

Heeding Woolf's Great Teacher

Uncovering and Defusing an Education in "Unreal Loyalties"

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ABSTRACT

In her 1938 epistolary novel and educational treatise, *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf discusses "freedom from unreal loyalties" as key to educating for peace rather than for war, as was the concern in Woolf's time and remarkably remains of serious concern seventy-odd years later. This essay analyzes how modern-day, post-9/11 U.S. public education is influenced by a whole range of unreal loyalties and, in fact, how we as educators reify and reinscribe these. The argument uses Woolf's text as a theoretical frame to analyze select aspects of U.S. public education, concluding with an exploration of the meaning and value of giving up, moreover, defusing, incendiary unreal loyalties present within the U.S. school curricula.

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A SWIFT AND FERVENT tide of patriotism swept across the United States following the 9/11 attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., becoming such a strong cultural metanarrative that those who did not line up behind the flag began to be viewed suspiciously (Minh-ha, 2011). More than ten years later, the expectation of loyalty to one's country and its flag is just as strong, moreover, has proliferated, manifest in Sarah Palin's and Michele Bachmann's rally cries and Fox News correspondents' frothy cautionary tales and conspiracy theories, designed to whip audiences into a fearful hate. As I posit here and elsewhere (Otto, 2005), such tales aim to create a script for how Americans can maintain their 9/11-fueled rage against the unknown, exotic "other," epitomizing the poisonous rhetoric that, by design, incites its public to develop, nurse, and queue up behind what Virginia Woolf in her educational treatise *Three Guineas* (1938) so wisely, carefully names "unreal loyalties" (p. 78). Last of the four great teachers of the daughters of educated men, behind poverty, chastity, and derision, "freedom from unreal loyalties" is imagined as "freedom from loyalty to old schools, old colleges, old churches, old ceremonies, old countries" (p. 78), and as key to educating for peace rather than for war, as was the case in Woolf's time and remarkably remains the case seventy-odd years later. In this essay, I analyze how modern-day, post-9/11, U.S. public education is influenced by a whole range of unreal loyalties and, in fact, how we as educators reify and reinscribe these. I make my argument using Woolf's text as a theoretical frame to analyze select aspects of U.S. public education. I conclude by exploring the

meaning and value of giving up, moreover, defusing, incendiary unreal loyalties represented within U.S. schools' curricula.

In *Three Guineas*, Woolf (1938) leaves no stone unturned as she considers the question, "How are we to prevent war?" (p. 9), keenly illustrating the dilemma created by a gender-based educational morass: the sons of educated men lavishly educated in public schools and universities to occupy the professions befitting a gentleman, yet the daughters of educated men, who literally and figuratively support their brothers' educations, can only hope for an "unpaid-for education" (p. 6). Using only the "educational" materials an educated-man's daughter might easily access—a general knowledge of psychology, history, biographies, and autobiographies and the daily newspaper—Woolf nevertheless amasses a brilliant, profound, angry (Silver, 1991) argument reasoning war as men's "profession; ... source of happiness and excitement; and. . . an outlet

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for manly qualities, without which men would deteriorate” (Woolf, 1938, p. 8), damning war as a man’s *raison d’être* and duty of patriotism that can lead only to the “morning’s collection” (p. 10): photographs of dead children, burnt houses, and mutilated, mangled humanity. So thorough is her argument and so bottomless her reserves that her reader can only be compelled to conclude that if one cannot educate for peace one should not educate at all, heeding her plan to buy “Rags. Petrol. Matches,” and decry, “Let it blaze! Let it blaze! For we have done with this ‘education!’” (p. 36) rather than display the “sartorial splendours” (p. 21) of professional men’s dress whose allegiance is intimately tied to “photographs of ruined houses and dead bodies” (p. 21).

Woolf’s vision for women resides in achieving “intellectual liberty” (p. 85), defined as “the liberty to think against the grain of conventional values, the liberty to criticize, the liberty to resist” (Silver, 1991, p. 343).

By freedom from unreal loyalties [Woolf means] that you must rid yourself of pride of nationality in the first place; also of religious pride, college pride, school pride, family pride, sex pride and those unreal loyalties that spring from them. (Woolf, 1938, p. 80)

On the point of which are true loyalties, or those “we must serve” and which are unreal loyalties, or those “we must despise” (p. 81), Woolf owes the authority to one of two “psychometer[s]”: the first is private, physiological that one “carr[ies] on [one’s] wrist” (p. 81) and, like the mercury contained within a thermometer, reacts to a certain level of exposure, “is affected by any body or soul, house or society in whose presence it is exposed” (p. 81). Perhaps one’s quickening pulse when reacting to one’s instinct—for dare not she say *heart*—is to what Woolf refers, but just as quickly she admits this meter may indeed be considered by many to be fallible, for it “has led to many unfortunate marriages and broken friendships” (p. 81).

