

LOYALTY: Between A Rock and a Hard Place
Geoffry D. White, May 2012

Loyalty doesn't mean anything without the potential for betrayal. Just as there is no day without night, no burger without a bun, I can't be loyal to you without a rival. The rival can be a person, a group, or a principle. I can profess all the loyalty in the world but until its tested we don't know for sure how deep it goes.

I learned this almost 20 years ago when I felt "the calling" to use my skills as a trauma therapist to help the people of The Balkans during the 1992-95 war and genocide. In 1992 I began seeing Auschwitz like images in the media of emaciated Bosnians in Serbian concentration camps. I saw TV footage of children shot out of the arms of their mothers in sniper infested hills surrounding Sarajevo (the site of the Winter Olympics not so long before). I saw blood soaked snow beneath the body of a boy not much older than my 5 year old son, Eric. Then there were the vacant stares of teenage girls my daughters age who had just been liberated from a rape camp. So what would I say to my children years from now when they might ask, "Dad, what did you do to help?"

I was more than qualified to help. As a psychologist I was fully trained as an expert in trauma, Red Cross certified and actively involved in several disaster zones including the big LA earthquake. As a professor of psychology at a major university I knew how to teach and train others in effective treatment regimens. And as a Jew I was blessed and cursed with The Holocaust legacy and it's erstwhile claim, "Never Again!" Or so we'd been told.

To complicate matters, as a Jew I was struck with two sources of shame regarding the slaughter of the Bosnian Muslims by the Christian Serbs. (Yes it was in part a religious war.) For one, I knew that American Jews during the Holocaust had done practically nothing to help their European brethren. This is well documented.

A striking example is the sad case of the St. Louis, a Jewish refugee packed ship denied a chance to deposit it's precious human cargo in the land of the free. Their fate was known should they be forced back to Europe and that's exactly what happened. There were no organized protests or demonstrations, no scathing editorials in the dozens of Yiddish and Jewish newspapers though they did report the facts.

Why no outcry? Why the disloyalty to their fellow Jews? They had their own loyalty conflict: publicly embarrass President Roosevelt (the biggest protector of American Jews they'd ever known) into intervening versus risk that he might lose the next election, branded a "Jew Lover" in Anti Semitic America. They chose self protection, loyalty to American Jews over an attempt to save their critically endangered friends and family from Hitlers death machine.

My second source of shame is that Israel was doing no more than any other country to stop the slaughter in Bosnia. I discovered this when I contacted the Israeli Embassy to see if I could join their efforts to stop the genocide. How could the homeland of Holocaust survivors limit "Never Again!" to Jews? I was enraged and embarrassed that a country founded on ideals could be so disloyal to them? I had to get involved.

As I was passionately organizing a program to train therapists in the Balkans to administer the latest trauma treatment procedures for the survivors, my former wife pointed out that I had overlooked an obvious problem: wasn't I being disloyal to my family by planning a journey to a war zone where I could be killed, disabled and traumatized myself? Why couldn't I do the planning and let those without dependent children (mine were 7 and 12 at the time), a wife and a Labrador Retriever take the serious risks? Perhaps I was being selfish or perhaps a thrill seeker in my supposed loyalty to seriously endangered people? A loyalty dilemma isn't a pretty picture.

At first I denied the danger. There was a cease fire and I would be there under the protection of the UN and other organizations. When this argument fell apart--because it would be dangerous---I accused my wife of not being supportive. Even if this was true it had nothing to do with her challenge to me. My next attempt was to up my life insurance to the point where I would be worth more dead than alive. My rationalizations were getting more ridiculous. I had to admit it, it was crucially important to go and couldn't articulate exactly why.

Several things finally helped me decide even though much ambivalence remained. Loyalty meets a deep human need for survival, community and kinship: I had found something worth risking my life for in addition to my children. A commitment to my ideals and the double dose of shame outweighed but did not neutralize the possible risk of injury and death. Someone else may have made a different decision and I would respect that but I wanted my children to be proud of their father for standing up for something he believed in

so deeply. This legacy offset risks and today I know I made the right decision. I was, ultimately, loyal to myself.