



The Things We Don't Say: The Ethics of Surviving a Childhood in Silence

Miriam Lovejoy
Graduate
First Place
Area of Study: Accounting

Silence shaped the earliest chapters of my life long before I understood the concept of ethics. Before I ever learned words like “compassion,” “complicity,” or “moral responsibility,” I was already living out those dilemmas in real time. In my world, silence wasn’t the absence of sound; it was a survival strategy, a shield, and sometimes a cage. It protected the people I loved while erasing pieces of me.

My ethical life didn’t begin in a classroom or through philosophy; it began in a childhood where staying quiet felt safer than being heard. This essay examines the moral complexity of silence, from its role in childhood survival to its evolution into an ethical responsibility to speak the truth for the sake of personal and generational healing. I now understand that my childhood silence operated within what ethicists call the “ethics of care,” where loyalty and protection are prioritized over truth. Gilligan’s ethics of care argues that caring for others without caring for oneself leads to moral imbalance and emotional harm. (Gilligan) A dynamic that echoed throughout my own childhood.

I was six years old when my parents disappeared for three days. Three long days of chasing whatever high pulled them away from our apartment and away from us. Even when they were physically present, they were often emotionally absent. So, the role of caregiver shifted onto me naturally, quietly, without anyone acknowledging the exchange.

In their absence, I stepped into the silence and did what I could to make the apartment feel less scary.

My siblings kept staring at the front door for footsteps that never came. I was six, trying to steady my seven-year-old sister who froze with fear and my four-year-old brother who copied everything I did. So, I sat them on the carpet and dug through the cabinets, praying there was something to make for dinner. I found two packs of beef ramen noodles and decided right then to

turn the kitchen into our own Martha Stewart Show anything to keep them from noticing the emptiness on the other side of the door.

I slipped into a fake fancy voice and exaggerated every step like I was filming a cooking segment. Then I dragged a chair to the stove, climbed up, and cooked the noodles while heating hot dogs in a pot of water. I mixed it all together and made those soupy noodles kids swear taste like a five-star meal. And honestly? They forgot about our parents for a minute. They laughed, they ate, and the house didn't feel so heavy.

After dinner, I put them to bed and got everything ready for school the next morning. No one told me to. I already understood that if I didn't do it, no one would.

Children raised in substance-abusing or chaotic households often assume adult roles far too early, a dynamic known as parentification (Hooper 2007; Harden & Whittaker 2011). When I finally learned that word, it felt like naming a ghost that had been living inside me all along.

Then came the knock.

Two CPS workers stood at our door, clipboards in hand, scanning the apartment as concern darkened their expressions.

"Where are your parents?" They asked.

The truth rose in my throat like a burning warning, but fear swallowed it before it could escape.

"They just went to the store," I said steadily, practiced, unblinking despite the fact that they had been gone seventy-two hours.

Children often lie during CPS investigations because they fear family separation more than remaining in unsafe environments (Dunn et al. 2015).

At six, I didn't understand addiction, neglect, or state intervention, but I understood enough to know that telling the truth might break my family apart.

This was the first time I ever confronted an ethical dilemma: Was my silence an act of compassion or complicity? Was I protecting my siblings, or helping to maintain a dangerous lie? At six years old, how was I supposed to know the difference?

Minutes later, my parents rushed home, tipped off by neighbors who saw CPS outside. They walked inside smiling, as though nothing had happened. I smiled too, sealing their story with my silence.

Children in homes like mine often develop "protective loyalty," hiding dysfunction to keep the household intact (Hooper 2007). I had already become that child.

Silence, at six, felt like love even as it carved away pieces of who I was becoming.

But silence didn't stay innocent for long. The quiet I learned at six followed me everywhere, even into places no child should ever have to go. By age eight, right around Christmas, while other kids were opening gifts, I was stepping into a much darker kind of holiday, one my mind wasn't old enough to understand.

