The Code of the West

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Abstract

The code of the west is creed which lays the foundation of how one should live their life in all aspects. Whether one is leading a family, an organization or just themselves, direction determines destination and without a GPS an internal compass, a code, one is simply drifting and drifting is not good for anyone, but especially not good for those of us who are leaders. And we all are.

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“I won't be wronged. I won't be insulted. I won't be laid a-hand on. I don't do these things to other people, and I require the same from them.” - J. B. Booker, The Shootist (1976)

With these words, The Shootist lays out his code, the standard by which he, and we, should all live. Of course he knows that most of the world doesn’t live by them, indeed it’s probably fair to say that he knows that most people don’t live by any code at all.

That wasn’t always the case however.

During Roy Rogers’ heyday on the big and small screen, he had his Rider’s Rules that he encouraged all his fans, but especially his young ones to live by:

1. Be neat and clean.
2. Be courteous and polite.
3. Always obey your parents.
4. Protect the weak and help them.
5. Be brave but never take chances.
6. Study hard and learn all you can.
7. Be kind to animals and take care of them.
8. Eat all your food and never waste any.
9. Love God and go to Sunday school regularly.
10. Always respect our flag and our country (Cowboy Way).

A contemporary of Rogers, Gene Autry had his Cowboy Code:

1. The cowboy must never shoot first, hit a smaller man, or take unfair advantage.
2. He must never go back on his word, or a trust confided in him.
3. He must always tell the truth.

4. He must be gentle with children, the elderly, and animals.

5. He must not advocate or possess racially or religiously intolerant ideas.

6. He must help people in distress.

7. He must be a good worker.

8. He must keep himself clean in thought, speech, action, and personal habits.

9. He must respect women, parents, and his nation's laws.

10. The Cowboy is a patriot (Cowboy Way).

Returning to those thrilling days of yesteryear, The Lone Ranger had his Creed:

1. I believe that to have a friend, a man must be one.

2. That all men are created equal and that everyone has within himself the power to make this a better world.

3. That God put the firewood there, but that every man must gather and light it himself.

4. In being prepared physically, mentally, and morally to fight when necessary for that which is right.

5. That a man should make the most of what equipment he has.

6. That "this government, of the people, by the people, and for the people," shall live always.

7. That men should live by the rule of what is best for the greatest number.

8. That sooner or later... somewhere... somehow... we must settle with the world and make payment for what we have taken.

9. That all things change, but the truth, and the truth alone lives on forever.

10. I believe in my Creator, my country, my fellow man.

Despite what many have said, the most recent rendition of *The Lone Ranger* did little to dispute the Creed. Admittedly one has to look hard to find them, but they’re in there.
The actor and disc jockey Jay Thomas, tells an incredibly funny story about The Lone Ranger (as played by Clayton Moore). In this story (found on You Tube), you see that even in real life, in reality, Moore, *The* Lone Ranger, understands the importance of living his creed. Now Congressman Ted Poe (R, TX) tells a similar story of when Moore appeared in his courtroom, a victim of thievery (Poe, c. 1990s).

Mr. Moore’s daughter in June at the Memphis Film Festival pointed out that her father’s legacy – the legacy of The Lone Ranger – continues on. She reported receiving letters from “policemen, firemen and teachers who say they chose a life of protecting others wanting to emulate the example my father set – not just as an actor, but as a man” (Moore, 2013, para 6). And the example? The legacy? To “inspire the notion of offering assistance without seeking acknowledgement or fame. To come to the aid of someone in need” (Moore, 2013, para 6). Ms. Moore notes that her father “was quoted often as saying portraying the character made him a better person” (2013, para 7). She suggests that perhaps it’s “a little hokey, but hey, if the love that flows from his multi-generational fans is any measure of that effort, then I would say he accomplished his goal” (2013, para 7).

Let that sink in. Multi-generational fans of The Lone Ranger report that they’re better as a result of watching his portrayal and of emulating his, i.e., The Lone Ranger’s life.

A better example of how to live could not exist, whether as a character or as man.

In the (original) movie *The Magnificent Seven*, after the villagers realize that the villain, Calvara, probably isn’t going anywhere a conflict ensures. We’ve seen this conflict play out time and time again, with one faction wanting to cut and run and another wanting to stand and fight.
In contemporary America this usually occurs after an active killing occurs and continues post Afghanistan/Iraq. Of course in reality there are usually more than two factions, but the opinions remain, cut and run, stay out of it, stand and fight (or help those who are).

This was the situation with The Magnificent Seven. Seven gunfighters who band together to help villagers against the bandit Calvara. Having routed him, many villagers believed he would just go away to other villages, “other villages that don’t sting like we do” (The Magnificent Seven, 1960). Calvara didn’t leave, worried about “how he’ll feed his men for the winter” and thus the villagers begin to fight amongst themselves.