The second authority being public, she advises her readers to attend the national galleries—open to all—to look at pictures and the library to browse volumes, coming to know what artists, poets, and philosophers have expressed about “the effect of power and wealth upon the soul” (p. 81), advising art functions as a “public psychometer” (p. 81). These public art objects Woolf means to make pedagogues themselves, offering, for example, “a far more instructive analysis of tyranny than any of our politicians can offer” (p. 81), helping the viewer, the reader, discover those which have been named unreal, not by politicians, sociologists or archbishops but by looking to art as a text which illustrates “the duties of an individual to society” (p. 81). Remembering that Woolf herself is using art in a revolutionary way “to propagate political opinion” in the same vein as Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* (Marcus paraphrased in Silver, 1991, p. 362), one may see that once one knows his or her duties, absent unreal loyalties, one knows freedom. Woolf argues strongly for true loyalties and even more strongly against the hypocrisy of the unreal, pride being a harbinger of unreal loyalties.

Admittedly, Woolf enters this conversation from a privileged socioeconomic, cultural, and racial position—as do the majority of our nation’s teachers today—speaking specifically to the daughters of educated gentlemen, drawing examples from their life

experiences. While Woolf’s argument calls upon the privileged to relinquish their unreal loyalties, calls upon them to refuse to be lured by the finery and seeming security one’s upholding unreal loyalties can offer, Woolf nevertheless speaks to the plight of all women wishing to earn their way, to all women who would make a place for themselves in the world absent the shackles of a patriarchy enforced by the pity of parsimonious access to a formal, credentialing education. Her argument never degenerates to preaching the simplistic act of trading one unreal loyalty for another, better, more-just loyalty—for such a practice can only serve to center another’s loyalty, thereby reinscribing systems of domination—but asks each woman find her own conscience, her own thread of quicksilver with which to identify the great teacher and against which to measure the value of peace for humanity.

So, how are unreal loyalties manifest in U.S. public education today? Many public, legal battles over patriotism evident for instance in one’s right not to pledge one’s undying allegiance to the flag have been and are being fought. Woolf is clear on the need to avoid the trap created by patriotism and its direct contribution to war, suggesting women instead pledge the indifference of an outsider, moreover pledge to act in word and deed as citizens of the world. The first I speak of here—and perhaps the most insidious of unreal loyalties in public education—is largely invisible to students, parents, and community members for it occurs upon many teachers’ employment, at which time the teacher must swear a loyalty oath: to country and constitution, to state, to district, to school. Early in the history of the U.S. republic, during the world wars, and during the McCarthy era, legislating teachers’ loyalty oaths spread in an effort to ferret out dissidents and ensure conformity of ideas. As early as 1776 in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, schoolmasters were required to sign an oath of allegiance (Newsom, 1954), an example of which reads:

...the rising generation should be instructed in the Principles of publick Virtue and duly impressed with the amiable Ideas of Liberty and Patriotism and at the same time inspired with the keenest Abhorrence of despotick and arbitrary power. (Knight quoted in Newsom, p. 174)

Mudge (1936) argues, at the time *Three Guineas* was published, in fact, that such an oath is *not* a constitutional provision; moreover, the oath to support and uphold the constitution

...imposes no issue of loyalty. One may perform honestly and conscientiously the duties of an office under a constitution and yet be far from loyal to that constitution. Loyalty is something that one lives, not something that one professes...[coming] from the inner consciousness of the individual, [and] a force that responds to the feeling that the institution to which loyalty is accorded is something which within itself possesses values that deserve acceptance and appreciation. (p. 279)

In essence, these are institutions deserving of one’s real loyalty. But what could and should one’s loyalties to country and state *be* in a post-9/11, Fox News–hyped political clime and in a nation where a

majority of our countrymen and women believe their president a Muslim and by extension a terrorist, where its people want to be free but clearly cannot abide freedom? As an educator, where should one's real loyalties lie?

