



Photo taken at Museo Nazionale Villa Pisani, Stra (Italy)

About staying faithful to yourself and loyalty

*An inspiring meeting over a cup of coffee.*

My conversation ensued about a precarious dilemma of faith and loyalty. A business friend told me a personal story about himself. For years he had a successful business but, awhile ago, he decided to stop. While he was in the process of selling his business he also took an important personal step to “come out.” He told me his story about a reality, carefully hidden in silence for many years, and the grief of his loved ones. It was a story about loyalty. It was about loyalty to his family. It was about loyalty to the business he had built- Who else should and could run his business? It concerned loyalty to his customers - What would be their thoughts and reactions? It also focused on loyalty to his parents and their expectations, the partner with whom he had been married for many years, his already grown up children, his clients, and loyalty to his staff

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It seems so strong and brave: a man with so much loyalty to those for whom he cares. But what about him? Was he faithful to himself? How could he be honest to others while he was not being faithful to himself? It was only after he had the courage to speak out, and no longer deny his feelings and needs, that he created space for himself. While not being honest to himself, it was so difficult to be there for his partner, his family and his relatives. He had been keeping such a large part of himself secret. He did not speak about it so just by denying it, he didn't allow it to exist. “Coming out,” no matter how painful for those in his life and in his environment, felt like liberation to him.

This man's story impressed me. It appeared to me as an excellent example of how we all can get caught up in our own dynamics between being true to ourselves and being loyal to others, to our convictions, ideas about what is good and bad, etcetera.

The story of my friend reminded me of a personal experience in my own working environment.

Recently I worked with a colleague on an assignment for a large financial company. Together with this colleague, we were delivering a learning activity for 12 senior managers. For these managers the day was about learning elementary leadership skills with quite a diverse program containing a lot of varied activities. In the afternoon a training module with professional actors was included. Actually, it was a very relaxed assignment, considering that it had come to me by chance. My colleague had invited me to collaborate with her on this assignment. The company had to change its supplier for this training program and they were looking for a replacement quite urgently. It just dropped into my lap! Quite seductive... It fit so well with my experience, skills and background ... and it was very well paid too. And yet, something didn't quite feel right to me! I got involved in something where everything was "tied down." It was like being part of a play where the script was created by another, the roles were already defined and, in a certain sense, the only thing that was left was the text that had to be pronounced correctly. The train was already running with an indisputable destination.... but of course I felt flattered that I was asked by my colleague for my contribution. Of course, I wanted to and could help her out. Of course I did not want to betray the confidence she had in me. But did I actually want to do this job in this form? I felt that there was something more fundamental needed for the managers involved in this training than what was included in the program. I was convinced that the work should be done in quite a different way than it was proposed and designed in the assignment.

So, I faced the dilemma. What would be the consequences if I would stay loyal to myself? And also, how would it be if I would withdraw myself from this assignment? My colleague would probably not be very pleased by this message. She would most likely ask "How should we proceed since we have already committed ourselves to this assignment?"

Nevertheless, I called her and told her that I would withdraw from the assignment. What followed was a short moment of silence. She was definitely overwhelmed by my message. And then anger followed and she blamed me. "How on earth could you do such a thing! There is no way to it explain to the client!" She suggested that my action was quite unprofessional. I explained to her that I had decided to join her in this assignment out of the loyalty I felt for her but that it also felt like being disloyal to myself. I also confided that it was not easy for me to make the decision between choosing for myself which included having to leave her alone or continuing to cooperate with her on this assignment.

A few days later we contacted each other again. The anger seemed to be gone but she still felt quite disappointed. My withdrawal from the assignment and the explanation I had given seemed to have raised her own questions about how she related to the dilemma of loyalty while still remaining faithful to herself.

I continued to feel relieved and it made me realise again how difficult it can be to stay true to myself while still doing my job well. In situations like this, where I have collaborated with a colleague, this balance can suddenly disappear. I was flattered for being requested and it also generated income. How nice it feels being significant to another ... and in a flash, I'm off to do the work out of loyalty but to whom?

What makes me stay true to myself? Yes, I definitely like to do meaningful work! Yes, I need enough income for my own continuity and well being! Yes, being free to make my own choices makes me feel great. When I stay true to myself, I am less concerned with pleasing others, being liked, fitting in and being loyal to everything and everyone. It gives me confidence. I believe that staying true to myself is a prerequisite for being faithful to the another. Staying true to myself makes my position clear to others and it also provides me and the other person with accurate boundaries for our collaboration. Only from this perspective can I best serve my business partners, my clients and my colleagues in providing them with what they need from me. Otherwise, do I still remain here in a loyalty dilemma? Loyal? But to whom?

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