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Rules and Release
Ellsworth, Maine
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I think I'm getting older. I go to bed earlier. I get up earlier. I think about things like mortgages and bills. I got a lot greyer over the summer, greyer than either of my parents at my age. and for better or for worse, I'm about to date myself. Star Wars, the movie series, is just a hair younger than I am. For just a couple of years of my life there was no Luke Skywalker, no Princess Leia, no Han Solo, no Darth Vader. I don't remember those years. For me, there has always been Star Wars, the Empire and the Jedi and the Death Star. I never really liked the movie, but I liked understanding the cultural piece. I liked what it offered us, heroes and good and evil and hope and a clear-cut world.

Rules keep us safe. Rules make spaces where we know we can go and spaces where we can't. Since Hammurabi's Code and the Ten Commandments we humans have legislated community behavior to help us know how to be with one another, and to help us know what we can expect from each other for good or for ill. Rules make the world less scary and more predictable; they set us up for success by making expectations and their consequences clear at the outset, and by providing an opportunity for discussion and negotiation around those expectations and consequences. When a community like this one creates a document like the Disruptive Persons Policy or a covenant of right relations, it opens the conversation about what is okay and what is not; what we find valuable, what we find tolerable, and what we find unacceptable. If we disagree, the disagreement becomes plain; if we have consensus, we work from the common ground, and if the community chooses boundaries that some people find intolerable, then the self-definition of the group becomes clearer as individuals opt in and opt out. It works, too, with beliefs and behaviors and unwritten codes. There's nothing wrong with that; there's not actually any more of a problem with people discovering that this is *not* the place for them than with people finding that it is. We as a community have to hold those choices judgment-free if we are truly a freely gathered community, as any free association of individuals does. Those choices help us find people who are willing to work to be with us, and help us know what we are willing to sacrifice for our religious practice. Through them we claim authority and value for what we do and say and be here. We are choosing a path that has some resistance, that has some struggle, because we believe in what lies within it. Even we who call ourselves free are choosing rules to hold us to the work we must do. We grow and we change and we develop because of the rules and because of the space they make for us. This is work of faith, work of the heart, work of the spirit and the soul. We are not playing with low stakes. We are playing with our arms wrapped full and strong around the wind, and we are going to go anywhere it takes us.

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Grammar is a good set of rules. It helps us make sense of what we read and what we hear; it helps us manage data and make meaning. But it isn't always helpful. Writers fast discover that if they want to write dialogue that sounds real, if they want to write in interesting and accurate voices, standard grammar is at best a guideline. Most people don't speak like textbooks because language and grammar are tools for communication, not life and death details. We bend and inflect not just our pitch and tone but the shape of the language itself so that it reflects more

meaning than the rules can hold. But there's one thing about which your English teacher was right: you have to know the rules in order to break them well. Rules are ignored at your peril, but played with, danced with, engaged with, they can be enriching rather than restricting; they can actually open up the possibilities.

Which brings us to the little question of rules and breaking and keeping them.

It's a continuum, like most things that appear to be binaries. Yoda, of the green skin and outsized robe, is easily my favorite Star Wars character, followed probably, ironically, by Han Solo for his raw humanity. Luke is just innocence waiting to be smudged; Leia is too good. But Yoda is every wise teacher rolled into a short, pointy-eared package. He did, however, make one mistake. Most things are not just do and do not. For most things, there is indeed a try. There are also *do like this* and *do like that* and *do but with a twist* and *do in spirit but not letter* and *do in letter but not spirit*. We do get points for effort, and we do get points for intent. And we often do get the chance to explain, justify, rationalize, and even adjust.

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I took up rock climbing when I lived in Portland. I loved it for the puzzle-like quality of climbs and the absolute focus it required of me. For those precious minutes I could think about nothing else: no laundry, no lists, no parishoners, no sermon topics, just.the.climb. I could ignore how my body ached; I could ignore almost anything. The way to climb well is to get the moves in your bones, marrow-deep. Then if you want to mess with the system...well, it's like grammar. You need to know what the rules are so you can break them and not get cut on the sharp edges.

But where climbing and grammar are like plastic and jello, faith is like glass. When it breaks it goes from smooth to razor sharp and fragile as fallen leaves. It doesn't hold up under stress, it can't be walked on barefoot, it loses its approachability and becomes untouchable. But worse, it becomes weak.

If we're going to be spiritually renegade and creative, if we're going to design and build our spiritual life from the ground up, we have to know the rules. We don't have to follow them, but we .have. to know them, and know them cold. We have to understand architecture, plumbing, electrical, carpentry, cement work, and roofing. We have to be rough carpenters and finish carpenters and window specialists. We have to know it all, so well that we can bend and fold and twist any piece of the design in our sleep. Only then can we expect to make a good choice about how to modify the roofline or add a geodesic dome to the third floor.

