



The Weight of Silence: On Action, Refrain, and Moral Clarity

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“Not everything is philosophy, Mom!” My daughter’s frustration reached a boiling point as she struggled to close the leg rest of our broken couch. She pushed against it with increasing force while I stood nearby, offering what I believed were helpful observations about how the mechanism worked. I suggested she take a pause, feel the resistance, pay attention to where it caught, work with the couch, and learn the logic behind the mechanism’s movement before forcing the leg rest down. Unfortunately, she was not in a state of mind to receive that information—or to work with the couch in that moment. She was frustrated and she just wanted to yell and do something. She wanted to force a quick solution and move on. My attempts to coach her into patience and understanding only pushed her further into exasperation—and eventually, she snapped. Her frustration was understandable. I recognized the pattern. I’ve seen it before in myself and in the world. In my daughter’s frustration, I heard the echo of our broader cultural impulse to push, fix, and move forward before taking the time to attune—to stand in silence long enough to truly grasp what we are facing before reacting.

When uncertainty arises, we rush for control. Action becomes a way to escape or outrun the discomfort of not knowing. We reach for action when what we need most is understanding. This instinct is deeply human, but depending on the context, it can carry ethical consequences. It’s difficult to know when to respond and when to refrain. The question then becomes, when is direct action an ethical imperative, and when is silence the more responsible choice? This question has followed me into my professional life, my relationships, and my inner work. The tension between urgency and understanding is not abstract—it shapes how we lead, how we care, and how power is exercised. Silence, far from being a passive absence, can become a morally consequential space—one in which ethical clarity emerges, but only when governed by

discernment, not fear or frustration. What, then, do we risk when we respond before clarity has had time to form?

The risk is clear—when we act or speak too quickly, we may feel the satisfaction of decisive engagement and the virtuous alignment of response over complicity, yet we risk missing what the moment asks of us. Taking fast and deliberate action may feel like moral responsibility but may lack moral clarity, in effect causing more harm than good. I've learned that when we leave space for contemplation—for silence, we invite discernment to provide clarity before we commit to action. Opening this space to listen deeply before reacting creates time and depth, allowing understanding to take shape.

The inverse can also be true and leads us to consider the ethical danger when silence protects systems at the expense of people. When restraint is used to avoid accountability rather than to cultivate clarity, it becomes complicit. In those moments, moral responsibility shifts and remaining silent is no longer care—it becomes consent. It's nuanced work to understand when action is an ethical imperative, and when it's a substitute for clarity.

Silence is not inherently noble or inherently wrong—it carries consequences that depend on context, intent, and outcome. In many organizations, silence doesn't only emerge from reflection; it's purposefully engineered. For example, legal departments advise against disclosure, public relations strategies encourage containment, and leaders across organizations are commonly told to manage risks. In education, healthcare, and tech industries, people frequently remain silent not because they lack courage, but because the structures around them have made silence the most rational option. This isn't a result of personal cowardice—it's the ethical distortion of systems built for data driven business preservation. Conversely, many businesses have created better synergy and found financial success by building systems that

value openness, trust, and coherence over silence—proving that context matters. The weight of silence isn't merely individual, it's structural.

In an organizational communications course I took last spring, we engaged in a case study comparing the business practices of Sam's Club and Costco—an exercise that revealed how silence operates not only at the individual level, but systemically within industry. Drawing on Edgar Schein's definition of organizational culture as accumulated shared learning, it became clear that culture is shaped as much by what is left unspoken as by what is explicitly stated.