Calvara’s “good friend, Sotero” who appears to be the village mayor wants the Seven to leave and essentially to beg for Calvara’s mercy. The other side is represented by Hilario as he argues, “We started this fight, and we’ll finish it. With or without you” addressing Sotero.

This is important, for when Hilario and two others went to the Old Man to ask his advice, he suggests they buy guns (to fight Calvara). Hilario says, “We’re farmers, we know how to plant. We don’t know how to fight.” To which the Old Man responds, “Then learn or die” (emphasis in the original). The Seven are hired on the advice of Chris (the leader) because “men are cheaper than guns.” Thus the Seven find themselves the subjects of, and in the middle of, the villager’s argument.

As they depart to assess the situation, their conversation begins:

Vin: “I’m not saying we bit off more than we can chew, but I do say this, we need to have a serious talk along the lines of what we’re going to do.”

Brit: “You wanna go?”
Harry: “There comes a time to turn mother’s picture to the wall and get out. The villagers will be no worse off than when we arrived.”

Chris: “You forget, we took a contract.”

Vin: “Not any kind a court will enforce.”

Chris: “That’s just the kind you got to keep.”

Vin: “A noble thought, but right now . . .”

A noble thought. A contract, unenforceable in any court, but important to honor - sounds like a creed, rules to live by and from gunfighters.

As the movie progresses, we realize that the villagers will be worse off as Calvara tells the Seven “what happens to them will happen whether I kill you first or not.” He chooses not to kill the Seven, believing they “won’t make trouble for [him].” They’re escorted to the border, given their guns and a hearty Adios! After which, another conversation occurs:

Brit (retrieving his guns): “Nobody throws me my own guns and says run, nobody.”

Vin: “It took me a long, long time to learn my elbow from a hot rock. Think I’ll ride back to that village.”

Harry: “You’re crazy, all of you. They won’t lift a finger to help you.”

O’Reilly: “No one’s asking you to go back.”

Harry: “Come on Lee, if they want to get themselves killed, let ‘em.”

Chris: “Go ahead Lee, you don’t owe anything to anybody.”

Lee: “Except to myself” (dismounting and retrieving his guns)

Looking on in awe is the young, wannabe gunfighter Chico; as these six, five at that point, hardened gunfighters are going to return to some poor border farming village to protect (at this point, save), the villagers, the farmers. At this point he realizes, if he has not yet, that there is an
honor, an integrity, a code to live by. And this code will serve him well, as it has served, is serving, the Seven. It could be argued that the Seven experienced all three of The Shootists, “I won’t” be’s.

Regardless, there exists among them a code, a moral imperative, an understanding that the weak need to be protected; that there is something bigger than themselves for which to fight, for which to live.

Sadly this seems to exist less and less in people these days. Whether cops, or firefighters, or CEOs or yes, even pastors, the idea of a moral imperative, of living for something bigger than themselves seems nonexistent.

We can see this idea projected in to the future with Mr. Spock of Star Trek fame. In the second (original) movie and in the second movie reboot (prequel), we hear Mr. Spock say the now famous, “the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few or one.” Interestingly, the general plot line from both movies is quite similar, leading Spock to this point, and in the prequel, leading Captain Kirk to utter the line as well (as he attempts to singularly save The Enterprise).

One can argue that Marshal Will Kane of High Noon fame could have said the same thing as he stands alone to save the town. Believing that the needs of the town (the many) are more important than his needs (he got married and is leaving), he stands to protect the town from The Miller Gang. And he does so, knowing full well that the townspeople, including his former deputy will not step up to help.
And is this not also what The Magnificent Seven did? Knowing they were outgunned, and suspecting at some level they could die, what did they do? They rode back to the village, to save the villagers rather than themselves.

U.S. Marshal Matt Dillon returns to a town ruled by a vicious sheriff. A man who “used to be a good man and a good sheriff” who has become less so. He rules the town with an iron fist, and after the townspeople removed him, he returned, as violent and dictatorial as ever, killing his former young deputy who’s now become sheriff.

Matt, in a discussion with the young man’s fiancé is told that despite how good he (Matt) is, the sheriff is better. Matt just needs to go on back to Dodge. His response, “I can’t do that.” There he is standing tall, standing in the gap, and standing up for the townspeople who tried and in their minds failed, knowing he might die, but knowing as well, it was his duty. He makes the same decision in the Marshal Dillon pilot when after being wounded by a gunman; he goes to face him for a second and last time. Despite the protests of Kitty and Doc, he has no other choice, he’s a man, the Marshal, it’s his job, and, more importantly, it is who he is.

Lest one think that these are just remnants of a past, even a past that some would consider just entertainment what about Gibb’s Rules? In the long running series, NCIS, Gibbs now has 51 (that we know of) rules that he lives by. The rules, his rules, as he tells new agent and Mossad operative, Ziva David, “are my job to teach you.”