My parents dropped my sister and me off at the house of people they used to do drugs with. My sister wanted to stay; our parents wanted freedom. The moment we walked in, something inside me sank. My dad's friend looked at me with a hunger I couldn't even taste, but my body recognized it long before my mind did.

"I don't want to stay here. He's a bad man," I whispered to my mother.

She brushed me off and promised candy and soda if I just stayed with my sister. So, I did.

That night, once the adults were high and my parents were gone, he walked into the room where I pretended to sleep. His shadow reached me before he did, stretching across the wall like

a warning carved in darkness. He leaned down, breath thick with chemicals, and whispered that if I screamed or told anyone, he would kill me and do the same to my sister.

When it was over, the terror didn't leave my body. I curled in the corner of the mattress, sobbing and shaking so hard I could barely breathe. His wife woke to my crying and came to the doorway. She asked what happened, and he cut in before I could speak: "She had a nightmare." I remember locking eyes with her, hoping she would see the truth written all over my face, but fear held my tongue in place. I was too terrified to say anything.

That night, he didn't let me sleep. He kept me beside him until nearly six in the morning, making sure I stayed awake. And every time my body swayed with exhaustion, his threat replayed in my head: If you make a sound, I'll do it to your sister too.

The silence that followed wasn't just fear; it was a vow to protect her, even if I had to swallow my own screams. By the time dawn came, I knew I wasn't waiting to be saved. I was just trying to survive that night. What I didn't know then was that my reaction had a name. It was the freeze response, the way the body shuts down and goes silent when a child senses danger. Research shows that children who are sexually abused often stay quiet because of fear, threats, or the instinct to protect their siblings (McElvaney).

At eight years old, silence wasn't a choice.

Silence was captivity.

That night carved silence into me like a second spine. I carried it home with me, tucked into all the places where my voice should have lived.

I kept that silence for four years.

At twelve, the weight finally cracked.

The silence I'd been carrying for years started spilling into everything. I had anger issues, outbursts, and behavior no one could explain. My parents couldn't understand why I went from withdrawn to explosive without warning. They never connected it to the night I never spoke about; they only saw the anger, not the wound underneath. But trauma has a way of resurfacing in the body, especially in children. A nervous system trained to survive often reacts in ways adults mistake for misbehavior, aggression, outbursts, and defiance (Cook et al.).

One day, shaking and visibly upset, I told them what happened. I told them what he did. My mother didn't cry right away. She just went quiet, like she was trying to wrap her mind around what she had just heard. But my father didn't pause at all. He accused me of lying. He said I was making it up, that I wanted attention, that I was trying to start problems. His disbelief didn't erase what happened to me, but it erased the safe landing I hoped my truth would have.

Children who disclose sexual abuse in substance-affected or chaotic homes are often dismissed or ignored, not protected, a pattern widely documented in disclosure research (McElvaney).

After that moment, speaking up felt like setting myself on fire only to be told I wasn't burning. So, the silence I learned at six became the silence I lived by at twelve, not because it protected me, but because telling the truth hurt more than keeping it in.

That moment carved an ethical fault line inside me: When you speak truth, and it's dismissed, does silence become the safer moral choice? Or does silence become a betrayal of yourself?

By fifteen, silence had grown roots so deep they felt permanent.

I was pregnant with my first child when I first felt something dark and heavy inside me. I didn't have words like "bipolar disorder," "depression," or "mania" I just knew something was

wrong. Research shows that bipolar symptoms in adolescents often begin as vague, unnamed emotional instability long before they have the language to explain it (Lewinsohn et al., 2003). I recognized those signs in myself long before I understood what they meant.

So when I finally tried to speak tried to admit that something inside me was slipping into a darkness I couldn't name, my words were crushed the moment they left my mouth. Their responses came fast, sharp, and familiar, looping in my head the way Christmas carols haunt every store in December, except there was nothing joyful in the melody: "You're dramatic." "You're fine." "You just want attention."

Each line cut deeper than the last. Their voices didn't just dismiss me; they drowned me. It felt like they were rewriting my reality in real time, telling me that what I felt wasn't real, that my pain was imaginary, that the storm in my chest was nothing more than theatrics.

