

Only One Ethical Course of Action

Imagine you land a job with the world's most respected and beloved baby food producer. You sign an oath of confidentiality—promising to never disclose their recipes or other business secrets.

Before long, however, you discover the CEO is having glass shards placed in jars the company delivers to a few families he has a grudge against. Maybe his grudge is perfectly legitimate, even if a few of the contaminated jars get lost; mixed in with shipments delivered elsewhere.

The other employees who know what is going on cover for the CEO, and keep their oath, saying loyalty is what matters. Maybe they even take pride in what they are doing to those people—after all, “they deserve it”.

You have a choice. It would be easy to go along to get along. The pay is good, and you don't want to be blacklisted with future employers. You know how popular the company is. You know how people feel about snitches. You took an oath! Still, there is only one ethical course of action.

It doesn't mean you love those targeted by the CEO. It doesn't make you a bad person. Standing up for what's right, in spite of personal costs— knowing you will be fired and hated— makes you a hero.

What if a friend asks you to keep all his secrets, and you agree, never suspecting you'll find out he's a serial rapist? Are you wrong to report him when you discover this particular secret? Should you be punished for breaking your promise? Should his crimes be excused because you broke a promise you made? Only in a world where justice is meaningless.

As soon as you discover wrongdoing, any oath of secrecy becomes ethically and morally null and void. Keeping such a secret would be wrong.

To punish the person who reports any real crime is never the right thing to do. Not ever. Circumstances can't change that.

This is why Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning are heroes. This is why those who want to see them punished are choosing to side with the bad guy, against justice. Against what is right. To allow Manning to be punished is to discourage others from doing the right thing. To call for Snowden to be handed over to the organization whose crimes he exposed is to take a stand against anyone brave enough to do the right thing in the face of enormous personal risk. There is only one ethical course of action.