The older, seasoned, veteran teaching the rules to the younger, newer, inexperienced follower. This is how it should be (but so often isn’t). Without the wise, sage, counsel of those that have gone before, where we end up might not be where we want to be (Stanley, 2011).
Former police officer and current Cop editor Roy Huntington says to “listen to old cops” (2004, para 1). His wife and former police officer Suzy, notes that in her travels and trainings, she oftentimes rides with the locals pre and post her speaking. All too often, she notices that they seem to dismiss her as “old” and make many of the same mistakes she and others have already made. Mistakes that could be avoided by listening to those who came before. They don’t, at their peril. Stanley (2011) makes the same point.

Roy Huntington (2004) suggests that we should “listen to these veteran cops, believe most of it, and put it into action in your own life” (para 2, emphasis added). What they told him “saved my life on several occasions I know of and probably many more times I never even realized.” As the multi-generational fans of The Lone Ranger reported, their life is better for having watched and listened and lived his life.

What Huntington (2004) relates is a code of how to live. This code, and variants thereof, should be passed on for it is a code that in many ways hasn’t changed since Peel’s initial nine points. It is a code that if learned and lived will save many a cop and their family. If forgotten, not applied or worse, not passed on, will almost certainly have devastating effects.

Owen (2013) relates the story of Goldman Sachs. What happened there, “underscores the perils of corporate leaders who forget – or never bothered to define – what their companies stand for” (para 1). According to Owen, the key to Goldman’s success was its culture: smart, driven people operating with “an almost superhuman work ethic” all operating with one basic principle above all: “‘our clients’ interests always come first’” (para 3).
When federal regulations reshaped the landscape in which Goldman worked and lived, when its structure changed so too did its core principle(s). This drift away from its core values, its creed, and toward “the management of legal liability” (2013, para 4) sent it on a downward spiral and multiple criminal and civil violations.

While surviving and prospering, however, “the tarnish to its reputation is irreversible” (Owen, 2013, para 6). What happened to Goldman Sachs is, according to Owen, “an object lesson for any business leader who doubts the importance of having a ‘code to live by’ (2013, para 6).

Having a code to live by. Whether an individual or a business, the code, the creed, establishes who we are and what we believe. It keeps us grounded. It lets others know who we are and what we believe. As Joshua noted,

But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD” (24: 15, NIV).

Oh that more people would know what they stand for, why they do so, and more importantly are unwavering in their stand. People, who stand fast, accept the consequences of their stance and are not afraid to tell others.

As we’ve seen The Lone Ranger was one of those people. And Clayton Moore was the better for his portrayal as were the variety of police officers, firefighters, teachers and others who learned from him. But it’s quite possible that The Lone Ranger, as honorable and straightforward he was, was in fact real.
Or at least came from a real life copper, Bass Reeves. Reeves, a former slave and Deputy U.S. Marshal for the Oklahoma Territory under Judge Isaac Parker may very well have been the inspiration for Stryker’s character (Eddy, n.d.). Like The Lone Ranger, Reeves was an imposing individual, honest, straightforward with an unwavering dedication to his job and to justice. So much so that he served a murder warrant against his son, taking him in. What the Lone Ranger did in movies, Bass Reeves did in real life (Eddy, n.d.).

No matter the threats or the danger, Reeves tracked the bad guys down “never backing away from a job . . . and never blinked in the face of extreme danger” (Anonymous, n.d.). Reeves was known far and wide as a no nonsense cop who enforced the law without prejudice against any and all who chose to break it. He did so in a fair minded way and was “impossible to bribe or corrupt” (Miss Cellania, n.d.). It’s reported that when asked why he spent so much time enforcing the white man’s law, he replied, “Maybe the law ain’t perfect, but it’s the only one we got, and without it we got nuthin’” (Miss Cellania, n.d.).

A man who though having been reared as a slave, was illiterate nevertheless has a strong sense of justice regardless of the negatives that came his way (including unsubstantiated allegations of any and everything), he “continued to do his job efficiently and with complete dedication” (Fischer, 2006).

With complete dedication to the law, and apparently to God as well. While not being afraid of shooting the bad guy, Reeves brought to justice a multitude of outlaws to face the hanging judge, Isaac Parker, a man of great resolve himself. While in custody and under Reeves’ control, he “would walk up and down before them and preach the gospel” (Fischer, 2006).
Being a believer, Bass would talk to his prisoners of right and wrong “and would do so emphatically” (Fischer, 2006). He wanted them to confess and repent. Could it be that he knew that such confession and repentance would bring them into the glory of God? It wouldn’t change the immediate consequences of their behavior, but it would certainly change the long term trajectory of their lives.

