

Wisdom Is (Mostly) Invisible

We have a lot of preconceptions about what wisdom looks like.

To most of us, a “wise” person looks old, appears serious and/or serene, and says weighty things from time to time. They deliberate over decisions. We have many stories of wise judgment from the past, so it’s easy to look back and point out these traits in our wise heroes.

Of course, hindsight is 20/20, and nothing is clear in the present. In the moment, you will probably not notice wisdom even when it’s right in front of you. The same is true if you decide to act with wisdom. Don’t expect people to notice.

Wisdom often happens in the words you don’t speak. It happens in the opinions you keep to yourself, the defensiveness you suppress, the ego you choose not to flaunt. You will face many decisions every day about whether or not to speak, and no one will know if you choose wisely. They will know if you choose foolishly.

Wisdom often happens in the actions you don’t take. It happens in the anger you allow to pass, the emails you don’t send, the hidden inner fears you don’t listen to. You will face decisions constantly about whether and how to act. No one will know all of the options you could take, or how difficult it can be for you to choose. They won’t know if you act wisely, but they will know if you act foolishly.

Foolishness is much more noticeable than wisdom for this reason. And because of real wisdom’s natural camouflage, it comes with very little credit. If you expect or demand people to notice wisdom, you immediately become a fool. Wisdom hates to be seen and is truly camera-shy.

The life of wisdom must be its own reward. But maybe by understanding just how deeply inaction and wisdom are linked, we can give a little more appreciation to the people who hold their tongues or stay their hands even when it’s difficult, humiliating, unpopular, or frustrating.

Frederic Bastiat once proposed the same for evaluating economists and economic action in *What Is Seen and What Is Not Seen*:

“There is only one difference between a bad economist and a good one: the bad economist confines himself to the visible effect; the good economist takes into account both the effect that can be seen and those effects that must be foreseen.”

If we are going to acknowledge wisdom in others and embody wisdom ourselves, we must not confine ourselves to visible wisdom – the wisdom of all our preconceptions. This wisdom is just the tip of the iceberg. We have to see further and deeper to see the wisdom of inaction and restraint.