

Disloyal

To be disloyal is to renege on a commitment to a person, cause, or personal dream. This vice is conventionally viewed as the worst; one remembers that Dante puts traitors in the lowest circle of Hell. Why is disloyalty, or treachery (a related notion) so greatly despised? My guess is this. Our human survival depends on society, where tradition is kept alive, weaponry is present to protect the tribe, and a considerable degree of mutual trust is available. It is that mutual trust which we require in order to co exist as social beings, and though we feel better if someone 'has our back,' we will pass most of our lives relying on others. Disloyalty is the most dramatic instance of scorn for the law of mutual trust.

Examples

1

I have traveled in foreign countries where I heard fellow Americans—it could be fellow Greeks or fellow Uruguayans, if fate had raised me in one of those countries—dump on their home country, attacking everything from domestic manners to foreign policy. This kind of careless critique seems to me disloyal. To assess your country carefully should be permissible anywhere, nor should there be any supervision of people's free speech. But to express casually critical views of your own country is disloyal, for you are a free citizen of your country, and could have left it. Socrates spent his whole life in Athens, and couldn't imagine turning his back on his elected home, just to save his life.

2

When we have spoken ill of another, out of malice and not out of critical care, we are disloyal to a fellow human. We can feel that disloyalty under our tongues. We don't feel good about ourselves, or furthered in the quiet business of living. When we hold our tongues about another—even if our thoughts are malign—we are at least taking the direction of self-discipline, which is a step in the direction of loyalty to the human condition. Silence about others, though mute and brute, is a good first step toward avoiding the slippery slope of human disloyalty.