

How to Stay Human: Cruelty, Beauty, and Moral Leadership Today

Epigraphs

“The greatest evil is not radical; it has no roots, and because it has no roots it has no limitations.”
— **Hannah Arendt**¹

“Beauty is that in the presence of which we feel more alive.”
— **John O’Donohue**²

Introduction:

As leaders across plural, religious, civic, and private sectors, we aim to see the world truly. Today we are presented with patterns of cruelty now become ordinary in daily life. Cruelty as a character flaw, or as an overt act is not first what I have in mind. Rather, cruelty is evident often in the *systems* and their suppositions that govern society, in the *institutional* production of diminishment: patterns of speech, policy, and power that withdraw recognition from the vulnerable and train a society to treat that withdrawal as normal.³

In conflict zones around the globe, political disregard for suffering means hospitals and aid corridors are targeted, marginalized, or rendered unusable. Women and girls are subjected to digitally amplified humiliation through AI-generated deepfake pornography. Migrant children are separated from their parents through policies of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The indefinite suspension of refugee populations persists, as in the case of over one million Rohingya refugees living in protracted displacement with limited rights, education, and mobility. Meanwhile, technologies monetize outrage through platform algorithms across Meta and YouTube, and adjacent influencer economies profit from attention systems that reward proximity to violence through livestreamed content.

This essay treats cruelty as a systemic danger baked into the structures that govern daily life—about which religious and wisdom traditions have long warned. And yet these traditions also tell a story of humanity’s capacity to resist and even to flourish amid cruelty.⁴ The formative power of beauty—which I clarify below—can likewise shape us and influence our inner dispositions, our habits and behaviors, our way of leading in the world each day. If cruelty is a contagion within systems, beauty is a counter-formation; beauty includes the capacity of human beings to apprehend and sustain deeper meaningfulness in their work, lives, and communities through a practice of meaning, attention, and care.

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York: Viking Press, 1963, Postscript.

² John O’Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*, New York: HarperOne, 2004.

³ Michael Reid Trice, *Encountering Cruelty: The Fracture of the Human Heart*, Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2011. The accounts of letters across millennia reveal much of human fear toward the neighbor. For examples, see Lindquist, Sherry C. M., and Asa Simon Mittman. *Medieval Monsters: Terrors, Aliens, Wonders*. New York: The Morgan Library & Museum; London: in association with D Giles Limited, 2018.

⁴ Hunter, James Davison. *Democracy and Solidarity: On the Cultural Roots of America’s Political Crisis*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024. See particularly the sections on personhood diminishment, a shrinking shared telos, and the rupture of authority and legitimacy.

Particular to our current global crisis—shaped by the intensification of religious and political nationalism—this essay reflects upon these two lenses attested across millennia of sacred and philosophical accounts around the world:⁵ Cruelty and beauty are interpreted here as formative within religious and philosophical wisdom traditions.⁶ Whereas cruelty exposes fractures within tyrannical systems and nationalisms that coopt the core messages of religion, beauty reveals how human beings, for thousands of years, have persisted and persevered within community—especially in the face of cruelty’s fracturing capacities upon our lives.⁷

This chapter also extends an earlier line of inquiry beginning in 2006, in which I described cruelty as a fracture running through intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional life—an encounter that can splinter the religious mandate to care, respect, justice, and integrity, often while remaining concealed beneath the language of virtue. In what follows, I return to that fracture with renewed urgency, attending to the ways cruelty now operates at scale within contemporary public life, and to the forms of beauty that continue to preserve human dignity and relational possibility.⁸

I. Seeing Cruelty: Five Theses

1 - Cruelty is quiet before it becomes loud

Cruelty is most visible at its extremes—war crimes, overt hatred, public humiliation—but it rarely begins there. It starts with small diminutions of recognition: the cutting side comment about a person or group, the “harmless” stereotype, the slow erasure of voice in institutional contexts where systems govern our lives. These moments often appear ambiguous enough to be minimized or dismissed. They feel like a vibration in the bones more than a blow to the face. Václav Havel describes how people “live within the lie” by learning to accommodate early distortions of truth.⁹ Left unchallenged, the lie becomes a reinforcing loop, a new social norm. Micro-fractures accumulate around that norm until moral and relational corrosion takes hold—corrosion that later appears “sudden” to observers when the public conscience toward the truth of one’s neighbor has been quietly reset.

