neglect their obligations to their children could rightly be criticized for disloyalty, while those who, after divorce, redouble their efforts in behalf of their children could not. Although Royce obviously did not address himself to our current concern with gay marriage, one presumes that a married person who discovered his homosexuality after marriage would be loyal if he sought a divorce to find a faithful partner of his own sex, but not if he sought divorce to explore his new sexual orientation with many partners.

Royce’s thoughts, like those of the other

pragmatists, seem more pertinent to our times than to those in which he wrote; his approach promises to steer a middle way between accusations of blame on the one hand and on the other a kind of postmodern insistence that no loyalty counts more than any other. Still, the question remains whether his flexible understanding of loyalty, rather than offering us a way to allay our loyalty panics, is merely an attempt to avoid hard decisions.

### III.

At first glance, debates over the importance of loyalty seem to be debates over the nature of modernity itself. Should we, like people who lived in traditional societies, make loyalty the pre-eminent virtue? Or should we instead value modernity and with it the capacity to break ties we view as oppressive? One of the advantages of Royce’s formulation is that it shifts the terms of this increasingly stale debate. Being loyal to loyalty suggests that it is not the presence or absence of loyalty that matters but rather what we are loyal to.

From this perspective, premodern societies can be defined as those that minimize the number of outlets for loyalty. If a temporal ruler also embodies the faith, one can be loyal to secular and divine authority in the same act. When ethnic ties and national ties overlap, conflicts between larger and smaller loyalties are eliminated. Arranged marriages were designed to preclude conflicts between the family one was leaving and the family one was forming. By keeping the objects of loyalty few, traditional societies encouraged the heartfelt sincerity with which professions of loyalty were asserted: devotion inevitably flags as it spreads to more objects.

Of course, premodern societies knew conflicts among loyalties. Antigone was torn between honoring the dead and heeding her uncle; the Bible poses one loyalty dilemma after another. Yet these competing loyalties do not pose quite the same problems as does our modern proliferation of loyalties. A society that can reduce its objects of loyalty to as few as possible—and then makes it crystal clear which loy-

alties are most to be honored—calls upon individuals to exercise strict self-control. Explaining why he was attracted to Sir Thomas More as a subject, Robert Bolt wrote (admirably) in his preface to *A Man for All Seasons* (1960) that More—“supple, humorous, unassuming and sophisticated”—was “set like metal, . . . overtaken by an absolutely primitive rigor, and could no more be budged than a cliff.”

While Thomas More was a determined man, it was not up to him to decide what to do; God’s commands, not his individual wants and desires, determined his course of action. And that is precisely why the kind of loyalty he demonstrated is not modern. For us, the choice is not between loyalty and disloyalty but between competing ways of being loyal. Each of our choices is morally compelling; we can act only by making our own tentative, provisional, and reversible decisions about which loyalties count most. We experience loyalty panics not when loyalty is lacking but when there is too much of it, or at least too many outlets for its unambiguous expression.

One can, of course, respond to such a situation by arguing that choices between multiple loyalties are specious: there being only one God, truth, or source of authority, we must, when faced with situations of multiple loyalties, find the wherewithal to do what is right. E. M. Forster hoped that he would have the courage to be loyal to his friend rather than his country, an entry, wrote critic Roger Kimball recently, “in the great competition for making the most morally fatuous remark of the 20th century.” But whether one believes Forster’s sentiments noble or, in Kimball’s words, “preening infatuation that is at once naive and pernicious,” both the novelist and his critic pose the problem in a remarkably anachronistic way. Most of us feel the ties of both friendship and patriotism. The question is how we balance them, not how we choose between them.

Consider the tribulations of Whittaker Chambers, so recently brought to life in Sam Tanenhaus’s gripping book, *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography* (1997). What makes Chambers interesting to us today is the degree to which he was *not* like Sir Thomas More. Traditional loyal-

ists, unwavering in their commitments, are noble in their choices. We admire them, if we admire them at all, for their lack of doubt, their refusal to accept that what might seem like a conflict of loyalties is any conflict at all. But however heroic such determination seems in traditional guise, it is out of place in modern clothing. The whirlwind around Chambers swept up a cast of characters, such as Elizabeth Bentley, who testified against former members of the Communist Party with as much single-minded dedication as Antigone. Their simple choices have no resonance in our world, and partly for that reason they have never been portrayed in novels, or even been the subjects of interesting biographies.