Culture lives in behaviors, norms, rituals, and assumptions—many of which are never formally named, yet still govern how people relate, contribute, and take responsibility. When silence becomes embedded in these structures and employees learn that questioning is risky, that misalignment should be endured, or that power determines whose voice matters—it ceases to be neutral and becomes instructional. The contrast between Costco and Sam's Club underscored how leadership choices either reinforce or disrupt these patterns. Costco's more human-centered approach, as discussed in class, aligns leadership behavior with espoused values, fostering psychological safety, engagement, and trust—conditions in which silence is less likely to serve concealment and more likely to support discernment. By contrast, cultures shaped by misalignment, performative values, or power consolidation commonly rely on silence to preserve stability, even when that stability is ethically compromised. Schein's Iceberg Model makes this dynamic visible—while formal policies may suggest openness, it's the deeper, unspoken assumptions that determine whether truth can surface. In this light, the ethics of silence becomes inseparable from responsibility—not only in speech, but in the environments leaders create where silence either protects dignity and learning or compounds harm over time.

The weight of silence doesn't only manifest structurally within industry; it also confronts individuals at moments of critical moral choice. President Theodore Roosevelt argued that the worst choice a person can make is to do nothing. I've long admired his widely shared quote, "The best thing you can do is the right thing; the next best thing is the wrong thing; the worst thing you can do is nothing." His philosophy has always made sense to me, because I believe that justice must have legs—that we need to act swiftly and righteously to keep moral action present in the world. In the past, I've used his quote as a motivational reminder to act decisively.

In fact, it came to mind after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 took place in New York City. Living in New Hampshire at the time, just a five-hour drive from New York City, the events of 9/11 felt terrifyingly close. My instinct to do something as a moral reaction led me to the local recruiter's office to join the US Navy the following day. My reaction was not only to feel the pain of those around me suffering, and to witness the destruction unfold, but to take decisive action. I wanted to respond in a way that mattered. I'll never know whether joining the military helped to achieve that—but I knew I had to try.

The gut-level instinct behind this view to do something, anything—is understandable. In some situations, delay can result in additional damage. And certainly, there are times when people defer responsibility indefinitely and call it contemplation. However, the opposite can also be true. With time and thoughtful consideration of these implications, I now believe that Roosevelt's framing—though bold—does not account for the moral clarity that silence can offer. It treats stillness as weakness; a view that leaves out an essential dimension of ethical maturity. Sometimes the most responsible action is to refrain from immediate action. Sometimes silence holds the weight of possibility that immediate action denies. Perhaps we could reimagine

Roosevelt's quote to include a non-complicit form of engaged leadership that includes silence—what we might call active silence as a form of “doing the right thing.”

History offers many examples of both failure and success in the ethical distinction between action and inaction. Though, waiting must never become an excuse to defer responsibility. Ethical restraint is not withdrawal—it's the courage to remain present with complexity long enough to respond with care. That complexity holds multiple truths that resist immediate resolution. To hold space for them without collapsing one into the other is not indecision—it's strong ethical leadership.

This kind of leadership, and the courage to wait with presence rather than retreating, is central to Brené Brown's recent work on stillness, discernment, and ethical strength. In Brown's book, *Strong Ground*, she describes how courage requires stillness. She explains that restraint is not absence—it's intention. Leaders must pause, not because they're afraid, but because they understand the weight of acting before understanding. She links this idea to poet John Keats' concept of Negative Capability and shows how discernment is not a delay in leadership. It's its foundation. Though Keats was writing about the creative process, his insight applies directly to ethics and leadership. Leaders are often trained to manage outcomes, but not to metabolize ambiguity. The ability to remain with discomfort and to let a situation unfold without interpreting too soon, is essential. As Brown discusses in *Strong Ground*, Negative Capability may be a form of disciplined focus that takes more time to unfold but ultimately, it allows for greater attention to real problems.

In September of 2025, I attended student-focused Q&A with Brené Brown, followed by her formal lecture at McFarlin Auditorium as part of the Tate Lecture Series. She spoke to a packed hall about vulnerability, courage, and ethical leadership. What struck me most was not

the grandeur of the talk, but the clarity of the smaller Q&A. She said the most grounded leaders are the ones who can say, “We need to slow down. We are not ready to decide.” Her point was not that decisions should be avoided—it was that clarity should precede them.

