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RULES IN LIFE

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It dawns upon me that there are — and always have been — rules in life. These are spoken or implied. They can best be defined as “Established standards, guides, or regulations set up by authority. “

We seem to be much more aware of the rules in life than we are of the “authority” that created them.

The earliest rule I remember is “*Children should be seen and not heard.*” While this ensured that meals were uninterrupted by trivial sharing by under-aged family members, it also meant that we grew up lacking some of the social graces of engaging in meaningful conversations with our elders.

For example, I was reminded so much of that rule every time that my grandfather came around that I was never able to really learn much about him — except to avoid “the grumpy old guy.” Here was a man who was born and raised in some unknown place in England, migrated to this country at some unknown time and, for unexplainable reasons, adopted my mother.

I knew he custom built furniture for Florida Power and Light executives, in Miami. The executives would describe the desk they wanted, and grand daddy Rich would build it. I even had the chance to visit his shop in the basement of the large building that housed that company’s executives, but I was too scared of him to ask many questions.

I knew that he built violins as a relaxing hobby.

I knew could play violin, piano and organ. Self-taught, he played as if he had graduated from the finest music academy.

However, because I feared talking to him, I never had the opportunity to ask him to teach me.

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Later in life, I joined the US Army.

The first rule I learned was that drill sergeants were gods. One did not ask questions of the drill sergeant; the drill sergeant asked the questions. Hands on hips, forever screaming and forcing me to do pushups, I learned to fear that presence.

I feared drill sergeants so much that when I was assisting my friend learn to shoot the M-1 Garand Rifle, I didn't know how to yell, "WAIT! I think my friend's making a mistake."

My friend, upon discovering the recoil's pain from firing his rifle, decided to hold the rifle's butt a little further from his shoulder so that the air would absorb some of the shock. Bad idea! His broken collarbone attested to the stupidity of that concept.

I watched as my friend rolled in the Georgia dirt, crying in pain and trying his best to massage the broken shoulder. All the while, the drill sergeant was screaming at me, "*Why* didn't you say something, idiot?"

It was here that I learned the rule, "*No pain, no gain*" which caused me to suffer greatly on many occasions because I thought I was doing the right thing in working through pain that was my body screaming, "STOP, you fool, you're hurting me. "

The Army's unwritten rule, "*Never volunteer,*" kept many of my peers from learning to step forward early because the best details (assigned tasks) were offered early in the process of daily chores.

I found that I could volunteer first and be put in charge of a detail, thereby having to do less work myself. It also helped me early on, develop some leadership skills.

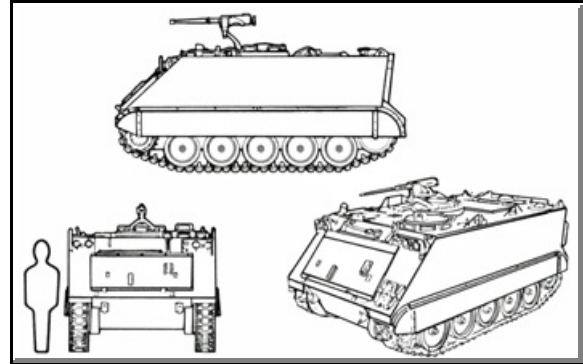
In the 1960's, the Army taught that "leaders are trained, not born," but it didn't act like it believed it until the 1970's.

As a young enlisted man, the Army wanted to ensure that I — along with all my peers — was given extensive leadership training. At least that was the goal.

However, what really occurred was best described by a Private First Class (PFC) in an organizational effectiveness survey I was conducted in

1983: “*We take these more educated troops and expose them to poor leadership that molds them into the poor troops we have come to expect.*”

For example, even on the coldest, rain-soaking days in Germany, we were forced to ride with the top hatch on our M-113 armored personnel carriers (APC) open so that we could watch for enemy aircraft. At all times, when moving or standing still, one of us had to be standing in that open hatch manning an M-60 machinegun.



M-113 Armored Personnel Carrier (APC)

(Of course, unless you were a machinegunner — which I was — you weren’t even trained to use it. If you

were a machinegunner, you were accepted as being trained if you fired 3,000 rounds from it. There was no real requirement to hit any targets, just fire the weapon.)

Let me remind you that this was 1965-1966 when the enemy was the Soviet Union and their aircraft were supersonic jets.

There were two basic flaws with the theory of suffering in the hatch. First of all, in the low-lying clouds of the German winters, no aircraft was going to fly low. Secondly, even if it did, by the time we saw it, it would have already finished its strafing run and we would either be dead or looking to change our underwear.