On August 2, 1948, Whittaker Chambers, informing his boss Henry R. Luce of *Time* that he was about to receive a subpoena to testify about his former activities as a Communist, offered to quit his job. “Nonsense,” Tanenhaus quotes Luce as responding, “testifying is a simple patriotic duty.” Actually, in Chambers’s case it was anything but. He had been active in espionage work in the Communist Party underground in the 1930s, but by 1937 he knew he would have to quit. Nonetheless, the only step he took before World War II to tell his story was to offer an account to White House aide Adolf Berle, who made little progress interesting anyone in the Roosevelt administration in it. Aside from that effort and a briefing he gave to the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 1942, Chambers took no active steps to reveal what he knew. Even in the years after World War II, when his knowledge of Communist activity became a national issue, Chambers held some information back. He was, Tanenhaus writes, “a cautious informant, still uneasy about betraying one-time accomplices and exposing himself to punishment.”

Chambers’s Dostoevskian dark streak discourages easy explanations of his decisions, but surely Tanenhaus is right to stress the erstwhile Communist’s misgivings about betraying people to whom he was once close. Testifying before a closed hearing of the House Committee on Un-

American Activities in 1948, Chambers spoke of Hiss as “a man of great simplicity, with a great gentleness and sweetness of character.” Chambers and Alger Hiss were usually pictured as opposites: the suave, well-connected, aristocratic Hiss versus the unkempt and ill-bred Chambers. But Tanenhaus emphasizes the remarkable similarity of their backgrounds: both products of families with a tendency toward suicide and tragedy, both born outside the upper classes but with pretensions to rise, both relying on powerful patrons—Luce for Chambers, John Foster Dulles in the case of Hiss—to advance their rise.

Understanding their similarities, it becomes possible to understand why Chambers appeared as tortured as he did. Self-made men propel themselves through the world by cultivating connections, making friendships, forming emotional bonds. Of course they have a loyalty to their country, one that demands that they reveal the names of those who conspired against it and lied about it persistently after. Most of us, however, do not choose our country, not, at least, in the same way we choose our friends. For Chambers to honor his loyalty to America, he had to turn his back on the loyalties he had forged in the course of his tumultuous life. Premodern heroic loyalists were never asked to do that; aristocratic, secure in their status, certain of their beliefs, they served their loyalties with scant regard for spouses, friends, and underlings. “Have patience, Margaret, and trouble not thyself,” Robert Bolt has Sir Thomas More say to his daughter as he faces his execution. Were I, like More, forced to sacrifice my life, or even my job, by refusing to sign an oath that violated my conscience, my first thought would be: who will pay for my daughter’s college education?

Although their backgrounds were similar, Hiss, unlike Chambers, convinced the world that he was the patrician. That helps explain why, from a modern perspective, the tragic hero in this case was Chambers, not Hiss. Aristotle’s rules of tragedy require the hero to be of noble birth, but modern conflicts of loyalty emerge out of the pushes and pulls of everyday life. Surely Hiss must have thought that his unbending efforts to achieve what he considered

integrity would help him win his struggle with Chambers in what Hiss called in the title of his apologia “the court of public opinion.” But Chambers anticipated the modern condition of torturous confessions of internal conflict. After Oprah Winfrey and Rikki Lake, Hiss comes across not only as a liar but, because he lacked introspection, as false to his internal self.

Spreading your loyalty around, rather than concentrating it in one place with certain conviction and unshakable faith, will never be the noblest way to fulfill the obligations of loyalty. Such a strategy can seem an escape from tough choices (although Chambers, finally, made them). Tentative expressions of loyalty among competing outlets, if taken to mean that our loyalties are equivalent, will fail as a moral injunction, for we cannot put our duties to our golfing buddies on the same plane as those to our children. And there will be times when having too many loyalties will be worse than having fewer; sometimes we express our sense of loyalty to others as a way of meddling in their affairs when we ought to stop poking around in other people’s business.

Still, the notion of loyalties as broad on the one hand and provisional on the other does serve as the most practical answer to the question of which loyalties to honor when there are all too many people, institutions, and practices to be honored at once. Practical answers, of course, are never perfect answers. But this one at least reminds us of why the loyalty question is such a hard one. It is not because it is hard to do the right thing; it is because the right thing is hard to find. Caught among their families, their jobs, their country, and their changing beliefs, who wouldn’t, like Whittaker Chambers, be cautious about choosing loyalty to one at the expense of disloyalty to all the others?

