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Arlington Street Church
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Good Dog

I really do want to be the person my dog thinks I am: the one who loads him into the car to run in the woods most mornings, the one who gives treats, and love. Actually, though, I want even more to be the person my dog is, or something like that. I want to bark wildly when I'm excited; run right through the middle of every mud puddle; greet my meals ears back and tail up, and just in case you were wondering if I liked what you made for me, put my whole face in my bowl; and circle three times and lie down to sleep in the patch of sun on the floor near you. But most of all, I want to greet you with unbridled enthusiasm, wagging and whining shamelessly, placing absolutely zero value on *cool* ... though I could probably skip the face-licking.

If we're very lucky, our dogs will demonstrate something like remorse after a particularly egregious transgression – maybe – though it never lasts for long. The upside is that there's a Zen-like quality to their presence in the present. They're too happy to be sad. And they don't have preferences, really; a car ride is a car ride, whatever the destination. So much to learn from our animal

companions! And so much to love.

But perhaps, of all the things I love about living with dogs, I love most their absolutely uncomplicated devotion: their *loyalty*.

It's easy to think of loyalty as love, but I suspect that's a bit anthropomorphic. And loyalty is enough – more than enough! It's huge. Today, as we bless the animals, and every day, as the animals bless us, I invite you to join me in turning our reflection to loyalty ... also known as faithfulness.

If you don't know the true story of Hachikō, the Japanese Akita, this coming December, you can see the movie remake – *Hachiko, A Dog's Tale* – though I suspect something happened in translation; it stars Richard Gere, who plays a Japanese professor of agriculture at the University of Tokyo. Hmm.

Hachikō was a real dog, known in Japanese as chūken Hachikō, meaning “faithful dog Hachikō.” Born in 1923 to the aforementioned professor, Hidesaburō Ueno, Hachi saw off his owner every morning, and greeted him at the end of every day at Shibuya Station, a massive train station in Tokyo. Then one day in May of 1925, Professor Ueno suffered a stroke at school and died.

The story goes from sad to heartbreaking when you learn that, although Hachikō was adopted by another family, the faithful Akita continued to go to Shibuya Station and wait for Professor Ueno to arrive on his usual train every evening for ten years. Although he received affection and treats from other

commuters, Hachi wasn't waiting for them.

In 1932, a Tokyo newspaper published a story about Hachikō, written by one of Professor Ueno's former students, and Hachi was an overnight sensation. Parents and teachers lifted up his vigil and spirit of family loyalty as an example for children, and a statue of Hachikō was erected in 1934; Hachi himself was present at its unveiling, about a year before his death. To this day, the statue remains a popular meeting place outside Shibuya Station. And every year, on April 8th, at a memorial ceremony at the station, hundreds of dog lovers and their dogs turn out to honor Hachikō's devotion.¹

The theme of *loyalty* is in every discipline, from psychology to philosophy, from business to the study of cults. Loyalty: “Families [and friends] expect it; organizations often demand it; and countries do what they can to foster it.”² But, as we well know, its adherents don't always emerge heroic. Consider the treatments of the difference between whistle-blowers and traitors. Both demonstrate extraordinary loyalty, but whistle-blowers are heroes, and traitors are considered scoundrels; somewhere along the line, their devotion got twisted.

Loyalty can be a perilous path.

Was any of you raised on Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree*? Heretically, I consider myself lucky to have missed it. In this story, a tree loves a little boy.

1 Most of this information is available on wikipedia: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hachik%C5%8D

2 John Kleinig, *Loyalty*, 8/21/07. See plato.stanford.edu/entries/loyalty/

He swings from her branches – yes, it's a girl tree – eats her apples, and enjoys her shade. Allegedly, he loves the tree, but as the boy grows older, he gathers her apples to sell; cuts off her branches to build a house; and chops down her trunk to build a boat. Allegedly, the tree is always happy to sacrifice herself for him. Near the close of his life, the boy – now an old man – returns once more, and sits down on all that is left of the tree: her stump. In his conclusion about this abusive relationship, Shel Silverstein, still referring to the stump as a tree – although, obviously, the tree is dead – reiterates that the tree loves this selfish predator ... and is happy.

