

“Rules to Live By”

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Readings

In the Unitarian Universalist tradition,
we draw wisdom from the enduring teachings
of the world’s great religions and philosophies.

Our readings, from A to Zed, or rather B to Zed,
from Baha’i to Zoroastrianism,
will take us on a tour of what is, perhaps,
the most universal of religious teachings,
as variations on “the golden rule” are found
in the sacred texts and teachings of most every tradition.

In the writings of Baha’u’llah in the Baha’i Faith are these words:
“Lay not on any soul a load that you would not wish to be laid upon you, and desire
not for anyone the things you would not desire for yourself.”
[Baha’u’llah, Gleanings, LXVI:8]

From the Udana-Varga of Buddhism:
“Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.”
[Udana-Varga 5,18]

From the Christian Gospel of Matthew:
“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”
[Matthew 7:12]

From the writings of Plato in Classic Greece:
“May I do to others as I would that they should do unto me.”

From the Analects of Confucianism:
“Surely it is the maxim of loving-kindness:
Do not unto others that you would not have them do unto you.”
[Analects 15, 23]

From the epic Hindu text the Mahabharata:
“This is the sum of duty: do naught unto others
which would cause you pain if done to you.”

[Mahabharata 5,1517]

From Islam: “No man is a true believer unless he desireth for his brother that which he desireth for himself.” [Azizullah, Hadith 150]

From the Jewish Talmud:

“What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man.

This is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary. [Talmud, Shabbat 31d]

From Taoism: “Regard your neighbor’s gains as your own gain and your neighbor’s loss as your own loss.” [T’ai Shang Kan Ying P’ien]

From the principles of Unitarian Universalism:

We affirm and promote respect for both “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” and “and the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

From the Wiccan tradition: “Do no harm.”

And from the teachings of Zoroastrianism:

“That nature alone is good which refrains from doing unto another whatsoever is not good for itself.” [Dadistan-i-dinik 94-5]

Sermon: “Rules to Live By”

It was just about the meanest thing I’ve ever done,
and I’m not proud of it.

My brother was ten and I was twelve.

We were fighting as brothers sometimes do.

Things got physical.

And then they got out of hand.

And at one point, as we wrestled around the family room,
I forced his face into the seat cushion of our couch.

Now, it would have been a relatively harmless thing to do—
were it not for the unfortunate fact
that the fabric on the couch was this sort of
1970's ugly green, coarse burlap cloth
and that my brother wore braces on his teeth.

He got stuck, and I got into load of trouble.

He was unhappy.
My parents were unhappy.
And, maybe hardest to take, our orthodontist was very unhappy.

I no longer recall what we fought over or why that day.

But I do remember treating my brother
in a way I would not want to be treated.

I hadn't followed the Golden Rule as I had been taught,
or, for that matter, any other rule that day.

Which was a point I had a plenty of time to ponder
in the course of the next many weeks when I was grounded. . .

I suspect we've all had our own moments like this.

Hopefully they didn't involve having to have
your brother's face freed from the cushions of the couch—
with surgical implements, no less.

But, I'm guessing that we've all had our moments—
times when we've realized we've not been fair to someone else,
moments when we've failed to treat others
in the way that we would hope they would treat us.

And, surely there have been times when we've all felt
someone treated us unfairly, too.

Neither feeling is a comfortable one to have.

Yet, knowing this feeling—knowing it in our bones—
is an important part of learning what it means to be human.

To know that we are more than capable of harming others,
and that others can and will most certainly harm us.

After all, if it weren't so, we wouldn't need quite so many rules.

As you heard a few moments ago,
the idea behind the Golden Rule
is found in some form in many if not most of the world's religions.

Some religions put it in positive terms:
do to other people what you would have them do to you.

Some religions say it in a way, sometimes called the Silver Rule,
that tells us what we should try to avoid:
don't do to others what you would not want done to yourself.

And others formulate what's called the Platinum Rule:
that tells us to treat others as they want to be treated.

That so many religions in focussing on how we treat one another
have come up with relatively similar things to say
has caused people to long wonder whether some divine agency,
whether God, is behind all of this.

But, I think it is more the product of human agency
that has led people all over the world and down through time
to recognize that the hope of the world
demands that we simply learn to be fair and just to one another.

Studies have shown that this isn't something
that so much has to be learned as much as practised.

It turns out that the grounding for the Golden Rule
is as much rooted in biology as it is in theology.

The neuroscientist, Donald Pfaff, believes that the Golden Rule
is hard-wired into the human brain.

In his book, *The Neuroscience of Fair Play*,
he says certain brain chemicals help us to make moral decisions
and that certain brain signals prompt us to consider our actions
toward others as if they were actions toward ourselves.¹

He says that we're "wired for reciprocal altruism,"
that our sense of what it means to be fair and helpful to one another
comes from our knowing what would be fair and helpful for ourselves.

Here's a story that makes this a bit easier to understand:

Not long ago a team of researchers
watched a 1-year-old boy take justice into his own hands.

The boy had just seen a puppet show
in which one puppet played with a ball
while interacting with two other puppets.