#### IV.

When loyalties are multiple, education in loyalty cannot be viewed solely as the transmission of timeless truths. To possess character, people need not only an emphasis on being loyal but an under-



standing of the need to make and remake what loyalty is. "The requirements of the spirit of loyalty," Royce wrote, "are in one sense perfectly stern and unyielding, while in another sense they are and must be capable of great freedom of interpretation." Not all those who decry our contemporary lack of loyalty understand this. What seems missing in their approach is not only a supple philosophy of loyalty but a sufficiently realistic psychology of loyalty.

Crucial to the story of loyalty lost is a theory of human nature. Modernity, runs this theory, offers all too many opportunities for shallow gratification. The requirements of loyalty, by contrast, are not easily fulfilled; "real loyalty," writes William Bennett, "endures inconvenience, withstands temptation, and does not cringe under assault." In such an account, loyalty is a virtue of the will. Knowing what is right is merely the first step; one must also have the courage to act on the basis of what is right. A loyal person must triumph over his own nature.

Expressed in this way, loyalty becomes, like courage, very much a military virtue, its ideal proving ground the battlefield. Loyalty "shows itself most clearly when we are operating under stress," Bennett points out. Not only is it true that only remarkable people can be genuinely loyal, but they can be so only under remarkable conditions. We expect the other virtues—compassion, friendship, honesty, perseverance—to reveal themselves in the course of everyday life. But loyalty is reserved for higher circumstances. To prove our loyalty, we first have to be tested, and the more severe, unusual, and demanding the test, the more loyal we are if we pass.

All of which may be true; but if so, then why compile a book of virtues designed to be read by ordinary people leading ordinary lives? There are loyalty tests we face in everyday life. Asking people to adhere to heroic standards of behavior when the situations they face involve mundane choices, though intended as good advice, may well be bad advice. At best, all it does is induce guilt. At worst, it encourages people to believe that the tests are more demanding than they really have to be, in that way providing an indirect justification for failing them. And when the test is failed repeated-

ly, the disloyalty we wind up explaining away outweighs the loyalty we encourage.

A good test of the tests involved in modern-day loyalty involves, once again, the question of loyalty to spouses and children. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead points out that the ideal of the nuclear family was once governed by a norm of permanence. As the anthropologist David Schneider defined that norm, it went like this: "A spouse is for better or worse, for the long run, and the quality of the loyalty (or love) is enduring without qualification of time or place or context." Such an ideal could not survive the culture of what Whitehead calls "affective individualism." Once we came to accept that the standard for judging our actions ought to be whether they contribute to our personal happiness, marital permanence, and with it loyalty and a sense of obligation to others, went by the wayside. Now, governed by norms of personal fulfillment, we lose the ability to invest in children—and therefore the future. To make ourselves whole again, we must "repeal the language and ethic of expressive divorce." Whitehead concludes that "a serious and sustained effort at divorce prevention" would send a message to couples, especially husbands, "to be more vigilant about the maintenance and care of their marriages." Then we might come to appreciate that "there might be greater honor attached to marriage as a human pursuit requiring struggle, intention, and work."

I have no quarrel with the way Whitehead frames the problem, and I especially agree with her concern that a society too quick to sanction divorce is in serious trouble. But the way she implores people to work harder at marriage implies that, at present, they do not. Whitehead's evidence of Americans' fecklessness is actually rather thin. She relies, through most of her book, on citations from divorce manuals written by therapists and social workers, many of which are predictably blind to the demands of loyalty. Yet it does not follow that because people buy such books they act out the advice they contain. Despite high divorce rates, real people are as unhappy about the divorce



Chicago, Illinois, 1996

culture as Whitehead. They know that personal fulfillment can be a shallow goal, that a better future for their children requires sacrifice on their part, and that one has to try one's hardest to stick out the worst moments in a marriage. Most people do not, like Tamino in *The Magic Flute*, have to be initiated into tests of their character; they experience marriage as a test of their commitments every day of their lives.