Those who endure such diminutions often learn to question their own perceptions of what is real. Tyrannical forces intensify this uncertainty by reinforcing new norms while portraying older ones as weak, radical, inconsequential, fake, or inessential to a newly asserted national vector. Cruelty in systems is quiet first; tyrants cultivate self-doubt across institutions as part of the machinery of aspirational dominance.

Quiet cruelty matters precisely because it is also formative. It trains and thereby forms both the perpetrators and recipients. Over time, it normalizes exclusion. When cruelty finally becomes loud—performative in our streets and causeways—or begins to realign policies in public and private life, it has already plied a long apprenticeship of small permissions.

2 - Cruelty regularly disguises itself as virtue

⁵ So much is written on Christian nationalism in the United States today. For a review of two different trajectories of the Christian religion in the U.S. see James Spickard, “Conflicting Civil Religions” in *Gratitude, Injury, and Repair in a Pandemic Age: An Interreligious Dialogue*. Michael Reid Trice and Patricia O’Connell Killen, eds. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2025.

⁶ Augustine of Hippo. *City of God*. Translated by Henry Bettenson. Penguin Classics. New York: Penguin Books, 2004. See Book XIV on the two loves that govern human life. Analogous themes are evident in the long arc of Christian theology.

⁷ Rohr, Richard. *The Wisdom Pattern: Order, Disorder, Reorder*. Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2020.

⁸ Trice, Michael Reid. *Encountering Cruelty*, 2011.

⁹ Václav Havel, “The Power of the Powerless,” in *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965–1990*, New York: Vintage, 1992.

Cruelty rarely knocks on our front doors seeking admittance. It enters laterally, clothed in the language of ethics, moral conviction, law, and public policy. Often it arrives by denouncing the values that preceded it as fraud or waste wherever they appeared in local, national, and international life—from repealed books by local school boards, to SNAP programs that sustain communities, to the halting of USAID funding justified as national and international prudence. Friedrich Nietzsche helps name this moral “bait-and-switch” through what he called transvaluation.¹⁰

Transvaluation unfolds in two movements. First, inherited values—and the policies that embodied them—are dismissed as harmful and then stripped of moral authority. Next, new values and policies are enacted, often using the same language, but reinfused with contrary moral aims. Recent political efforts to redirect the U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division’s enforcement priorities toward alleged fraud—without evidence—risk erasing decades of commitment to combating discrimination in voting, housing, employment, and disability access. Transvaluation is not merely the replacement of one value with its opposite; it is more destabilizing than that. It skews the moral field like a funhouse mirror, confusing the public conscience, disrupting the moral barometer of individuals, and wreaking havoc within society.¹¹

The rationalization of cruelty is always an act of deception upon an unwitting public.

Cruelty borrows the terminology of our highest ideals, hollows out the words, and reinfuses them with poison. Justice becomes state-sanctioned revenge under another name; security becomes perpetual expulsion and coercive control; love is transvalued into pity, while empathy is infantilized as a public good. This inversion is often cultivated through a logic of personal (even religious) piety and public (even patriotic) prudence.

Cruelty’s disguises do more than justify harm; they also aim to disorient the public’s capacity to reason and to judge. Part of cruelty’s interior deceit is that it foils rationality itself. People cannot understand why a legislative branch would remain silent in the face of obvious moral rupture. They cannot understand why a nation would posture toward the invasion of Greenland, even when the stated justification is plainly a ruse. Yet this bewilderment is not accidental. Cruelty frequently operates by manufacturing implausibility—by pushing actions beyond the horizon of what reasonable people expect—so that moral attention is exhausted in confusion. In such conditions, the question is no longer simply, *Is this right?* It becomes, *Is this even real?* The ruse succeeds when it fractures both moral clarity and rational coherence, leaving the public suspended between disbelief and resignation, and ultimately trained to accept the unacceptable.