Later on in life, while still single, I found that success in finding “tour guides” (single women) was to go to bars. Yes, I would have liked to meet a nice, young Christian girl; but, churches were designed to dispense the gospel; not to permit any meaningful exchange of ideas. Thus, there was little time in the structure of either the Methodist or the Baptist Church to meet girls. So, most men and women went to bars.

In Sunday School, we listened to some supposed knowledgeable person tell us what the *Bible* said about living in Biblical times.

In the main service, we’d listen to some preacher tell us to love our neighbor, forgive our enemies, and — above all — give to the church.

When attending bars, I found that going with one male friend increased the chances of success because women, in those days, came to bars in groups of two. We had three rules:

1. He who goes first, gets first choice.
2. Never laugh at my choice.
3. Going home alone is an option.

It was about this time that I began to formulate my Three Basic Rules to Life:

1. Perception is reality.
2. Behavior is believable.
3. Expectation is energy.

I discovered that there is no truth; only exchanged perceptions. If we want to work with another person, we have to discover what they believe and collaborate so that our accepted beliefs do not conflict to the point of dissonance.

I found that when people tell you something that is incongruent with their behavior, believe the behavior. For example, when I was a Major, I worked with a guy called LTC Watts. He was forever saying, "*If you have a problem, bring it to me.*"

Of course, if you did, he would belittle you for not being able to deal with your own problems; so, no one ever took any problems to him. He was so proud that none of his people had problems and so shocked when they did.

I discovered that when I was excited about a project, I could work tirelessly day and night to accomplish it. I found out that others shared this same trait. So, the sooner I could get others excited about a project, the sooner they empowered themselves to achieve it. The rule was: "If it is mine, I will make it work."

Years later, in the pentagon, I found that the stated policy was that "*honesty is foremost over all other things.*" However, whenever honesty conflicted with getting the job done on time, time won out. I was fond of asking senior officers, who loved quoting that rule, how many men they had fired for being dishonest and how many they had fired for not getting projects done on time.

You can guess which would get a person fired.

Now that I'm a senior citizen, I've found that new rules apply that I never expected.

For example, I wear hearing aids in both ears because I have a 75% loss of hearing in the right ear and about 50% in the left ear.

By the way, most probably, my hearing has been like that since I was wounded by a claymore mine, in Vietnam, in 1968. However, one can not wear a green beret with a hearing aid or get a good assignment, so I avoided ever really taking a hearing test from 1968 until 1989.

My first wife's number one complaint was that I ignored her. The reality was, I barely heard her most of the time. However, I had honed the skill of appearing to understand when — in fact — I could not hear.

The challenge, these days, in wearing hearing aids is that if clerks realize you are wearing them, they believe the correct response is to yell and talk faster — both of which create more problems than they solve.

My new rule is: Tell them to lower their voice and talk slower. After all, I'm reading their lips anyway.

Quite frankly, if it had not been for Special Forces, I would not have been able to make a career in the military.

It was in Special Forces that I learned the useful rule, "*It's easier to get forgiveness than to get permission.*"

I was always on the leading edge of "molding" rules to fit my needs rather than blindly obeying them. By the time I left Special Forces, I was a Major, so the army tolerated me making more rules and avoid obeying too many of the ones I did not believe in.

I believe that titles are words; labels are reality.

For example, I belong to a Memoirs Group. Early on in the process, a woman (who quickly dropped out of the group) suggested we call ourselves "Life Lines." I don't know how many of the group liked the name versus those who just didn't care. However, we agreed to the name. At least, that's the title we used in our first group photo.

However, we never call ourselves "Life Lines". We call ourselves "The Memoirs Group."

I believe in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr: "*It doesn't matter what you call me. What matters is what I answer to.*"

Since behavior is believable, we are “the Memoirs Group”; not “Life Lines.”

Since I’m a life-long procrastinator, when the Memoirs Group meets weekly, I’m much better at publishing a memoir. Yes, I wait to the last minute; usually the morning it’s due, but I get it accomplished.

When we meet every-other-week, during the summer, I don’t publish much because I procrastinate to the last moment and then I’m overcome by events which preclude typing anything. It’s not that I don’t have stories; it’s that I don’t have time — or, more correctly, don’t make the time.

One of my most steadfast rules is: “I function best when I schedule a task on the calendar and when I place a deadline on accomplishing that task. If it’s not on the calendar, it’s probably not going to get done.

Rules are everywhere and ever-present. Some we obey; some we ignore. Based upon my experience, if I believe in a rule, I obey it. If I don’t believe in it, I just nod and move on.

Life is just that way.

We live, we nod, we move on.

