ON LOYALTY

Jean Bethke Elshtain delivers the 2012 Erasmus Lecture.

If you visit Edinburgh, you can visit the famous statue of Bobby that sits near the south entrance to Greyfriars Kirkyard at the southern end of the George IV Bridge. When his master died, the Skye Terrier continued to make their daily rounds, visiting the pub on the way, and then entering the cemetery where he spent his day lying on his master’s grave. When Bobby died in 1872, there was an immediate cry for a memorial. The famous statue of Bobby is an ongoing reminder of what it means to be faithful even after death parts us.

It is a bit odd, I suppose, that a vital human trait, attribute, or accomplishment would be best represented by, or most fully realized in, the

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animal kingdom. For the creature that seems to embody loyalty paradigmatically is not man but dog. Dog loyalty is frequently stacked against the pale, watery thing humans call loyalty, and we are found wanting. The lore on loyalty in the dog kingdom is replete with tales of self-sacrifice and undying devotion. The stories inevitably tug at the heart and moisten the eye, descending quite rapidly into pathos. And yet there is that moment of truth: the dogged faithfulness we call loyalty.

There have, of course, been efforts to debunk the tale of Greyfriars Bobby over the years, but no exposé took, so to speak. Bobby seems immune to debunking. What accounts for the story's enduring popularity? Though not as familiar as it once was, certainly to American children, Bobby's story continues to tug at the heartstrings. It is a story of a particular relationship that transcends its time and place, tapping into something in the makeup of humanity that springs to life at the story of Greyfriars Bobby.

Perhaps the words on Bobby's gravestone provide the answer: "Let his loyalty and devotion be a lesson to us all." Often we flatter about frantically when we sense that something we once took for granted—keeping pledges and promises, remaining faithful despite adversity—is wanting in our public and private lives but remains visible, alive, in exemplars like Bobby. Dogs "signed" a social contract with hominids at least 15,000 years ago. They have kept up their part of the bargain. But have we kept our bargain with each other? What does a long-dead Skye Terrier have to teach us, and about what?

Our topic is loyalty and why we should care about whether there is a loyalty deficit or a loyalty superabundance. Have we really lost something of importance? The answer is yes, but it is a complicated yes. For loyalty is entangled with faithfulness, endurance, selflessness, generosity, the keeping of promises, and much else central to human life. There is always that flip side of the coin, is there not? Disloyalty. What are its fruits? We think of deceit, chicanery, lying, mocking, refusing to join in solidarity with others, and shocking those who had counted on us and believed we were "with them" and, therefore, that we were telling the truth.

It is never the case, however, that one gets only one side of the coin. The negatives seep in, sometimes in the guise of loyalty. Take, for example, Polonius' puffery in Hamlet: "To thine own self be true" and one will be false to no one. A loud groan at this point from a sophisticated theater audience. But why? For one thing, the speech by Polonius to his son is overinflated and bombastic, far too rhetorical for the leave-taking between a father and a son who may not see one another for months, even years. But beyond that, Polonius' call for personal authenticity—one must be true to oneself—seizes into a social or political predicate: One "canst not then be false to any man." Polonius adheres to some account of human universality—logically, he must—to assume that faithfulness to the self alone collapses into "any man." We are alike insofar as we are "selves."

That would be one point of entry for a critical discussion of Polonius' oratory. But we have other fish to fry, other loyalties to plumb. We know that people are, or can be, loyal to an idea—an abstraction—and die for it. That's a rather astonishing thing. And if one can be loyal to an idea or ideal, one can be disloyal. We Americans were much troubled in the 1950s by the question of loyalty. Are you one of us, or are you just pretending? Are you really loyal to some other nation or group, or are you just expressing an individual conceit, some personal gripe or discontent? Should we try to treason or give you another chance to prove your loyalty?

Loyalty is a mind bender and a vexation that nearly all of us bear, in part because we feel a strong sense of loyalty not just to one person or ideal but to several. We feel loyalty to our homes, our families, our communities, our churches, and our country—even to our ancestors' countries. Is there any room in this account for multiple loyalties? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines loyalty in primarily political terms. The first definition is rather generic—namely, "to be true to obligations of duty, love, etc." Meaning number two places us in the political realm, as loyalty is equated to faithfulness "in allegiance to a sovereign or constituted government." Loyalty, the *OED* tells us, is "faithful adherence to one's promise, oath, word, etc. . . . faithful adherence to the sovereign or to lawful governance."