And the worst part? A piece of me believed them.

When your truth is treated like an inconvenience, you learn to swallow it whole and smile through the ache.

Their rejection didn't just quiet me; it rehearsed me for the years I would spend hiding from my own mind. The silence that followed was suffocating: Don't speak. Don't feel. Survive.

After that moment, I stuffed every fear, every sadness, every manic spike and crashing low into the same vault I had built as a child. Once again, silence became my punishment, my survival tactic, and my cage all at the same time.

Silence at fifteen wasn't protection.

It was resignation.

It was a surrender.

It was the belief that my suffering wasn't important enough to have a name.

That moment revealed a painful moral question I had never been allowed to ask: What responsibility does a child have toward her own suffering when no adult takes responsibility for it?

By nineteen, I was the mother of four.

Outside, I was functioning. I cooked, cleaned, worked, and parented. I kept the house running and paid the bills. I showed up to class and held a 4.0 GPA like it was a lifeline. But inside, my bipolar disorder was unraveling in waves I didn't understand. My highs would lift me for months at a time, ninety days of feeling unstoppable, brilliant, motivated, almost superhuman, until around day one hundred, when everything inside me would spiral downward. The crash always came without warning, like someone suddenly turning off the lights in a room I had just learned to navigate. One moment I was thriving, the next I was buried alive under a weight I couldn't name.

Everything I had worked so hard for, the stability, the independence, the life I tried to build to escape my childhood, felt like it was slipping through my fingers. I kept believing, or maybe hoping, that if I just worked hard enough and did everything "right," whatever was wrong with me would eventually disappear. But it didn't. It followed me into adulthood like a shadow I couldn't outrun.

Truthfully, facing it felt dangerous. In the back of my mind, I was terrified that admitting I needed help would lead to the one thing I'd spent my whole life trying to avoid: losing my children.

And instead of getting help, I kept performing stability even as my mind was unraveling, a high-functioning woman on the outside, a collapsing one on the inside, with nowhere to fall and no one I trusted enough to catch me.

There were nights I cried to my closest friend, begging for answers, hoping someone could fix what I didn't even have the language to describe. But every time, I ran into the truth I hated most: the solution wasn't outside me. The battle, the questions, the healing they had been inside me all along, waiting for me to speak. Here again at 19 I found myself standing at another ethical crossroads. When survival forces you to perform a strength you don't actually have, does that performance eventually become another form of silence? I told myself to fake it till I made it, but even then, I wondered: how much breaking can a person fake before the fracture becomes real?

For years, I believed that staying quiet meant staying in control. Silence required less energy than explaining what was happening inside me. Silence was less risky than being judged. Silence, to me, was less dangerous than losing custody; a fear conditioned in me since childhood. Fear and stigma delay bipolar treatment for years or decades (Vesga-López et al. 2008). For me, it delayed the diagnosis by exactly ten.

Eventually, the silence became too heavy to hold.

At twenty-five, everything finally broke open not at home or alone in a bathroom, but in the too-bright exam room of my OB-GYN. I had gone through my day as usual, even as I unraveled inside. When the doctor walked in and asked, "How are you feeling?" something in me gave way. I tried to answer casually, but the words tangled in my throat before everything spilled out at once: how I couldn't hold a stable emotion anymore, how one day I felt charged with energy and the next I sank into a darkness I couldn't explain. I told her how sad, angry, overwhelmed, and lost I felt, and how my moods were confusing my children and exhausting everyone around me including myself.

My whole body shook as if something catastrophic had happened, even though nothing had. Tears came so fast I could barely breathe; my chest felt like it was caving in. It wasn't sadness, it was years of swallowed emotion finally breaking through.

Every scream I buried at six, every ignored truth at eight, every rejection at twelve, every collapse at fifteen, everything surged through me in that moment.

I couldn't speak. I couldn't steady myself. I couldn't pretend anymore.

That's when my OB-GYN stepped in.