My own exposure to capital punishment appellate work revealed this mechanism with clarity. Proceedings for one of our clients were saturated with juridical decorum and solemn rhetoric. Yet, as Camus noted, the “administrative machinery of death” can operate precisely through such cleanliness.¹²

When cruelty is ritualized through religious or legal language, it becomes simultaneously more powerful and less visible. The danger is not only externalized within society; many people internalize these moral deceptions and disguises without noticing they have done so, learning to treat themselves and others with the same punitive exactitude our systems have normalized. Cruelty then becomes a public style—a social pedagogy—expressed through incivility toward neighbors; contempt toward vulnerability (and toward empathy itself); detention framed as protection, so that caging human beings is recoded as care; voter restriction framed as “integrity,” so exclusion becomes responsibility; and public shaming framed as “accountability,” so humiliation is mistaken for patriotism.

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998.

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 1998.

¹² Albert Camus, *Reflections on the Guillotine*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Vintage, 1959.

Cruelty also expresses itself through vehemence toward those who do not conform; self-imposed misgivings whispered through enculturated misogyny; and the unrequited act—and irrepressible echo—of perpetrators who have no right to, and yet do, limit individual self-trust.¹³

Cruelty, in these ways and more, becomes not only an outward harm but also an inward discipline: a formation of the self in the image of domination.

3 – Cruelty: three atmospheric rivers that converge

The topic of internalized cruelty opens a way of observing it across three atmospheric rivers that converge in daily life.

First, the *intrapersonal river* involves the turning of hostility inward. Here the human being becomes accuser, judge, and punished subject simultaneously. Self-contempt, internalized racism or misogyny, and shame constitute powerful forms of intrapersonal cruelty. They deform our moral aperture and distort self-perception.

Second, the *interpersonal river* describes cruelty between persons. This river includes bullying, humiliation, gaslighting, and the weaponization of difference in everyday life. It is the domain most commonly acknowledged, although it remains inseparable from the other two.

Third, the *organizational or institutional river* is the most consequential. Here cruelty is embedded in bureaucratic procedure, economic systems, algorithms, law, and habituated social exclusions enacted through policy. It is impersonal, routinized, and therefore scalable.

When human intent within systems is abstracted, no single actor must intend harm; harm is produced systematically. Contemporary, sober examples abound: asylum deterrence regimes that strand migrants in danger; health care systems that deny life-sustaining care based on cost; environmental policies that allow water contamination in poor communities; digital architectures that amplify dehumanization because outrage is profitable; and, as Sarah Smarsh reminds us, biases that unfairly diagnose the American working class as White supremacist bigots.¹⁴

Cruelty in organizational and institutional form is especially dangerous precisely because it is easily disowned by individuals working within the institutions generating it. A leader can absolve himself of responsibility by appealing to procedure, as though the system bears its own internal permissibility. Along with the separation between cruel intent and the derangement of institutions through systemic cruelty, cruelty has a viral quality within society, increasing its dangerousness. It spreads through imitation, by institutional silence, and the steady normalization of what once would have been unthinkable.

4 - Cruelty is resisted not primarily by retaliation but by refusing its logic

Cruelty invites mimicry. It is inherently contagious across the three rivers identified above. In any of these cases, often the most natural response to violation is retaliation, which may promise short term satisfaction yet reproduces the very logic it claims to resist. In this way, those in power will use cruel ends

¹³ Trice, *Encountering Cruelty*, 2011.

¹⁴ Smarsh, Sarah. *Bone of the Bone: Essays on America by a Daughter of the Working Class, 2013–2024*. New York: Scribner, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, 2024.

to clinch the system around individuals and communities, for instance by claiming and quelling insurrection through escalations of cruelty that were fabricated by those controlling the system in the first place.¹⁵

James Baldwin's observation that "the fire begins in the heart" is apt.¹⁶ Retaliation stokes the same inner flames cruelty relies upon to justify itself. To refuse retaliation is not to deny the need for accountability or justice. Rather, it is to reject the premise that human value is secured by dominance, humiliation, or deceit. Refusal of cruelty's grammar is an act of disciplined moral freedom; refusal opens alternative moral possibilities that cruelty is incapable of fathoming for the individual or for the world.

The individual's and community's refusal of cruelty may be revealed as nonviolent resistance, or institutional reform, or as accompaniment of those harmed, or as a quiet preservation of our humanity in stressful circumstances that encourages people to abandon hope. At heart, the refusal of cruelty is an act of the moral imagination, always liberating oneself, most often alongside others. This moral act is neither naïve nor passive; it is the difficult work of not allowing the machinations of cruelty to dictate the terms of one's identity, one's community, or of the world one inhabits each day.¹⁷ Acts of our moral imagination are as much conscious choice as unconscious conviction.