We learn that the dictionary locates loyalty in multiple sites, both horizontal and vertical, one might say. So let's examine loyalty in two contexts: the family (or private) sphere and the nation or state, the wider political sphere (even, some say, the world, arguing that our loyalties should extend to the "global community").

When I was a child in the rural village of Timnath, Colorado, population 185, we covered all the bases in our 4-H Club pledge: "I pledge my head to clearer thinking, my heart to greater loyalty, my hands to larger service, and my health to better living for my club, my community, and my country, and my world." Nine- and ten-year-olds have only the faintest notion of what all this means, but in an experiential way
it made sense. Notice the progression from club to community to country. One is pledging to each level as one ascends the scale from humble beginnings to a universal (as the philosophers might say).

Let’s begin with family: the world of intimate relationships, including friends, one’s fellow worshippers in church, one’s buddies. It would be odd to thoroughly politicize these relationships, although, clearly, there is a political, or public, dimension to each. That differs quite significantly, however, from an ideological or narrowly political approach in which home, friendship, and family are all used instrumentally to attain some good not central to these relationships, which are raided or razed, if need be, to attain an external political goal.

Now is not the time or place to do a reprise of the superheated debates in the 1970s and ’80s that continue with the current gay-marriage debate about who makes or defines the family. Let’s assume a mother, a father, and their offspring. It was that family that was the enemy in the early skirmishes of the sex wars. Politics was reduced to power and dominance: Some had it. Some didn’t. The ideal was to get it. Under the slogan “the personal is political,” everything was up for scrutiny. The curtain must be drawn back to reveal the machinations of a repressive, even violent patriarchy that does much of its work in private, within the space afforded by the home.

Nothing personal is exempt from political manipulation, direction, and definition—neither sexual intimacy, nor love, nor parenting. The only solution: End the “rape culture” nurtured by the nuclear family; indeed, the family must be eliminated—and there were all sorts of proposals, some fanciful, some actually grisly—to get the men out of the way so the free reign of women might commence.

Many women who identified themselves as feminists did not go along with this ruthless ideologizing of intimate relations, but, under the rule that one was not to criticize anything called feminist, such women were told, in effect, to shut up. Their disagreements could be vetted some other way, perhaps when the feminist utopia was fully realized. So one way to treat a sphere of loyalty—the family and private life—is to condemn it, rip it to shreds rhetorically, and consign it to the dustbin of history with scarcely a thought given to who loves and raises the children, who sees to their moral development. The very raison d’être of the family is at the heart of the matter. When we are loyal to the family, it is a concrete, not an abstract, loyalty.

That is part of what is at stake in a stark tale Dietrich Bonhoeffer tells about loyalties, in the plural—in this case, to home and to school. In his controversial essay “What Does It Mean to Tell the Truth?” he pits the two against one another through the concrete example of a child in school. He sets the stage by reminding us that truthfulness is “not solely a matter of moral character” but also a “matter of correct appreciation of real situations and of serious reflection upon them. The more complex the actual situations of a man’s life, the more responsible and the more difficult will be his task of ‘telling the truth.’”

The young child is first located in one concrete sphere of loyalty—the home, and his or her parents and siblings. The child’s next sphere will be the school. The possibility of conflicting loyalties may arise. Bonhoeffer notes: “Every utterance or word lives and has its home in a particular environment. The word in the family is different from the word in business or in public. . . . When words become rootless and homeless, [are wrenched from their proper contexts], then the word loses truth.” A loss of proper context means that the various concrete spheres of existence or orders of being are obliterated, as each order of life no longer respects the other.

Now, here is Bonhoeffer’s very controversial example of what he is talking about. He asks us to imagine a teacher confronting a child in front of the entire class by querying “whether it is true that his father often comes home drunk. It is true, but the child denies it. The teacher’s question has placed him in a situation for which he is not yet prepared. He feels only that what is taking place is an unjustified interference in the order of the family and he must oppose it. What goes on in the family is not for the ears of the class in school.”

For Bonhoeffer, the teacher has “failed to respect the reality of this institution.” (He is referring to the child’s family.) The child has not yet reached an age at which he will be able to express himself in the right way. Even though the child’s denial of the drunkenness of a parent is not true in any formal sense, for Bonhoeffer “this lie contains more truth, that is to say, it is more in accordance with reality than would have been the case if the child had betrayed his father’s weakness in front of the class.”