Having spent many years riding for Judge Parker, no doubt Parker’s treatment of him influenced his treatment of others. Despite Parker’s reputation as the “Iron Judge” and the “Hanging Judge” many of those who were sentenced by him returned to thank him for their sentencing. Clearly Reeves was influenced by this honorable man, as editorialized by A.J. Kendrick:

There is but one summation that need be pronounced upon this remarkable man. Sweet and simply, it comes ringing down the age . . . well done, thou good and faithful servant (Fischer, 2006).

In a report of Reeves’ impending death, his then police chief said:

. . . The veteran Negro deputy never quailed in facing any man. . . . he is one of the bravest men this country has ever known. He was honest and fearless and a terror to bootleggers. He was . . . most loyal to his superiors (Fischer, 2006).

Reeves’ funeral was “attended by hundreds of old friends – Black, White and Indian” (Fischer, 2006).

What Bass Reeves demonstrates is that no matter who you are or where you come from you aren’t a victim of those circumstances, but rather you can rise above it all and live your life courageously, with conviction doing the right thing, regardless.
Of course whether you’re talking Gibbs, Spock, Kane, The Magnificent Seven, or especially Bass Reeves, the model for this approach to life and living is Jesus Christ. Though probably motivated by his own self-interest, Caiaphas, the Chief Priest of that time said, “Don’t you know anything? Can’t you see that it’s to our advantage that one man dies for the people rather than the whole nation be destroyed” (John 11:49-52, The Message)? Caiaphas’ motivation notwithstanding, the essence of his comment remains and is consistent with the Code of the West.

Of late, it seems, especially, though not exclusively, in the political realm, what we’ve seen is the needs of the few (or the one) far outweigh the needs of the many. This sets up what Myatt (2013) calls a crisis of leadership.

Myatt believes that this crisis of leadership is not just an American problem but a problem of the world. He asks, “[W]hat do we do about it?” Myatt believes we are in need of a movement, that we have forgotten what leadership looks like. We have not only forgotten what leadership looks like, but we have forgotten what moral leadership looks like, what it means to have a creed, a series of beliefs by which to live, to govern, to lead.

Not only do we not filter stuff through the “lens of leadership” (Myatt, 2013, para. 2), we do not filter through the lens of morality, of ethics, of honor, loyalty and integrity. Notes Myatt (2013, para 4):

Our world is suffering greatly at the hands of people who have placed their desire to be right above the desire to achieve the right outcome. They confuse their need for an ego boost, their quest for power, and their thirst for greed with leadership.

The needs, concerns, wants of the few (the one) outweighing the needs of the many.
His answer is that we must all demand more of ourselves and from those in positions of responsibility. Regardless of their position, we must demand that our leaders act honorably, act selflessly, and live by a moral code, a creed. Leadership says Myatt (2013) is not about the leader, it’s about “the betterment of those whom the leader serves.” It’s “about improving the status quo, and inspiring the creation of positive change.” It’s about what Caiaphas said.

John Wayne said that “Courage is being scared to death, but saddling up anyway.” The humorist Mark Twain said that "Courage is the mastery of fear, not the absence of fear." And fear, of course is False Evidence Appearing Real (Coughlin, personal communication). The mastery of fear is having a code, a creed, by which we live. Knowing who we are and who’s we are, allows us to saddle up anyway, to master our fear, to do the right thing all the time, no matter what. Such has been established by legislation in the state of Wyoming which includes:

(i) Live each day with courage;
(ii) Take pride in your work;
(iii) Always finish what you start;
(iv) Do what has to be done;
(v) Be tough, but fair;
(vi) When you make a promise, keep it;
(vii) Ride for the brand;
(viii) Talk less, say more;
(ix) Remember that some things are not for sale;
(x) Know where to draw the line (Saar, 2010).

If such a code is worthwhile for a state, is it not even more worthwhile for an individual?
Moral courage is the ability to stand fast in the face of the various storms of life that toss and turn us. Whether moral courage leads to honor, loyalty and integrity; or whether it’s the other way around (Butcher, personal communication) it is not something that just happens to a person. A foundation must be laid. John Wayne said, “A man’s got to have a code, a creed to live by, no matter his job” (Wayne, 1987, p. vii).

Ballantyne (2013) in laying out his 12 Rules does so for the benefit of those who would like to make “MORE correct decisions with less effort” (emphasis in the original). Having a personal set of rules, he says will allow one to “make the correct decision and fewer decisions that leave you with remorse.” While his rules tend to the imminently personal side, still they echo Gibbs’ Rules and the cowboy creeds.

Whether one is leading a family, an organization or just themselves, direction determines destination and without a GPS, an internal compass, a code, one is simply drifting and drifting is not good for anyone, but especially not good for those of us who are leaders. And we all are.

Though first said by Jesus, the ultimate CEO, an old cowboy’s advice ends with: Live simply. Love generously. Care deeply. Speak kindly. So let it be with you.
References


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