Renée Nicole Macklin Good's death in Minneapolis in January 2026 names the point with painful clarity: cruelty does not merely act; it interprets. It seeks to monopolize meaning by making violence appear necessary, and by converting the victim into the author of her own harm. In the days that followed, Good was spoken of in the abstract grammar institutions reach for in moments of public scrutiny—threat, compliance, justification, procedure—as though a human being could be reduced to the categories required to excuse what happened. This is one of cruelty's most reliable strategies: after the wound, the narrative; after the force, the rationale.

Yet the moral reality of a person's dignity in the face of coercion is not erased by the stories power tells about itself. There are moments when resistance is not an argument but a presence: the insistence that one's life is not reducible to the scripts a system needs in order to preserve its innocence. Such integrity is never owned by the institutions that deny it; it belongs to Renée alone, and it is carried forward by the community that refuses to let her be forgotten. In this way, refusal becomes a form of remembrance—an act of moral witness.

5 - Cruelty is weakened where relationship is restored

Finally, cruelty's aim is relational rupture. It seeks to isolate persons from one another and from themselves. In institutional life, this may take the form of choosing the new veneer of national "rightness" over community relationship. As noted above, exclusion is frequently justified precisely in the name of moral or doctrinal purity.¹⁸ The antidote to cruelty is not merely better argumentation. It is the restoration

¹⁵ Girard, René. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Translated by Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965; Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. Translated by Patrick Gregory. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.

¹⁶ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, New York: Dial Press, 1963.

¹⁷ Menakem, Resmaa. *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017. Menakem helps to infuse the need to be formed through a transgenerational yearning for the liberty of one's imagination, one's body, one's identity in the world.

¹⁸ Much is written on the rise and requisite features of tyranny. Madlyn Albright's latest text is poignant as a warning. See, Albright, Madeleine Korbel, with Bill Woodward. *Fascism: A Warning*. First edition. New York: Harper, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2018.

of trust, belonging, and mutual recognition.¹⁹ It is the slow reweaving of what Wendell Berry calls “the neighborly covenant.”²⁰ This does not mean ignoring injustice; rather, it means insisting that the pursuit of justice itself remain humanizing. Where relationship is renewed, cruelty loses one of its primary aims: the fragmentation of the human world. And where recognition is restored, cruelty loses one of its primary instruments: isolation.

II. Beauty: Four Theses

If cruelty fractures, beauty binds. Beauty is not cosmetic decoration upon an otherwise neutral reality. It is a way of perceiving, inhabiting, and shaping the world such that life becomes more intelligible—and more bearable. Across religious and philosophical traditions, beauty has been associated with order, radiance, balance, and depth of meaning. In the register of this chapter, beauty is closer to O’Donohue’s claim than to mere aesthetic taste: it is that in whose presence we feel more alive. And if, as Arendt warns, evil’s danger is its rootlessness—its limitless drift—beauty is one of the ways human beings re-root one another in the world, restoring limit, texture, and moral intelligibility where cruelty has tried to dissolve them.

1 - Beauty lights up as connection

Beauty arises from recognition, which traditions often name as the seat of mercy, and by which one life becomes visible to another without being reduced to instrument.²¹ Anthropologists have long noted that early human communities gathered around shared fires, telling stories, preparing food, repeating rituals that bound individuals into a people. Human beings do not find beauty only in sunsets and symphonies; they find it in the experienced reality of being seen.

Toni Morrison suggested that the fundamental question a child asks silently when looking at an adult is, “Does your face light up when you see me?” Adults hunger for the same affirmation. Beauty appears whenever a person’s presence is encountered as gift rather than burden.²²

In the long migratory record, *connection* was not romantic; it was the condition of endurance. Fire circles functioned as a social technology: the site where a “we” was repeatedly remade through story, shared food, and attention to the vulnerable. This is why connection is our prevailing thesis.²³ Cruelty begins with diminutions of recognition; beauty begins with the opposite motion—faces that light up, a place at the circle, a shared world in which a person is not a problem to be managed.