Do I hear Tina Turner singing “What's love got to do with it?” This would be a good example of love gone very wrong; exhibit A of misplaced loyalty, and codependence ... which is not loyalty, but a disease: loyalty to a fault.

So what is healthy loyalty? What is deserving of our loyalty? I'm thinking of the words *life-giving*: that which deserves our loyalty is that which we love, and which, in turn, loves us. Loyalty is about mutuality. It can't be perfect; we're not perfect, so sometimes, maybe lots of times, we get disappointed. But that doesn't mean that we abandon our faithfulness; that's the point of loyalty: hanging in there, and seeing it through, even when the road gets rough. When the road gets rough, we should find out who our friends are.

But the road can only get so rough before loyalty is no longer loyalty. *Loyalty is not longer loyalty when the road is rough to the point of abuse.* There's a kind of intrinsic contradiction, or irony, here: even as loyalty binds us

to one another, it should free us rather than imprison us. If we feel trapped by our loyalty, something is very wrong.

In an iconic conversation with my friend and colleague Fred Small, he once questioned my loyalty to a particularly odious relationship. Fred had formerly worked as a lawyer; he said to me, “You know, Kim, a contract is only valid and binding if both people have signed it.” He wasn't talking about a piece of paper. Translation: A commitment, a covenant, a promise, a relationship is only “real” if both people are “in.” If everyone isn't “in,” then the loyalty is unwarranted, and, perhaps, inappropriate. Misplaced loyalty is loyalty to a fault ... or worse. The key to true loyalty, the mark of devotion and faithfulness, is *reciprocity*.

Now I'm thinking of another children's story, to which I was imprinted, deeply. I'm thinking of Dr. Seuss' iconic *Horton Hatches the Egg*. The theme of loyalty runs like a plumb line through the plot:

Then Horton, the elephant, passed by her tree.
 “Hello!” called the lazy bird, smiling her best,
 “You've nothing to do and I *do* need a rest.
 Would YOU like to sit on the egg in my nest?”

The elephant laughed
Why, of all silly things!
 /haven't feathers and /haven't wings.

ME on your egg? Why that doesn't make sense....

Your egg is so small, ma'am, and I'm so immense!"

You saw it coming: Horton the elephant gets stuck with an abandoned bird's egg, and, improbably, climbs up onto the nest to keep it warm. He sits through extremes of horrible weather and harassment by his so-called friends. Then, in a terrible turn of the plot, hunters appear:

He heard the men's footsteps!

He turned with a start!

Three rifles were aiming

Right straight at his heart!

Did he run?

He did not!

HORTON STAYED ON THAT NEST!

He held his head high

And he threw out his chest

And he looked at the hunters

As much as to say:

"Shoot if you must

But I *won't* run away!

I meant what I said

And I said what I meant....

An elephant's faithful

One hundred percent!”

Realizing Horton is much more valuable alive than dead, the hunters capture him and put him in a traveling circus – tree, nest, egg, and all. Horton is miserable, but over and over, voicing his loyalty to this quixotic mission, Horton repeats the refrain,

“I meant what I said
And I said what I meant....
An elephant's faithful
one hundred percent!”:

Then one day, the bird returns from her gallivanting and wants the egg back. By now, Horton has grown deeply attached to it, and is very, very sad to surrender his place on the nest. Suddenly, all the purpose has gone out of him. But then, just in the nick of time, the egg hatches, and, in a big Seussian finish worthy of the very best, the little bird emerges with ears and a tail and a trunk just like Horton's.

And the people came shouting, “What's all this about...?”
They looked! And they stared with their eyes popping out!
Then they cheered and they *cheered* and they CHEERED more and more,
They'd never seen anything like it before!
“My goodness! My *gracious!*” they shouted. “MY WORD!
It's something brand new!”

IT'S AN ELEPHANT-BIRD!!

And it should be, it *should* be, it SHOULD be like that!

Because Horton was faithful! He sat and he sat!

He meant what he said

And he said what he meant....”

... And they sent [them] home

Happy,

One hundred per cent!

My spiritual companions,

May we aspire to the loyalty of Hachikō and Horton.

May we devote ourselves to the deepest expressions of loyalty,

faithfulness *and* reciprocity,

and enjoy loyalty's gifts, both in the receiving and the giving.

Let us give and receive one hundred percent.