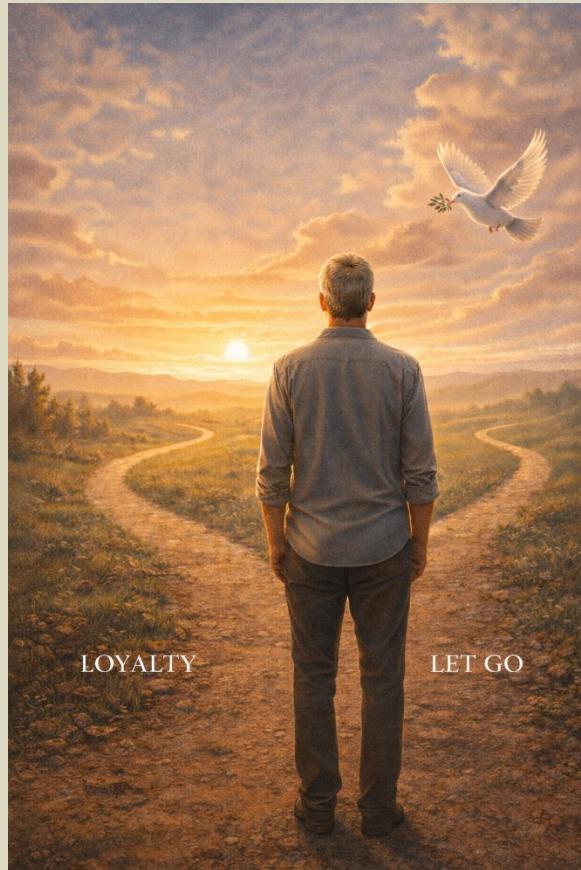


Loyalty: Virtue, Vice, or Something in Between?



Dr. Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

I've been thinking about that word loyalty. It is one of those words that sounds immediately virtuous, almost beyond question. We praise it. We expect it. We want it from others and quietly hope we possess it ourselves. Loyalty feels like moral glue, the thing that holds relationships, families, institutions, and even identities together.

But the longer I sit with it, the more complicated it becomes.

What Loyalty Actually Means

The word loyalty comes from the Latin *legalis*, meaning of the law, faithful to obligation, bound by allegiance. At its root, loyalty is not primarily about emotion. It is about binding. About choosing to remain attached to a person, a cause, a role, or a covenant even when circumstances change.

Loyalty: Virtue, Vice, or Something in Between?

- Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

That is why loyalty has always been counted among the virtues. It signals reliability, constancy, and faithfulness over time. In a world addicted to novelty and disposability, loyalty feels like moral resistance.

And yet, virtues when left unexamined have a way of turning against us.

Aristotle and the Problem of Too Much Virtue

This is where Aristotle keeps intruding on my thoughts. He insisted that every virtue exists as a mean, a balance point between two extremes. Courage sits between cowardice and recklessness. Honesty sits between deceit and cruelty.

Virtue is never simply about having more of something. It is about having it rightly ordered.

So where does loyalty sit? Too little loyalty and we become fickle, transactional, untrustworthy. But too much loyalty is where things quietly become dangerous. Loyalty without discernment turns into self-erasure. Loyalty without reciprocity becomes bondage. Loyalty without truth becomes complicity.

At some point, loyalty stops being a virtue and starts becoming a liability.

When Loyalty Turns Against the Self

Here is the hard question I have had to face. When does loyalty become the thing that keeps you going back for crumbs, even when there are no crumbs left to receive?

I see this clearly now in my recent experience in my previous position. I loved my boss. I still do. I considered him a spiritual brother. He recruited me out of Madigan. He gave me space to create, to develop the NeuroFaith® model, to think deeply, to write, and to teach. Those gifts were real. I do not deny them.

But over time something shifted. Responsibility without authority. Requests without response. Letters unanswered. Phone calls ignored. Writings and books sent into silence. Again and again.

And still, I stayed loyal.

Why? Because some part of me kept hoping. Hoping for recognition, appreciation, attunement. I wanted him to speak my language. He could not. Or would not. He comes from a corporate world where relationships are often instrumental. I come from a world where relationships are moral and formative.

We were not speaking the same relational dialect.

Kinds of Relationships

Aristotle names three kinds of relationships. Relationships of utility, based on what each person gets. Relationships of pleasure, based on enjoyment or affinity. And relationships of virtue, based on mutual recognition of the good in one another.

Loyalty: Virtue, Vice, or Something in Between?

- Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

I wanted to believe ours was virtuous. I believe I was showing up that way. But increasingly it became clear that the relationship functioned primarily as utility. My wisdom, my labor, and my model had value. I did not feel valued in return.

A virtuous relationship cannot exist when only one person believes it is virtuous.

Hope Deferred

Scripture names this ache with painful clarity.

“Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life.” Proverbs 13:12.

That verse does not accuse anyone. It simply tells the truth. Hope that goes unanswered does not ennoble us. It exhausts us.

I see now how my loyalty intersected with my own need to be seen. That is not shameful. But it is instructive.

Business or Brotherhood

People will say it was not personal, that it was just business. But that phrase reveals a worldview. It assumes that business exists outside moral relationship, that people are interchangeable, and that outcomes matter more than people.

I do not see the world that way. I never have.

Perhaps the deepest grief here is not just the loss of a role or a relationship, but the collision of two moral frameworks that could no longer coexist.

The Proper Ordering of Loyalty

Loyalty is a virtue until it asks you to betray yourself.

True loyalty is faithfulness to what is good and true, including the good and truth of one's own dignity. When loyalty requires you to silence yourself, abandon your boundaries, or accept disregard, it has ceased to be virtue.

Sometimes the most faithful act is not staying but leaving with integrity intact.

That too is loyalty, properly ordered.