2 - Beauty gives meaning

Meaning is the architecture of beauty. Beauty is experienced when values, narratives, and practices cohere in a way that renders existence intelligible and worthwhile. Individuals feel beauty when their lives rhyme with their deepest convictions; communities experience beauty when their structures, practices, and purposes align.

¹⁹ Sacred wisdom disposes of an eye-for-an-eye across religious traditions, including in what may be ascribed as the handbook of Buddhist wisdom, *The Dhammapada*: “Hatred is never appeased by hatred. Hatred is appeased by love. This is an eternal law.

²⁰ Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, ed. Norman Wirzba, Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 2002.

²¹ “My mercy encompasses all things,” **Qur’an 7:156**

²² Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.

²³ Nhat Hanh, Thich. *The Art of Living: Peace and Freedom in the Here and Now*. New York: HarperOne, 2023. ‘We are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness.’

This does not imply simplicity or the absence of conflict. Rather, it suggests that human beings can endure extraordinary hardship when they perceive that their suffering participates in a story larger than private distress. Meaning transforms endurance into vocation.

Here the migratory frame matters again. Early human pathways forged through ancient migrations required more than logistics; they required a cosmology sturdy enough to interpret drought, death, birth, fear, and awe—and a telos resilient enough to keep the group from dissolving into mere self-preservation.²⁴ In other words, meaning was not an ornament on survival; it was one of the ways survival became human. When cruelty operates at scale, it attempts to monopolize meaning by supplying its own categories—threat, procedure, compliance, necessity. Beauty counters by restoring human narration: the insistence that a life, a community, and a future are not reducible to the scripts a system needs in order to justify itself.

3 - Beauty emerges as coherence

Coherence is not perfection. It is integrity across the parts of a life. Where institutions preach one thing and practice another, dissonance erodes credibility and morale. Where communities embody their professed commitments, coherence is experienced as a form of aesthetic rightness—things “fit.” Martin Buber described this movement from “I–It” to “I–Thou,” where the other is encountered not as object but as person. Beauty is generated whenever human beings relate to one another in genuinely dialogical ways.²⁵ Coherence lives in this dialogical relationality: inner life and outer action support rather than contradict one another.

The migratory analog is concrete: a people survives long routes through patterned coordination—roles held in trust, discernment repeated day after day, small adjustments made without abandoning the shared aim. Coherence is what keeps plurality from becoming chaos. In present institutional life, coherence is felt when a team’s stated values are not merely posted but practiced; when procedures do not quietly contradict public commitments; when persons are not treated as instruments. This is also why coherence is aesthetically charged: it is the felt relief of alignment—between inner conviction and outer action, between speech and practice, between the human claim “you are a thou” and the institutional habit of treating people as an it.

4 - Beauty becomes luminous in limit

Limit is frequently misunderstood as the opposite of beauty, yet it is its precondition. Mortality, transience, fragility, aging, and finitude render beauty possible. A rose is beautiful not in spite of its brevity but because of it. The knowledge that a moment will not return intensifies attention to it.²⁶ Historically, migrating peoples, refugees, and communities under duress often create astonishing beauty. Their limit conditions sharpen perception. Songs, prayers, and artistic forms arise not to deny suffering but to interpret it. Beauty becomes a mode of defiant compassion, a refusal to let violence or scarcity dictate the meaning of human life.

²⁴ In the Western tradition, illuminated manuscripts of the Medieval period demonstrate the cosmological influence I have in mind. For a thrilling illustration see: Keene, Bryan C., ed. *Toward a Global Middle Ages: Encountering the World through Illuminated Manuscripts*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2019.

²⁵ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Scribner, 1970.

²⁶ This point is illustrated in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by existentialist author, Milan Kundera. The protagonist, Sebina, reflects on beauty within the mass she encountered unexpectedly in the village church. “The mas was beautiful because it appeared to her in a sudden, mysterious revelation as a world betrayed.” The world passing away renders its liturgy a precious albeit fleeting gift in time(110).

Arendt's line about evil's "no limitations" is not only metaphysical; it names a social danger: cruelty's appetite expands when it is unbounded—when nothing interrupts it, when no reverence restrains it, when no neighborly claim is allowed to matter. In the face of cruelty's limitlessness, beauty restores limit as the counter-teacher. Migratory life placed limit in the foreground: bodies fail, seasons shift, languages vanish, whole worlds pass. Yet limit did not only diminish; it clarified. It taught what can be cherished because it will not last.