And Unitarian Universalists pride ourselves on being spiritually wild; if we are actually committed to that, it is absolutely critical that we treat that commitment like signing up for a marathon and treat every day like we're training. We cannot skip days; we cannot make excuses. We cannot let baseball and soccer and dinner get in the way; we cannot let the Nature Conservancy have all our money because they happen to get to us first. This is a daily, ongoing, committed relationship to our spiritual tradition. If we are going to play out beyond the seawall, we had better be able to swim like we're able to breathe, because it's going to take every ounce of strength and skill that we can muster.

There are plenty of religions that offer structure, rules, lists of beliefs, and thorough hierarchies.

Those things have their purpose--they provide certainty, rhythm, strength. They are a known quantity, the thing you can count on even if you hate it. We have some structure here: we guarantee questions, we often have coffee, we usually like discussion. But we are not going to tell each other what to believe; we are unwilling to hand someone a false but easy answer. We figure if you come here for your spiritual practice you want it like a hike, not like a paved sidewalk. You won't find your path if I give you mine; I rarely talk about what I believe because it's not about agreeing or disagreeing with the minister, it's about raking the ground flat and starting from your square one to create a faith practice that works for you. I'm out to challenge you so you think, not so you decide that I'm right.

Our job here together is to venture out on the slippery rocks of possibility and experimentation, to venture together, on our shared and individual journeys. And in order to do that, all of us must be equipped and skilled. Which means we have to do our work.

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We are once again in the season of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the high holy days of the Jewish calendar. These are the days of atonement, of making-right, of forgiving. These are the days when they strive to recenter themselves and wipe the slate clean for the new year. It is religion with rigor. It is religion with rules. It is religion with right ways and wrong ways and rituals that can be learned. When Gordon Atkinson went to St. Anthony's Orthodox church, he found a way of doing church that demanded something of him, that expected him to work hard and learn his way in, that refused to water itself down because he just showed up after 2000 years of their ritual and practice and didn't know what was going on. There is a solidity there, a strength of self-understanding that makes a place hard to blow down. Here in this faith we work hard to avoid certainty, concerned that it becomes idolatry too fast for our slow fingers. But idolatry by itself isn't the sin that the Bible makes it out to be; idolatry involves understanding the power with which we imbue the symbols that help us think about things we cannot see or even name.

We have a lot of unnameables here, like mystery and money and rules and sometimes even god.

We set them aside to avoid discomfort, to avoid exposing ourselves, to avoid having to trust each other too much. If we refuse to talk about personal things that might be different, we can pretend we're all the same. But what a disservice that does. If the rules say that we have to limit ourselves to that which we already know, or already think we know, we will not become close.

We will not be tamed by one another. We have made certainty the antichrist among us, the opposite of salvation, the key to our downfall, but we are lying to ourselves. We are making excuses. We are avoiding the raw and rough edges of true connection when we let shame make our choices, when we let discomfort turn innocence into a crime of unknowing. It is not that we don't need rules, it is quite the opposite. We need some rules so that others may be ignored or danced with or modified or moved around. The rules that we keep give us ways of being together that call us to growth, to understanding, and even to intimacy.

As with so much of our faith tradition, both are true. We need rules and rigor and learning to hold the space open for creativity and rebellion and growth. Spiritual disciplines and community covenants keep us faithful to each other and to the larger mystery that calls us back again and again, even when our voices shake, even when our feet are sore, even when our knees are weak.

We are called to spiritual work that is more than a walk in the park--this is the appeal of daily meditation, of nightly journaling, of showing up at church even when church is the last thing you will enjoy. There is an inexplicable, unnameable deepening there, a richness born of something incomprehensible that happens when we offer our animal bodies a routine, a story they can expect. If the foundation is solid, there is .so much. that can be built on it.

We tend to want quick fixes. But when you're going to defy centuries of tradition, quick and easy is not the order of the day. You need to know in the heart of your heart and the bones of your bones that what you're doing has more than impishness behind it. We mess with religious tradition every day. We take traditional liturgies and bend them into pretzels. We quote unholy sources and sing heretical songs. Our forbears knew their theology backward and forward and studied rhetoric so they could stand their ground with the courage and articulation of their convictions. We must do the same.

Find a practice and do it; find a history and study it; find a conversation and have it until you can have it flawlessly. Defend yourself again and again, dive deep, take a chance, change, and begin again: because you can, because you know what you mean, because you know who you are.

This is not religion for the fainthearted, although people will say that it is. If you were on trial for being an orthodox UU, could you be convicted?

Live the heart of your belief, and live well.

Blessed be
and amen.