

Rules Are for Dolts

by Stewart Blackburn

My father spent over forty years in the U.S. Navy and did well for himself by following the rules (mostly). But after he retired he seemed to have a serious change of heart around always following the rules. One day he was talking to my girlfriend at the time and me, and in an exasperated tone declared, “Rules!?! Rules are for *dolts!!!*” We don’t use the word “dolt” much nowadays but it means a dunce or a stupid person.

I was reminded of this recently when I was talking with someone who had so many rules that he tried to live by that he was often in a state of incapacity not knowing which rule to live by at any given moment. I suggested to him that it might be time to sort out all his rules to see which ones made him happy and which ones he might want to let go of. That’s a daunting task for any of us, but probably something that any of us could benefit from.

Rules seem so sacrosanct; they have an authority that seems total. We learn “the rules” of any given thing and we get a sense of comfort that we know what’s going on. By living within the rules we can get a nice feeling of stability and rules can assure us that this is a path that will take us where we want to go. But rules are arbitrary, just like anything else. We make them up.

Now some rules are so codified and rigid that we call them laws and there are substantial penalties for violating those rules. For the most part these rules are there to make a society function reasonably smoothly. We have rules that say that if you steal from others, you will get punished. That’s all well and good.

But the rules of reality that say that this is how things work or work best are all made up. And many of those rules were made up to make us do things that others wanted us to do. Rules like you have to get married or you will end up lonely, or you can only succeed by working hard, or you have to believe certain things in order to have a pleasant afterlife are all designed to accomplish the goals of the rule makers.

But suppose we decide for ourselves which rules we will buy into, and which we will drop? This is an act of self-empowerment. This is an act of personal authority, taking up our own sovereignty. It can also be somewhat scary. How do I know which rules are good for me and which ones aren’t?

I suggest that the concept of Pono is useful here. Pono, translated from the Hawaiian as a state of harmony or balance, is also about effectiveness. That is, does what we are looking at contribute to harmony or diminish it? This harmony

could be within a group of people, between a person and his or her environment, or within oneself.

So, in terms of rules, do our rules add to our personal harmony or peace or do they take us out of our happiness and joy? Here are some possible guidelines for evaluating our rules.

One, does this rule simplify my life so that I can enjoy it more? If a rule or personal decree isn't contributing to our joy and happiness, then of what use is it? Rules like bedtimes, morning rituals, when we make love, and when we relax can easily become more like shackles.

Two, did we choose our rules ourselves or are we living by the rules others have chosen, perhaps chosen for us? The initial rules of our own personal reality are taught to us at a young age, rules like: you are smart/stupid; you don't deserve happiness/success/abundance; you need to settle for what you have otherwise you will spend your life fighting a losing battle. These kinds of rules are relatively easily seen and changed. It just takes the motivation to question them.

Three, some of our rules are so ingrained in us that they seem like reality and these rules are just how life works! Taking the time to look at our rules may reveal rules like: certain other people are inferior/superior to us; our bodies start deteriorating at birth and by the time a person is older, the body will be naturally falling apart, memory will increasingly fail, and the mind will lose its flexibility; since time heals all wounds that's what it takes to get over an emotional pain; disappointment is the inevitable result of a failed expectation; and we are born to suffer because that's how we learn.

These rules are probably the hardest to sort out. Looking at them forces us to question our personal reality. It can be disorienting to let go of some of our bedrock assumptions about life and that can be unpleasant. Just the same, it's likely to be well worth it.

Taking the time to review our many rules may seem like a luxury to those whose lives are filled with chores and duties. It may look like a desirable endeavor that needs to take a back seat to the more important things in life. But without a little bit of reflection, we may well be losing sight of what we value most and what genuinely works for us. We may find that some of our rules work well for us and some don't, but not looking at them will certainly make us dolts!

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