In personal experience, some of the most beautiful moments occur at the edge of loss: sitting with a dying friend, acknowledging the end of a vocation, or sensing one's own diminishing strength. Limit invites gratitude rather than possession; it teaches reverence. Far from sentimental, beauty in the presence of limit becomes a disciplined attentiveness to the preciousness of the finite—and, in a time when cruelty so often tries to make the world feel disposable, that discipline becomes one of beauty's most quietly resistant forms.

III. A Moral Response of Leadership Today: Practicing Connection, Meaning, Coherence, and Limit

Cruelty does not only injure. It forms. It trains attention, narrows imagination, and teaches communities what to expect from power. It persuades people that domination is realism, that exclusion is responsibility, that humiliation is accountability, and that fear is prudence. When cruelty succeeds, it does not merely harm its targets; it recruits bystanders into resignation. It renders the public less able to reason, less able to trust their own moral perception, and more likely to accept the implausible as inevitable.

In such conditions, leadership cannot be reduced to competence, messaging, or institutional survival. Leadership becomes a moral vocation steeped in both discernment and associated action: the work of safeguarding the human world—its dignity, its shared reality, and its relational integrity—against the slow corrosion of transvalued virtues and routinized harm. This practice of discernment and action belongs not only to religious leaders. It belongs to leaders across plural, public, and private sectors wherever decisions are made that shape the lives of others.²⁷

The response required is not sentimental. It is not a call for leaders to "be nice." It is the disciplined practice of beauty as moral resistance: the cultivation of the conditions in which human beings can remain human together. In an age when cruelty presents itself as virtue and confusion becomes a strategy of control, leadership must reestablish the moral and relational conditions that cruelty seeks to dissolve.

Four practices are therefore urgent.

1 - Protect connection: making persons visible again

Cruelty begins by reducing persons to categories: threat, cost, burden, enemy, disposable. The first moral task of leadership is to restore visibility: to insist, publicly and institutionally, that no human being is exhaustively describable by the role a system assigns them. This is not simply interpersonal warmth. It is institutional design. It is whether policies presume dignity or presume suspicion; whether workplaces reward truth-telling or reward silence; whether communities are structured to protect the vulnerable or to manage them as risk.

²⁷ Ronald A. Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, and Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*, Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009.

Connection is the moral practice of recognition. It is the refusal to let systems make people disappear—through bureaucracy, through stigma, through detention, through shame, through erasure. Leaders who practice connection create conditions where people can appear as persons rather than as instruments, abstractions, or liabilities. They rebuild the “we” that cruelty seeks to fracture, and they do so through concrete practices: attention to those most vulnerable, protection for dissenters and truth-tellers, and a public refusal to treat human beings as expendable.

2 - Restore meaning: refusing cruelty’s monopoly on narrative

Cruelty does not merely act; it interprets events and often judges the powerless. It seeks to monopolize meaning by making violence appear necessary and by converting the victim into the author of their own harm.²⁸ In this way, cruelty does some of its most durable work after the wound: it produces the rationale, the procedural language, the “justification” that allows institutions to preserve their innocence. Cruelty continues as a self-reinforcing cycle of harm.

Leaders today must therefore become stewards of moral narration.²⁹ This is not propaganda. It is the public labor of truth: naming what is happening in language that does not disguise harm as virtue. Meaning is restored when leaders refuse to allow procedure to become a substitute for moral judgment. Meaning is revived when leaders keep human lives attached to stories larger than bureaucratic categories—stories of dignity, obligation, mutuality, and shared fate.

Religious and wisdom traditions have long understood that communities live or die by the narratives they inhabit. The leader’s task is not to manufacture meaning, but to guard it: to protect the moral imagination from being colonized by fear, resentment, and deceit. When cruelty tries to overwhelm public reason with implausibility and ruse, leadership must become an act of interpretive courage—telling the truth plainly, and refusing the exhaustion that cruelty intends.