The center puppet would slide the ball to the puppet on the right,
who would pass it back.

And the center puppet would slide the ball to the puppet on the left . . .
who would promptly run away with it.

Then the two puppets on the ends
were brought down from the stage and set before the toddler.
Each was placed next to a pile of treats.

At this point, the toddler was asked
to take a treat away from one [of the] puppet[s].

Like most children in this situation,
the boy took it from the pile of the 'naughty' one.

But this punishment [apparently] wasn't enough —
he then leaned over and smacked the [little] puppet [o]n the head.²

¹Donald Pfaff, *The Neuroscience of Fair Play: Why We (Usually) Follow The Golden Rule*, Dana Press, 2007.

²Paul Bloom, "The Moral Life of Babies," *The New York Times*, May 3, 2010.

Maybe we do, indeed, come into this world with a sense of fair play.

Maybe the Golden Rule really is written into our DNA,
even though we so often manage to ignore or resist it.

Clearly enough, though, DNA is not destiny.

We humans are capable of incredible violence and unspeakable harm.

But, we are also capable of so much more.

And, that, to me, is what this research is pointing to—
the sacred truth that religion stumbled upon long ago:
that if we look within ourselves,
we already know how to treat those around us.

That by considering the respect and dignity we ourselves desire,
we can know what a life of integrity and human decency requires of us.

What I find most fascinating about this research is that it reveals
the Golden Rule is not some arbitrary law imposed from above,
but a sacred reminder of our own potential inscribed onto our very hearts.

Still, we often need a lot practice to realize our potential.

Unitarian Universalist minister Robert Fulghum
gets at this better than anyone I know.³

He says:

Most of what I really need to know about how to live,
and what to do, and how to be, I learned in kindergarten.

Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain,
but there in the sand box at nursery school.

These are the things I learned.

Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people.

³Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*.

Put things back where you found them.
Clean up your own mess.
Don't take things that aren't yours.
Say you are sorry when you hurt somebody.

Wash your hands before you eat. Flush.
Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.

Live a balanced life.
Learn some and think some and draw some
and paint and sing and dance and play and work everyday.

Take a nap every afternoon.

When you go out in the world,
watch for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.

Be aware of wonder.

Remember the little seed in the plastic cup?
The roots go down and the plant goes up
and nobody really knows how or why. We are like that.

And then remember. . . the first word you learned,
the biggest word of all: LOOK!

Everything you [ever needed] to know is there somewhere.

The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation,
ecology, and politics and sane living.

Think [Fulghum says] of what a better world it would be
if we all, the whole world, had cookies and milk about 3 o'clock every
afternoon and then lay down with our blankets for a nap.

Or we had a basic policy in [every] nation
to always put things back where we found them
and clean up our own messes.

And it is still true, no matter how old you are,
when you go out in the world,

it's best to hold hands and stick together.

I don't know about you, but his list sort of makes me want
to head back to Kindergarten...
a time when the rules and decisions of life
seem so much simpler in comparison
to all we are contending with now

I think the thing that Fulghum forgets to say, though,
is that this is truly lifelong work.

These are not lessons we learn once and for all
when we are five or six years old.

Living by the Golden Rule is a way of being in the world,
a way of moving through this life.

To consistently do unto others as we would have them do unto us
requires that we routinely imagine ourselves in someone else's shoes.

It is the "reciprocal altruism" behind
why we are being asked to wear face masks—
that by doing so, we might protect each other.

Taken up with intention,
putting ourselves in another's place,
can become one's spiritual practice.

Taken up with regularity, it can become one's religion.

For, religion has always been more about what we do
than what we believe.

It's been said that, "We all have two religions:
the religion we talk about and the religion we live.
[And that our task is] to make the difference between the two
as small as possible."⁴

It's not so easily done.

⁴Attributed to William E. Gardner.

My preaching professor from seminary told the story of going into the social hour after the worship service had ended one Sunday.

He had not eaten breakfast, he was incredibly hungry, and he was thrilled to see that, miraculously, there were still some bagels left.

But there was only one container of cream cheese and one knife and a child labouring over the spreading of this cream cheese, slowly and ever-so-carefully covering every bit of the surface of her bagel.

In telling the story, Gary confessed that he was feeling very hungry and impatient and self-important—and that he desperately wanted that knife!

And just as he was ready to reach out and grab it, the little girl turns to him and says, “I made this for you, Gary.”⁵

“There is the religion we talk about and the religion that we live.”

And then there’s that uncomfortable difference.

Sometimes the difference between the two is as vast as an impatient minister wanting his turn at the cream cheese, and sometimes as small as a simple act of kindness spread all over a bagel.

The mystic poet Kahlil Gibran wrote that:

“Your daily life is your temple and your religion. Whenever you enter into it take with you your all.”

May we do just that.

Guided by rules of silver, gold, and platinum, may we take with us our all—

⁵Gary E. Smith, “Love Your Neighbor - A Sermon for Valentine’s Day 2010,” 14 February 2010.

to build from the precious moments of our lives
a temple of integrity and love to endure for all time.

Amen.