She didn't rush me or dismiss me. She didn't tell me I was dramatic or seeking attention. She handed me tissues, placed a steady hand on my shoulder, and said the first words in my life that ever felt like safety: "You're not crazy. Something is wrong, but it can be treated. With medication and therapy, you can get better. Everything you're describing sounds like Bipolar II disorder."

In the months that followed, as I finally sought help, I learned a truth I had spent years bleeding for. My father admitted he was bipolar too and had never sought treatment. The same man who silenced me, called me dramatic, and made me feel unwanted finally confessed that the darkness I carried was the same one he had been battling his whole life. He told me I wasn't crazy that what I felt was real, and that I got it from him.

I didn't know it then, but my struggles had roots I couldn't see. Children with a bipolar parent often feel the symptoms long before they understand their origins (Rende et al.). Hearing that after being blamed my entire childhood for symptoms I inherited felt like someone cracking open a door I'd been pounding on since birth. It wasn't an apology or repair. But it was the first time my suffering wasn't treated like fiction.

And in that rush of emotion came a realization I'd never allowed myself to see: None of this was weakness. It was an illness left unaddressed. It was trauma stored in my body. It was fear hardened into silence. When it finally broke apart in that exam room, frightening as it was, it marked the beginning of my healing.

For the first time, I began to understand myself. Therapy taught me that I was "high-functioning." I knew how to cope with silence. I knew how to perform normally. I knew how to carry chaos behind my ribs while keeping everyone else calm.

I knew how to be quiet.

I did not know how to be well.

Eventually, those silent battles became loud cries for help. As a mother of five with severe bipolar disorder, silence wasn't strength anymore; it was suffocation. Using the voice I'd been taught to bury is what saved me. In the end, silence felt complicit. And it forced me to ask: What happens when the silence that once protected you becomes the thing that's destroying you?

My answer was simple but terrifying:

To speak.

To name my truth.

To break the generational silence that trained me to disappear.

Therapists call this moment "the rupture," the point where the coping mechanism that once saved you becomes the thing that holds you hostage.

I learned that while I may not owe the world my voice, I owe it to myself and to the five children who depend on the woman I've become. I didn't just survive my childhood; I built something from it. Today, as an SMU graduate student, a working intern, a working mother of five, and someone pushing to create a nonprofit that helps children like me know there is a better

world for them out there and that someone cares, I'm giving kids the one thing I never had: proof that they matter.

There is an ethics lesson here. Once you know the right thing to do, how many of us actually do it? And is it easier to do the "right" thing once you finally exit survival mode?.

I started my nonprofit because the child I once was, deserved someone who would show up and now I choose to be that person for others.

My work isn't charity; it's an ethical response to a past where silence was my only protection. I want children like me to know a better world than the one we were handed, one with stability, warmth, dignity, and someone who chooses them on purpose. And once you know what the right thing looks like, the real ethical question becomes: Will you act on it? For me, doing this work isn't optional; it's the responsibility that grew out of the silence I survived.

Looking back from the scared six-year-old to the exhausted young mother to the woman who finally spoke I don't see silence as failure anymore. I see strength and fierce protection. I also see the moment when silence became too costly to carry.

My story is not defined by the quiet that raised me, but by the voice I built from its rubble, a voice that refuses to pass down generational silence and insists on dignity, truth, and healing.

If I have learned anything, it is this: Silence is neither inherently virtuous nor inherently harmful. It becomes ethical or unethical depending on whom it protects, whom it harms, and whether it prevents truth, safety, or healing.

Silence may have been your shelter once, but it cannot be your home forever. Finding your voice isn't about being loud; it's about choosing yourself. It's the quiet shift where healing begins. Because eventually, silence stops feeling safe and starts feeling heavy. It stops protecting

you and starts limiting you. And even though speaking up feels unfamiliar, even though it asks more of you than you're used to giving, it is also the first step toward something better. Finding your voice is how you rise from the places that once held you down. It's how you say, I'm here. It matters. Sometimes that single act of speaking is enough to change your entire life.

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