The public sometimes imagines that ethical leadership should always be highly visible—fast, bold, and decisive. The deeper work, though, happens elsewhere. Ethical problems are rarely technical, they are adaptive. They demand different ways of seeing, not just different ways of acting. Many leaders don’t succeed in these moments. They react before understanding what is being asked of them. They address surface-level symptoms without tracing the deeper causes and mistake urgency for clarity. That response protects them from integration and transformation.

Effective leadership doesn’t hide. It attends and listens for structures and dynamics that don’t always announce themselves. That kind of perception cannot be summoned quickly—rather, it grows slowly over time through attention and reflection. Without it, action becomes premature and virtue becomes performance. The result may look like strength, but it lacks coherence. Understanding the difference between moral responsibility and moral clarity is essential. Moral responsibility can appear suddenly—it’s our inner signal that something is wrong. Moral clarity, however, moves more slowly and asks for interpretation. It calls for understanding not only that harm exists, but how to engage without reinforcing the problem. The space between responsibility and clarity is difficult to navigate. That space, though, holds the conditions for discernment.

In his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*, Stephen Covey’s Habit 5 encourages us to, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” This concept offers one way to inhabit that space. Empathic listening, he explains,

is not merely a communication skill but an ethical stance. It involves giving full attention, suspending judgment, and listening to understand rather than to reply or fix. Covey's model slows the impulse to act and opens space for insight, connection, and trust, aligning with the idea of discernment before action.

While Covey offers a behavioral pathway into this space, Frankl discusses its existential power. Viktor Frankl, Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, Holocaust survivor, and author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, frames the space between moral responsibility and moral clarity as the space between stimulus and response. In that space, he says, lies our power to choose. It's not passive—it's where ethics begins. However, many systems don't support that space and instead reward performance optics, efficiency metrics, and deadlines which act to undermine this reflective space. Structures that prioritize speed, efficiency, and measurable outputs do so at the expense of reflection, relational coherence, and ethical attunement. In such environments, where silence is not cultivated as discernment, it becomes strategic self-preservation.

Google's Project Aristotle offers a striking counter-narrative to this efficiency model. Through data-driven analysis of over 180 active teams, the study concluded that the most critical component of high-performing teams was not raw output, but psychological safety. When team members felt safe enough to take risks, admit uncertainty, and express dissent without fear of embarrassment or retribution, collaboration deepens and productivity rises. Trust, cohesion, and shared purpose become the foundation for effectiveness—not mere compliance or speed (Aristotle Performance). Rather than undermining outcomes, environments that support deliberation and care ultimately perform better. In this light, honoring the space between stimulus and response is not only an ethical act, it's a strategic one. Those who hesitate, who

pause to consider or question, may be perceived as inefficient or even insubordinate. Frequently, they are the ones most attuned to what is truly at stake.

Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen's concept of the "Gap Map" in *Thanks for the Feedback*, outlines how people miscommunicate because they're responding to different kinds of gaps. One person may believe the conflict is about skill. The other is responding to a gap in values or identity. Because each side assumes a different meaning, the conversation stalls and feedback fails. Silence follows—not out of avoidance, but because the exchange never touched the root of the disconnect (Stone and Heen). That is not a failure of courage, it's a failure of alignment.

We see this disconnection everywhere. In politics, people scream about policy while truly, they are reacting to values. In education, teachers are evaluated on skill when the real issue may be misalignment in mission. These are Gap Map failures. Each side believes the conversation is about one thing, but the subtext is entirely different. Without shared understanding of what is really being negotiated, silence becomes the only option—this isn't because people don't care, but because their words cannot find traction in a conversation built on incompatible foundations.

These gaps create confusion, but they also create pressure. Leaders feel compelled to speak and followers feel pressured to comply—but no one feels fully seen. As a result, the ethical terrain becomes fragmented. In that space, silence may be necessary—but it also becomes dangerous when left uninterpreted. The paradox is that silence may be doing the most communicative work in the room. Yet, without a shared map for what it means, it gets misread. The courage to name misalignment without rushing to fix it is a form of ethical leadership.