Bonhoeffer didn’t live long enough to extend and polish his remarks, but I think we take the point. The worst thing about telling the truth about one’s dad before an entire class is not only the public humiliation. The worst thing is that doing so denies something deep, something of God’s creation and purpose. The teacher’s demand magnifies and valorizes disloyalty,
the breaking of relationships. It sullies the created order. Truthfulness does not mean one must make manifest everything one sees or knows.

What does this object lesson on loyalty tell us? It tells us that the relationship between truth and loyalty is complex; that loyalty is not an ephemeral formal claim but a concrete relationship of some sort, itself constitutive of a sphere or social space that is neither reducible to nor absorbed within another without doing terrible damage to the human being himself. At the same time, these spheres are, or in principle ought to be, connected to one another. One can readily see connections between the home and the school. Each is concerned, at least hypothetically, with the educational and moral formation of the child—socialization, some call it. Each takes place within an institution (a home, a cluster of buildings). Each generates relations in a particular way (teacher–student, parent–child). Each instills loyalty and trust. Each prepares the child to go forth from family and school into a wider and ever more complex world.

Suppose a teacher decides that the school should intervene directly on a Big Issue and that it is not at all necessary to get home approval for a particular project because the parents do not understand it. Imbued with the dominant slogans of the time about how the world is at stake because man is a destroyer and reckless in his use of the world, she sets up a program on “Fighting Global Catastrophe” and requires all students in her classroom to agree to a mission statement as a mark of their solidarity. The statement declares, “We are told to be loyal to our families and our country. But these exclusive, narrow ways of looking at things lock us into a way of thinking that has proven to be destructive. We must think anew as citizens of the planet. The globe is our home now, and we must learn how to tend to it and to be strong enough to fight for this new perspective.”

The teacher presumes one can leapfrog from one concrete institution or sphere—the home, the school—to the universal, the global, an empty category into which we shove all good things, including diversity racially, sexually, and any other way we can divvy things up. But, if Bonhoeffer is correct, this means we have distorted the realm of moral discourse almost beyond recognition. The global has no concrete reference point.

Surely, however, we must find ways to honor concrete relations that are not our own, in the sense that they are not family, not personal friend, not citizen of my polity. It would be very odd indeed for someone turning to the Christian heritage to deny this possibility given Christian universalism: Christianity is not tied to any territory. So here we imagine the lines that connect us to the wider Church from our own small parish or our cathedral or our temple. Loyalty to our faith takes us out of anything small or parochial and into a wider ecclesia. For St. Augustine, we find a dynamic layering of institutions so as not to lose the concreteness that any compelling account of loyalty must include.

The household is a component that contributes to the completeness of the whole. Our work in small ways and about small things contributes to the overall harshness or decency of any social order. Indeed, the heavenly city on earthly pilgrimage helps to forge peace by calling out “citizens from all nations and so collects a society of aliens, speaking all languages.” She—the civitas Dei—does not annul or abolish earthly differences but even maintains them and follows them, so long as God can be worshipped.

Our loyalties, according to Augustinian realism, are realized in and through concrete memberships in concrete institutions and communities. Here the connection of the home with the global loses its airy abstractedness so that one can concretely connect the smaller to the larger, the more to the less complex, and so on.

Let’s take up two examples. The life’s work of the American reformer Jane Addams was one of mediating “the family claim and the social claim.” She understood that, historically, great thinkers had seen women as disloyal in a real sense where the city is concerned. Women disrupted or made impossible the unity essential to the city. “Have we any greater evil for a city than what splits it and makes it many instead of one?” cries Socrates in Plato’s masterwork, The Republic. There are words scattered throughout Plato’s text that evoke disintegration, anarchy, and dissolution, on the one hand, and, on the other, conformity, binding, and making one. For Plato, we must stem the tide of disintegrative tendencies. So women, too, should be educated and the elite among them should become part of the Ruling, Guardian class.

