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The Four Rules to a Simple Life



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The psychiatrist Scott Peck wrote, "The paradox of life is that we are all trapped inside of a box, and the instructions on how to get out of the box are written on the outside of the box." Life can be a complicated process and figuring out a way through is often tough and confusing.

In a way, we are all looking for the "owners manual", fumbling around in complexity wishing we could make things clearer and more direct. It doesn't need to be this way. Angeles Arrien, a cross-cultural anthropologist, has spent a lifetime studying this subject and created four rules that can be found in many cultures worldwide. I have found them invaluable, and know that whenever I am in a self-made pickle it is because I have violated one of them.

They are not complex. There is a reason for this. What Gandhi called, "means to ends consistency". He advised that one's journey must match the destination. Thus, if you wanted a simple life, then a complicated process contradicts the goal. A simple life means you must use simple rules. But be warned. Simple does not mean easy. It just means clear, and without equivocation.

Here then are a set of instructions for getting out of the box and different religious models. They are based on the landmark work of anthropologist Angeles Arrien.

Rule one: Show up!

Rule one means to be fully present each and every day, a task harder than it looks in our fast moving and multi-tasked world. The average adult spends 40% of their waking time worrying about things that will never happen and 35% worrying about the past and things that can't be changed. This leaves only 25% of our internal thought time is in the present. It is being present in the present that creates depth and connection. A critical key to living at depth is to live at it's pace.

A few years ago I jumped out of a moving airplane...a perfectly good moving plane I might add, and I paid someone to help me do it! This experience was one of many from my younger years. Flying trapezes, race car driving, walking on fire, cliff jumping--these were all some of the many things I did to create an intense "buzz" in

my life. This buzz helped me feel alive, and in some ways supported my love of learning.

But in my mid-forties something began to shift. I began to separate "intensity", the thrill and all the effort that came with it, from "depth". And it was a question of speed.

Intensity moves at a high rate of speed. Everything is fast. We think fast, act fast and make appropriate connections fast. No time to consider whether pulling your ripcord is a good idea. You pull and pray. When you walk across hot coals, your mind says only one thing, "Go, go, GO!"

It is conducive for survival but not for showing up.

If you want to show up more, you need to speed less. Think slow to medium. Think time in nature.

All great religious traditions know this. When you wanted to have an epiphany you walked into the wilderness. Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Mohammad, all went because their souls craved depth and it could only be found in nature at nature's rhythm. Native Americans go on vision quest, aborigine's on walk-about. The goal is the same. To slow down and then...show up...for our own lives. In the end showing up is about showing up for your own life. To consider, as the poet Mary Oliver asks, "Listen. Are you breathing just a little and calling it a life?"

Rule two: Pay attention to what has heart and meaning.

The Grand Canyon makes me weak in the knees. Whenever I am within a hundred miles of it, I try to visit.

Such was the case a few April's ago. The day was unusually warm and misty, but at that time of the year there was still plenty of snow on the ground. This resulted in a feat of nature—fog. I couldn't see much past my nose. Directly below me, the canyon dropped away thousands of feet, but to my eye there was nothing but mist. Nothing.

I walked back and forth on the rim, staring, peering into the middle of a cloud. No view, why was I here? So I did what everyone does

when there's no view at the Grand Canyon. I headed for the gift shop.

I was poking around when in walks this guy. He is beside himself with anger and frustration. His veins popping out the side of his neck. Talking to no one in particular, but somewhat directing his attention to a small Navajo woman behind the counter, he starts right in.

"I can't believe this", he begins yelling. "I've waited over forty Goddamn years to see the Grand Canyon. It's been my dream for my entire Goddamn life. My dream! I finally get the time, take a bus trip here from Florida...and it's fogged in. The Goddamn thing's fogged in! I've been here for six fogged-in hours. The bus is leaving in fifteen minutes, and I haven't seen a thing! Not one Goddamn thing!"

I felt his rage on my spine. Everyone is backing away except for the Navajo woman behind the counter, who is remarkably calm. She moved closer. She looked into his eyes with kindness, holding his gaze.

She moved forward and gently took his hand. "I understand your disappointment" she said. "Sometimes the Grand Canyon gets fogged in. But what I can't understand is why you would devote only six hours of your life to your life's dream."

It was a shockingly accurate statement—and he immediately deflated. He left to get on his bus, in shock and softly crying. I had no idea what he was thinking, but clearly, her words went right to the marrow of his bones.

The gift shop stayed in complete silence. There was nothing left to say. We all knew why we were there.

This rule instructs us to stay attentive to that which is most meaningful in our lives. To remind ourselves of our deepest dreams and to devote enough time to those things that matter the most.

Rabbi Baruch Spinoza advised that meaning can be found by thinking about the following three questions for a season. Ask yourself, "What made me happy today?" "Where did I experience

comfort, satisfaction and a deep peace today?” and “What or who inspired me today?” If we ask ourselves these three questions every day we will know without doubt that which our heart holds with deepest reverence.

Rule three: Speak the truth without blame or judgment.

It is a tough thing to say what’s so when it’s so, especially in our culture. We are so used to either inflating or denying our true feelings that many of us create unnecessary complexity through our communication patterns.

The theologian, Thomas Aquinas instructs, “A trustworthy person is angry at the right person, for the right reason, at the right time, at the right level in the right manner.” When we are vulnerable, open and willing to see beyond our judgments we move beyond the complexity of our own machinations into what is truly so.

So much of our own complexity occurs when we sit in judgment of others. Try this experiment. For one month, every time you have a judgment or feeling that is negative about yourself or another, just raise your hand. That’s it. Just raise it. Simply flag the feeling. The unspoken resistance is 8–10 times more powerful than the spoken one so this simple activity helps bring to awareness our judgmental nature while helping us laugh and release our critical patterns.

Finally, speaking the truth is about not holding back on saying what is important and loving. The death and dying therapist, Steven Levine says, “If you were going to die soon, and you only had one phone call you could make, who would you call and what would you say? And why are you waiting?” As a practice try every day asking yourself the question, “What would be the more vulnerable and honest thing to say right now?” Then say it.

Rule four: Be open to outcome, not attached to outcome.

This final rule teaches us about de-attachment, which means we do our best in the effort and then we let go of whatever the outcome may be. To remember, what Alfred Tennyson said, “For us there is only the trying. The rest is none of our business.”

One of the most helpful models I know to teach us de-attachment is the morning prayer of writer Annie Lamott. “Whatever” is her daily offering to God. In the evening she closes every day with “Oh well!”

Being open to outcome has us looking at the possibility of a larger perspective. I don't know if there is a master plan, but I do know this. Unless you have the big picture—I mean the really big picture—than self-inflicted judgment, guilt, recrimination, faultfinding and attachment is probably a waste of time. And the deal is, none of us will never have the big picture. So don't curse the rungs of the ladder that got you to where you are. Because wherever you are on the ladder, unless you're dead, one thing is for sure...it's not the last rung.

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