Manali Kumar's work on prudent judgment offers a way to navigate these tensions. She argues that leaders must develop the ability to make decisions under uncertainty while holding

complexity rather than eliminating it. Prudence, in her framing, is not caution, it's coherence. It draws from lived experience, long-range thinking, and an awareness of systemic impact. This is not a personal trait; it's a political ethic. It resists polarization and honors ambiguity (Kumar). That capacity to hold paradox—to understand that action and inaction each have a place—requires a maturity most systems do not cultivate. Those who pause are seen as weak when immediacy is expected, though clearly discernment is not about doing nothing. It's about ensuring that what is done serves rather than obscures. That line is subtle, but without it, ethics dissolves into performance.

This isn't an argument for doing nothing—it's a call to realign action with insight. There are moments when breaking silence is the most ethical choice, and others when waiting is what keeps harm from compounding. The risk is not in one or the other, but in mistaking speed for strength and noise for leadership. Action without discernment may create the illusion of momentum while dragging a system in the wrong direction. The work is to know the difference, and to act only when the foundation can hold the weight.

Ethical leadership is not about doing more, not necessarily. It's about choosing carefully and acting at the right time—for the right reasons, with the right understanding. Discernment cannot be rushed; it must be practiced. Discernment prepares the ground so action can be aligned with reason. Without that preparation, we confuse urgency for purpose. When we embrace silence with intention—we calm our inner dialog and wait purposefully to gain attunement. We wait to listen deeply so we can broaden our understanding. When silence becomes a contemplative space in service of humanity—an expression of conscience and moral responsibility—it allows a more coherent form of care to emerge.

Systems shaped by discernment are more likely to endure than those driven by reaction. Human-centered systems have demonstrated this repeatedly, just as individuals have. Reflexive care exhausts, while care grounded in clarity sustains. There are moments when breaking silence is the most ethical choice. There are others when waiting is what prevents harm from compounding. The work is learning to tell the difference, and that work cannot be rushed. It requires presence, humility, and the courage to trust that clarity will arrive without being forced. Silence isn't the absence of ethics. It's one of its most demanding forms. It asks us to consider not only what we say, but what we withhold—and why. Within that consideration, conscience takes shape and responsibility deepens. And care, no longer driven by performance or fear, begins to emerge with steadiness.

What emerges across these examples—from the story of my frustrated daughter to organizational culture, from historical crisis to contemporary leadership—is not a rejection of action, but a demand for discernment. Ethics doesn't ask us to move faster; it asks us to see more clearly. When silence is used to avoid responsibility, it becomes complicit. When action is taken without understanding, it becomes destructive. The ethical task is not to choose between silence and action, but to work slowly and deliberately to cultivate the capacity to know when each is required. That capacity is not passive or abstract, it's built through attention, humility, and collective trust. These systems allow people to pause, listen, and think together rather than react alone. When urgency, outrage, and visible performance become the expectation within organizations, the most responsible response is the one that resists immediacy long enough to align action with reality. This is how care becomes coherent preparation, leadership gains accountability, and communities move forward together.

Whether personal or organizational, silence is never neutral. It shapes what lives and what collapses. It determines who carries the burden, who is protected, and what is allowed to surface. When silence comes from fear, it becomes a shelter for harm. When it comes from discipline, it becomes a ground for moral clarity.

When we sit in silence with the weight of moral responsibility upon us—allowing conscience to speak in its fullness—we may find that our eagerness to act does not always come from clarity, but from urgency shaped by ego or distortion of another kind. To act swiftly and boldly is not without merit; it can be a deeply courageous choice. Yet yielding to discernment and strategy requires greater restraint and maturity and carries the most lasting ethical impact. Decisive action is commonly viewed as the preferred ethical option, the place where integrity becomes visible, however silence can powerfully define what a person truly stands for. This is where ethics either dissolves or takes form—not in what is said, but in what is discerned, and why. The weight of silence is not its absence; the weight of silence is its consequence.

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