However, the price to be paid is that a Guardian woman is assigned to a Guardian man (a kind of eugenics breeding program), and the baby who is born is removed from his biological mother to be raised elsewhere in the city, handed willy-nilly to any nursing woman when it comes time to feed. This anonymity—the mother doesn’t know her own child—alone will sever the particular loyalties we show to our own. (Aristotle found this all rather shocking because it pushed against a vital human trait and virtue.) So, for Plato, there must be a singular, overriding loyalty: The city must be as one.
For Addams, the concrete dilemma was how to honor various worthy claims rather than eliminate them or destroy the institutions that sustain them. An educated nineteenth-century woman: What is her concrete sphere of loyalty, duty, responsibility? This was the vocabulary Addams used. "How are you going to keep them down on the farm once they've seen a library?"—or something like that. But Addams knew that family claims were legitimate claims and that they must be honored, for lives were at stake. At the same time, the world of work life must be reformed for the sake of male workers and to create a decent space where women who had to work could do so without fear of disgrace.

Women had come to realize that they could not protect their children by drawing a cordon sanitaire around the family. Addams tells the story of one immigrant mother who made such an attempt to protect her three daughters from an epidemic that was, at the time, roaring through Chicago, especially the overcrowded, dirty alleys and byways of the city's tenement neighborhoods. She did everything she could, as a mother, to prevent her daughters' exposure. But it did not work. One cannot isolate oneself entirely. One of her daughters became ill, then another, then the third—and she lost all of them. This is not only a horrible personal tragedy, Addams tells us, but a public tale as well, a way of noting the connection between home and public, as much as we would turn our backs to the problems suffered by the poor.

Honoring the social claim was the only way to do justice to the family claim in the complex new era women had entered. You did not have to smother or sacrifice one loyalty definitively and uphold the other uncritically. No, you had to struggle, with difficulty, to make compromises, to mediate, and to work it out as best you could, understanding that it would never be tidy. But the connection was vital. For politics, especially city politics, is "civil housekeeping," in some sense, and many of the skills women acquired as homemakers were sorely needed in the civic sphere.

I realize, of course, that each of these claims is controversial, but I do not plan to argue them out. Rather I am naming and defining the nature of conflicting loyalties as understood by strong, persistent people of that time.

The French village of Le-Chambon-sur-Lignon, which sheltered Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe, offers another poignant tale of the connection between the domestic—the home, the church—and a terrible outside world of terror, deceit, and death. This action on the part of the village was spearheaded by their pastor, André Trocmé. He and his parishioners embraced what he called "realistic hope" by contrast to the "sentimental hope" that everything will turn out okay in the long run, even as people die by the hundreds of thousands in the short term. The "kitchen debates," described by Philip Hallie, author of the definitive book on Le Chambon, Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed, are instructive, for here we see a concrete moment within one powerful sphere of loyalty—the household, the domicile—that votes to put that very institution in deadly peril in order to try to spare the lives of strangers who do not share their language or their faith.

We all know the famous words of St. Thomas More, who died "the King's good servant but God's first." The God to whom More was loyal above all was not, for him, some strange abstraction, existing everywhere and nowhere at one and the same time. God is real, here and now, making claims on you and your loyalty. Are you up to the task? Are you trustworthy? How many times this concrete God must have found us wanting and wept with us in our travail. In other words, God is not some metaphysical first principle of the Kantian sort but a real, concrete, living presence of the Augustinian sort.

This loyalty no longer makes any sense to many of our fellow citizens, who see in religious faith a kind of childishness that a person with a functional brain should long ago have jettisoned. Why hasn't this happened? Well, because, we are told, people are weak, they are afraid, they just cannot face reality. Loyalty? There is but one loyalty: loyalty to myself. This transcends all other loyalties. Well, maybe two: There is a kind of loyalty to humanity, and perhaps, just perhaps, one might find some thick connective strands that suffice for us to see something "in common" with other human beings. But beyond that... sorry.

Even if you claim you are nobody's servant, you serve somebody. We had best be about reflecting on whom or what we serve. In Augustinian language, whom do I love? Which way am I ordered? To love or to cupiditas? To decent humility or to superbia, to pride? To be loyal to some person, thing, idea, institution, or way of life is to define oneself. One cannot be a self without other selves around it. One requires the rough give-and-take of complex human lives. If, however, we lift our lives up to God, if we ask his forgiveness and place our weaknesses before him, we will not only come to know a peace we had not previously known; we will also be able to handle conflicts of loyalty in a spirit of good humor and fellowship.