If one forgets for a moment the splendid trappings of which Woolf (1938) speaks—the capes of ermine, endless loops of gold bouillon, embroidered crests, horsehair wigs—that beg, moreover demand, one's reverence to their power, and if one sets aside the laws and their assumed fidelities, then one might begin to see an educator can profess a loyalty oath without also crafting his or her pupils' education in unreal loyalties. For is not an educator's first loyalty to his or her pupils—more precisely to the pupils' intellectual, social, and emotional betterment—and when this has been achieved and the pupils are inspired and ablaze with all the energy of a house afire, are not all loyalties to all stakeholders of any lawfully mandated oath richly satisfied? Indeed, a worthy loyalty, a real loyalty, is pledged “with a mind and a will of [one's] own” (p. 100) and not prescribed by “obstinate” (p. 109) nostalgia attached to patriotism, a nation's law that “throughout the greater part of its history has treated [one] as a slave; [or] has denied [one] education or any share in its possessions” (p. 108), or legislation that currently seeks to (re)legislate women's reproductive freedoms.

Loyalty oaths speak directly to one's patriotic nature or one's ability to be truly loyal to “old countries,” the source of one's entitlement to certain “rights and privileges” (p. 78) as well as one's potential enslavements. Patriotism is an unreal loyalty that lies not far below the surface of all that is taught in the United States and is rooted in a determination to revel in ownership, and to and to “fling [that ownership] back in the...face” (p. 80) at all who do not belong. But even an educated man's daughter's unpaid-for education tells her that pride in country and the assumed ownership that comes along with a wind blowing patriotic, parti-colored bunting are not uncomplicated: Any “biography never returns a single and simple answer to any question that is asked of it” (p. 79), and history tells us “the finest education in the world does not teach people to hate force, but to use it” (p. 29). To see the atrocities we teach in the name of country one must have eyes which are clear and a life that has “neither capital nor force behind” (p. 22) it. Clear eyes and steadfast determination must become the tools of pedagogues who strive to teach for peace as a true loyalty.

On May 2, 2011, in a raid on his residential compound, U.S. Navy Seals shot and killed Osama bin Laden, ideological extremist and mastermind of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. As news of his death reached the media, all the revenge-filled hatred of U.S. citizens—kept alive and vibrant for ten years by virtue of a perpetual newsreel loop (Otto, 2005) of planes crashing into towers, buildings ablaze, structures collapsing, and souls running for their lives from a billowing cloud of debris—burst from its bounds, flowing to the surface and across the U.S. landscape like a storm surge, destructively coursing through homes and offices, into streets and public-school classrooms. The classrooms this hatred entered were full of schoolchildren, many of whom were not yet alive on September 11th, 2001. Nevertheless, many teachers anecdotally report that children cheered, waved stars and stripes, felt and expressed the chilling, murderous glee of revenge. On the

steps of the U.S. Capitol and in front of the White House, drunken patriots chanted hate and victory, never once thinking of their own lost humanity or pausing to remember the tragedies' trembling victims, mourners of ones lost, so virtuous were they in their certainty of the event's true meaning. Patriots and schoolchildren alike celebrated as if the United States had wrested the World Cup title from the hands of a particularly reviled nation.

If schoolchildren can cheer the murder of a war criminal killed without the due process upon which the United States is founded (and prides itself), what are educators teaching them of freedom and patriotism? Certainly not that loyalty to country is an unreal loyalty, and certainly not that war is to be abhorred. What does such a tale tell about a nation that relies upon the rage of children to help ensure its strength and virtuosity? Woolf promises a guinea to help rebuild a women's college under conditions taught by her four great teachers, arguing, “You must educate the young to hate war. You must teach them to feel the inhumanity, the beastliness, the insupportability of war” (p. 22), not inculcate the young with bloodthirst, a revenge-fueled fascination for pictures of dead bodies and ruined houses. One cannot allow oneself to teach vengeance through war; for though one knows from history, biography, and a basic knowledge of psychology that people commit unspeakable atrocities against their fellow human beings, these are lessons in the importance of humanity, not primers on how and when to commit atrocities of one's own in the name of loyalty to country. For such an education “hypnotize[s] the human mind” (p. 114), leaving one dazed like a rabbit caught in headlamps; such “limelight...paralyzes the free action of the human faculties and inhibits the human power to change and create new wholes. ...Ease and freedom, the power to change and the power to grow, can only be preserved by obscurity” (p. 114). As a pedagogue, one cannot allow oneself to become a seducer coming with one's “seduction” to bribe schoolchildren into the “captivity” of unreal loyalties, but instead, Woolf sagely tells us, one must “tear up the parchments; refuse to fill up the forms” (p. 80).