Whitehead is not a conservative, but her treatment of divorce reminds us that conservatives rarely understand how conservative most Americans really are. Americans are not, as so many conservatives assume, fleeing from their loyalties to one another by giving themselves over to dubious nostrums premised on therapeutic ideals of self-fulfillment, morally bankrupt conceptions of value relativism, or unsatisfying versions of secular humanism. Quick to scold people for what they lack, critics of our loyalty deficit rarely acknowledge what people already have.

We could make a great deal more sense

of the problems around us, including the problem of marriage, if we viewed people as predisposed to prefer present commitments to future possibilities. Of course it is true that a society in which marriage vows are not taken seriously is a society with a loyalty problem. But we should also recognize that loyalty-dependent institutions, including marriage, have sources of resilience. One state, Louisiana, recently put into place a procedure that allows couples who are about to marry to elect a more binding commitment. Those who choose this commitment are permitted to divorce only under certain conditions (e.g., in the event of adultery or abandonment) and only after a separation of two years. Changes such as this may herald a retreat from the divorce culture. Disloyalty in the culture does not mean disloyalty in the people. Americans may be trying to remake loyalty in new ways, and if we dismiss their efforts as insufficiently rigorous or pain inducing, we fail not only to do them justice but to acknowledge the necessity of finding a concept of loyalty relevant to the modern world.

## V.

If one agrees that American society fails to appreciate loyalty but also thinks that conceptions of loyalty must take individualism into account, how should loyalty be advanced? Royce offers a possibility. To create a deeper sense of loyalty, he wrote in 1907, we have to face “the problem of educating the self-estranged spirit of our nation to know itself better.” Royce proposed a strategy for achieving this goal. Interestingly enough, the path he advocated stands as the exact opposite of the one America chose to take.

It might seem obvious that the way to cultivate loyalty to the nation is to encourage people to think nationally. Royce disagreed. Provincial, rather than national, loyalties ought to be emphasized, he suggested. “The tendency to the centralization of power in our national government,” he wrote, “seems to me . . . a distinct danger. It is a substitution of power for loyalty.” Royce was quite taken by the energy and dedication to community Americans manifested at levels below the national state symbolized by Washington, D.C. Born in Grass Valley, California, the child of parents who were lured west by both God and gold, Royce held up as a model of loyalty “that spirit which has originated, endowed, and fostered the colleges and universities of our Western towns, cities, and states, and which is so well shown throughout our country in our American pride in local institutions of learning.”

Local institutionalism, for Royce, was the starting point, not the goal, of education in loyalty. It is not “the old sectionalism” that he advocated but “a new and wiser provincialism.” In line with pragmatist thinking, Royce was looking for institutions close enough to people that they would directly experience the pride of belonging. Once they experienced that, they could appreciate the possibility of broadening their loyalties from the provincial to the cosmopolitan.

Understood this way, loyalty is not a duty

codified into rules. It is a practice cultivated through experience. We cannot be loyal to abstractions called God, country, and family. We can be loyal only to particular religious ideals, actual families, and specific societies worthy of the loyalty they demand. A good society will not propound an ideal of loyalty and then ask that institutions conform to it. It will instead build on the institutions already in existence to uncover an ideal of loyalty proper to them.

Such a pragmatic approach to loyalty may seem naive at a time when provincial institutions seemingly are being undermined by the centralizing forces Royce noted, as well as the newer globalization of capitalism and culture. Yet in a paradoxical way, globalization, by increasing economic insecurity, makes more valuable the security that comes from attaching oneself ferociously to institutions closer to oneself. That is why companies are responding to intense competitive pressures by refocusing on employee and customer loyalty. It may also explain why we have started asking whether the institutions of civil society—from bowling leagues to charities—can survive. It may even account for a recent decline in the divorce rate. So long as we are human, we will always be somewhat provincial. Royce’s truth is that we make our loyalties out of the raw material at hand, and that we will always do so no matter how distant the forces that seem to control our lives.

There is a sense of generosity and optimism in Royce’s thought that would, if added to our current debates about loyalty, improve not only the tone but also the efficacy of such discussions. We should never forget that as much as we value loyalty to God, family, and nation, we cannot allow loyalty to trump every other consideration without sacrificing what makes us modern, democratic, and free. And we should never take the virtues of modernity, democracy, and capitalism to such lengths that our loyalties will be only to ourselves. We have to trust people to find their own sense of loyalty, even when we believe they do not value loyalty enough, because if they do not find it, no one else will find it for them.