3 - Insist on coherence: aligning speech and practice

Coherence is not perfection. It is integrity across the parts of a life and across the moving parts of an institution.³⁰ Cruelty thrives where dissonance is normalized—where organizations claim justice while practicing exclusion, claim care while routinizing harm and toxicity, claim truth while rewarding distortion.³¹ In such environments, cynicism becomes rational, and resignation becomes the most predictable civic posture. Julia Galef’s evidence-based research reminds us how difficult it is for individual and institution to ‘change their minds,’ to reach new levels of coherence often estranged from former biases.³²

Coherence is therefore one of leadership’s most powerful moral disciplines. It requires leaders to resist the temptation to outsource responsibility to systems. It requires refusing the excuse that “the institution did it,” when institutions are always carried forward through human decisions.³³ Coherence demands that values not merely be announced, but embodied—especially when doing so carries cost.

²⁹ Václav Havel¹¹, “The Power of the Powerless,” in *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965–1990*, New York: Vintage, 1992.

³⁰ This section owes much to Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013.

³¹ Trice, Michael Reid. “The First Council at Nicaea: Lessons from the Field.” *Dialogue* (Winter 2024).

³² Galef, Julia. *The Scout Mindset: Why Some People See Things Clearly and Others Don’t*. New York: Portfolio, 2021.

³³ Trice, Michael Reid. *Encountering Cruelty*, 2011.

This is why coherence is aesthetically charged: it is the felt lightening or relief of the possibility of justice as an alignment—between inner conviction and outer action, between speech and practice, between public commitments and institutional procedures, so that justice may once again ‘roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.’³⁴ Where coherence is restored, people can once again trust their moral perceptions. They can once again believe that integrity is possible without naivete.

4 - Honor limit: resisting cruelty’s appetite for the limitless

Cruelty expands when it is unbounded—when nothing interrupts it, when no reverence restrains it, when no neighborly claim is permitted to matter. Limit is therefore not the enemy of leadership; it is one of its central moral teachers.³⁵ Honoring limit means leaders must know where power stops. It means establishing boundaries around what cannot be done to human beings, even when the institution is anxious, even when the public demands spectacle, even when retaliation feels justified.³⁶

Limit also clarifies what matters. It reorients leadership away from fantasies of total control and toward the durable work of relationship, trust, and repair. It teaches restraint as moral strength: the refusal to become what one opposes. It makes space for humility, for pluralism, and for the slow work of institutional conversion.

In this sense, the refusal of cruelty’s logic is not passive. It is disciplined moral freedom. It is the capacity to act without surrendering one’s moral imagination to mimicry. It is the ability to seek accountability without humiliation, to seek security without expulsion, to seek justice without revenge masquerading as law.³⁷

Conclusion

Cruelty and beauty are not only moral categories; they are formative teachers. Cruelty trains perception and behavior by shrinking the field of recognition, hijacking the work of meaning, rewarding incoherence, and eroding limit. It habituates people to the unacceptable until resignation begins to feel like realism. Beauty, by contrast, forms persons and communities toward life. It restores the conditions of a shared world: connection that makes persons visible again; meaning that refuses cruelty’s monopoly on interpretation; coherence that aligns speech and practice; and limit that interrupts the appetite for the limitless.

This is why leadership matters now—across religious communities, civic institutions, professional organizations, and the private sector. Leadership is not finally a matter of branding, performance, or even competence. It is formation: the shaping of attention, habits, and institutional norms that teach people what to expect from power and what to believe about one another. The question before us is not only what we will do in the face of cruelty, but what we will become—and what our organizations will train others to become. To practice beauty with discipline is to refuse the world cruelty is trying to make, and to insist—through policy, speech, relationship, and restraint—that human dignity remains real.

³⁴ Amos 5:24

³⁵ Hannah Arendt, on evil’s limitlessness/rootlessness; see *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, New York: Viking, 1963.

³⁶ Sabbath as limit: Genesis 2:2–3; Exodus 20:8–11.

³⁷ Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson, London: Penguin Classics, 2003.

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Kathryn Lohre (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America)
Peter Makari (United Church of Christ / Christian Church – Disciples of Christ)
Luke Miltz (United Methodist Church)
Laura Osborne (Reformed Church in America)
Mark Pettis (United Church of Christ)
Larry Pickens (Pennsylvania Council of Churches / United Methodist Church)
Margaret Rose (Episcopal Church)
Paul Tche (Christian Church/Disciples of Christ)
Ted Thompson (Episcopal Church)
Don Thorsen (Wesleyan Theological Society)
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Rabbi David Straus (National Council of Synagogues) ???
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