I now turn to a second unreal loyalty, one I simply call an addiction to progress and its slavish relation to scientific achievement and technological advancement. Svetlana Boym (2001) suggests the French Revolution reinvented the word *revolution*—which, up to the time referenced the cyclical, its meaning drawn from the orbiting cosmos—by introducing the notion of progress, or forward advancement as an alternative to cyclical movement. This idea was taken up as central to nineteenth-century Western culture, and in years since time instead marches a straight line, one leading inexorably forward (Boym paraphrased in Otto, 2005) toward a vanishing point of modernity. Woolf (1938) evokes the Marquess of Londonderry, who wonders if the rush to scientific achievement and its misuse “will bring about the destruction of [mankind] and the edifice of civilization” (p. 72). Woolf's quote echoes a sentiment similar to one within John Steinbeck's Nobel Prize acceptance speech, in which he worries aloud, in the wake of the atomic bomb's advent and use, that science's head has rushed ahead of its heart (Nobel Foundation, 1962). For educators, the unending cycle of change that progress brings about is what makes it at once addictive and an unreal loyalty. Such change promises an

ever-new hope of “fixing” schools with some scientifically rendered silver bullet imagined to be just around the corner but that in reality turns out to be around the mulberry bush (Woolf, 1938). U.S. education has come to a point where change—largely motivated by educational and technological corporations’ marketing and corresponding success claims—happens merely for the sake of change or exists solely to prey upon districts, principals, and teachers’ desperation for adequate yearly progress. This addiction to progress and its relation to scientific objectivity is at the root of No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 demands to push ever skyward high-stakes accountability measures—as if such a science of success could possibly contribute to the kind of humanity, the kind of duty to humankind Woolf envisions and for which she so thoughtfully, deftly advocates.

Finally, and third—and because such impressive tensile strength lies within the rule of three—I posit the unreal loyalty of educating both for a free-market economy and for the professions. This unreal loyalty begins not in the work world but in schools themselves, for as most U.S. schools are no longer well-supported by their property-tax base, an educator’s ability to deliver a free and public education is grimly challenged. Thinly veiled, cast as a way one can uphold one’s true loyalties to educate schoolchildren, the push comes for a teacher to become a grant writer, to scour the horizon for potential donors, and to sidle up to corporations and foundations, drawing them into the rhetoric of educational reform and its plans for progress, soliciting an oath of loyalty from corporations and funders to public schools. Educators are then debased to whisper promises of a reliable supply of workers carefully tracked in order to socially engineer the reproduction of social class divisions and produce appropriate worker docility. Educators then become indebted to those very corporations determined to wage warfare to secure human resources and raw materials necessary for production, all the while resigned to these actions as a means to a noble end, yet knowing these means of “progress” provide no way to move an inequitable world toward equity and away from war. As are the daughters of educated men complicit in supporting war, an educator becomes “forced to use whatever influence she possess[e]s to bolster up the system which provide[s] her with [fine things]. . . . Consciously she must use whatever charm or beauty she possess[e]s to flatter and cajole the busy men, the soldiers, the lawyers, the ambassadors, the cabinet ministers. . . . Consciously she must accept their views, and fall in with their decrees because it [is] only so that she could wheedle them into giving her the means” (pp. 38–39). As a result, she becomes “even more strongly perhaps in favour of war” (p. 39), setting up a system of paradoxes we have come to normalize and justify as enterprising and not at all as a practice that desperately begs our derision.

Close-at-heels on an educator’s economic complicity is one’s promise to educate schoolchildren for the professions: be it for the economic promise and corresponding upward social class mobility that education offers families or as a lure for businesses scouting quarters complete with tax-forgiveness deals. Not subtle at all, not buried, but visible on the surface of our cultural meta-narrative of meritocracy, education’s role as the great liberator

glows—moreover, in the current economy is perhaps one of the last embers of an otherwise dying fire—every hope pinned on one’s entrée into the professions. Importantly, in an economy of shrinking living-wage jobs, we are also required to educate for competition rather than for a collectivist, democratic ideal. As Woolf illustrates, the better one becomes at competing, the poorer one gets at fostering humanity, the further away one moves from “the dream of peace” and “the voices of the poets . . . assuring us of a unity that rubs out divisions as if they were chalk marks only,” and the closer to “the sound of the guns” (p. 143). But there is a way to both educate for the professions and not simply join the splendid parade across the bridge to the work world, and inevitably across the bridge to war.

Woolf (1938) leaves her reader no fine measuring stick, no calculator, or blueprint for how to read, recognize or relinquish one’s unreal loyalties. Instead her work calls for women to make a conscious decision about at what price and under what terms they will join the procession of educated men, calling upon women to “use their liminality as a place of refusal” (Silver, 1991, p. 344). But how might a woman’s voice, and thus her use of gender-fueled liminality as a place of refusal—of revolution—gain traction and be heard rather than be subsumed, overridden, and outshouted by the voices of so many warmongers, profiteers, and patriarchs, particularly given how teachers’ voices are so utterly absent in today’s national debate on how we should educate and for what we should educate? Woolf (1938) recounts for her reader the fight for the franchise—women’s suffrage—detailing just how much was accomplished with so pitifully little financial capital in order to remind her readers what is possible if women unite forces, use their peculiar, liminal position to refuse and resist the status quo. But in schools and schooling, the organizational, administrative, and architectural structures conspire to isolate and fragment teachers’ potential solidarity, subjecting them instead to suspicion, blame, accountability, and surveillance, withering resolve and stalling momentum. There is, however, a point of possibility within U.S. schools, for surely the overwhelmingly female and educated U.S. teaching force has potential similar to that of Woolf’s contemporaries to put before one another and one’s students consideration of the very danger of unreal loyalties and those loyalties’ contribution to the erosion of humanity and the rise of war.

Woolf insists:

If you refuse to be separated from the four great teachers of the daughters of educated men—poverty, chastity, derision, and freedom from unreal loyalties—but combine them with some wealth, some knowledge, and some service to real loyalties then you can enter the professions and escape the risks that make them undesirable. (pp. 79–80)

But how are we to escape these risks? As with the fight for the franchise, women across social classes must join together and call upon their educations, economic resources, and intellectual freedoms for the good of humanity. We need not look far, for powerful examples dot the historical horizon: for instance, middle-class, White women who defied the law and their

husband's edicts to secretly organize and drive carpools ferrying Black women to work during Civil Rights-era bus boycotts challenging the South's Jim Crow laws. Three activist women of color (two African women and one Arab woman) shared the honor of being awarded the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize—the first women to be awarded the prize since 2004. One African woman, Leymah Gbowee, called upon women's true loyalties as mothers, allying women across highly contentious ethnic and religious divides (in this context, Christian and Muslim) to bring about an end to Liberia's long-lived war and secure women's right to vote, considered crucial for maintaining peace (BBC, 2011; Cowell, Kasinof, & Nossiter, 2011). In an era of broad access to information technology, communication, and mobility, connectivity makes possible and draws nigh the seeds of revolution, making ripe the potential construction of a "Society of Outsiders" (p. 109) wholeheartedly pledging to act in word and deed as sisters, wives, and mothers of the world who abhor and reject the horrors of ruined houses and dead bodies.

What might an education to reveal unreal loyalties entail? Centering peace in schools at this historical moment as a true loyalty, a worthy loyalty, might indeed provide a constant touchstone within an education that raises critical consciousness, that is drawn from a humane, empathetic curriculum. I posit Woolf guides her readers to become educators who create and enact curricula designed to reveal and analyze overarching social systems (cultural metanarratives) used by the few to dominate the many—such as capitalism, racism, patriarchy, sexism, and heteronormativity—in order to avoid simply instructing in exchanging one loyalty for another. The importance of such educational revelations lies in such systems' taken-for-grantedness, which oftentimes function beneath a conscious level to the point that they are assumed simply to be part of the world's natural order. Once taught critical-awareness skills designed to make invisible social systems visible, students can identify and learn to decode political origins and messages of propaganda, sloganeering and, ultimately, warmongering. Educating for critical awareness can challenge the black-and-white, bipolar thinking that separates the world into Disney-esque good and bad, call into question social constructions such as considering war an outlet for qualities

deemed "manly," and instruct on examining the underpinnings of using force to impose one's will, bringing into sharp focus the "insupportability of war" (p. 8).

Regardless of the chosen action, in order that educational institutions' windows are made to blaze, alit by virtue of the fiery curiosity inside, undampened by the cold wind of patriotic suspicion, unprostituted by the act of "sell[ing] the mind for money" (p. 82), and freed from the "tyrannies and servilities" (p. 142) of nations and states, home and hearth, we might "dream the dream" (p. 143), spreading the understanding that "a common interest unites us; it is one world, one life" (p. 142). Only then can we reimagine an education unindebted to the unreal and truly educate to prevent war by "finding new words and creating new methods" (p. 143), just as Virginia Woolf dreamed from inside the chaos and terror of a world war.

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