

# You Are Not the Boss of Me

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This service does not make sense unless I tell you a little bit about my life's experience. Sometimes I think the title was chosen as an excuse to relate these life stories, but I am well aware that my life story is only of interest to one person. Therefore, I will be brief.

When I was about 5 or 6 years old, my mother (who was soon to be diagnosed with multiple sclerosis) was seeing double. I was walking with her somewhere, and an elder (either my father or one of my brothers) told me to help my mother cross Division Street — a busy street in Oak Park, Ill. At that moment, there was a geological shift in my world perception. I could see well, but my mother could not. She had good judgement; I did not. Yet responsibility fell upon me.

I have three older brothers with age differences, respectively, of 4 years, 3 years, and 4 years. My mother died in 1967 when I was eleven years old. My eldest brother was at sea in the Coast Guard. The second eldest was at college. The brother closest in age, Ron, my father and I were on our own.

The rules in the household were quite simple. There were divisions of labor for cooking, cleaning, and laundry. The miracle of permanent press affected us positively since it eliminated the chore of ironing. Household chores needed to be done, and my father preferred the house to be spotless. Neither of his brothers nor their wives were nearly as fastidious. But my brothers and their families keep their dwellings much neater than I do. They are not the boss of me.

My father remarried in 1969 and remained married for 3 years. There were conflicts among my Dad, my step-mother, Ron, and me. The basic conflict was that my step-mother had rules, and my Dad had few to none. In 1972 (after the divorce), Ron was at college, and my Dad was drifting between sales jobs that often kept him on the road.

It was the 1970s. I was a teenager in an unsupervised environment, and most of my friends were also from dysfunctional families. Haley's Comet was a disappointment, and despite the warnings from Moses David and his followers, the Kahoutek Comet did not bring the end of the world.

It certainly seemed at the time that the end of the world was near. Nuclear disaster was apparently eminent, America was losing the war in Vietnam, and the assassinations of John, Bobby, and Martin were weaved into the fabric of my youth. The legal age of drinking was 18; we were buying beer and wine at 16. My friend Lee and his brother used to go to the Hare Krishna house for a free vegetarian meal on Tuesdays until one of the guys in saffron robes propositioned Lee's 14 year old brother. El Toro Alexander, one of the 20 or so African American children at my high school, told the shop teacher that he wanted to make a billy club. The shop teacher refused to understand until El Toro referred to it as a "nigger knocker." This was the environment in which I lived.

Little did I know that there were strangers who were protecting us. My friend Robert and I were in 11th grade, at a rock concert in downtown Atlanta, and two of the security policemen asked if we were in the North Fulton High School Band. These officers also worked high school football games and recognized us. I often caught the same city bus to school, and once while I was hitch-hiking home, an off-duty city bus pulled over to pick me up. It was my regular driver. Honestly, I was more afraid of him whom I knew than that random stranger who would have picked me up. Yet he was indeed a helpful adult. Other adults were not as helpful, and now is not the place to tell of the trouble that they caused. Some were, I believe, well-meaning.

Suffice to say that I grew up in an era and a family in which rules were few and far between.



My second oldest brother Jimmy has a son Zac, who would often question his father's authority. Like most children, Zac wanted a rationale for his father's capricious rules. His dad neither having time nor inclination to explain himself when confronted with the question, "Why do I have to?" would reply, "because I am the boss." Zac would infuriate his father retorting, "You are not the boss of me."

So when the television series “Malcolm in the Middle” ran, my brothers, my children, my father and I would watch and see parallels to our lives. I grew up in the “Leave it to Beaver” and “My Three Sons” era. Yet anarchy was always just outside the door, if not within the household.

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As a mathematician, I work within constrained boundaries. These are the axioms. The axiomatic system allows one to draw conclusions about undefined, yet intuitive ideas. Axioms are meant to be strong enough to regulate arithmetic and geometric notions. Yet there are truths that cannot be verified within any set of axioms. We don’t get to choose our axioms arbitrarily, but we are explicitly told to examine our assumptions when contradictions arise. As Sherlock Holmes put it, “How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth?”

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Many of the rules that we are instructed to follow contain contradictions, inconsistencies, and are indeed troubling. I want to examine a few.

The Code of Hammurabi was an effective legal system because it often encoded the customs of the time. Yet, according to Wikipedia, a number of items are punishable by death. These would be classified as cruel and unusual in our own society.

The ten commandments as presented in Exodus 20, start out by saying (Revised Standard Edition) “I am the Lord your God ...” They go roughly like this:

1. Don’t have other gods before me.
2. Don’t make graven images: the iniquities of the fathers are visited upon the children of the 3rd and 4th generations.
3. Don’t take the name of the Lord in vain.
4. Keep the sabbath holy.

5. Honor your mother and father.
6. Don't kill.
7. Don't commit adultery.
8. Don't steal.
9. Don't bear false witness.
10. Don't covet your neighbor's possessions.

George Carlin has a very thoughtful and powerful routine about the ten commandments. I don't know about you, but I am pretty down with "don't kill," "don't steal," "don't commit adultery," "don't bear false witness," and "Don't covet." The only problem is that there are exceptions that I can imagine. Furthermore, the whole, "I am the Lord your God" thing bugs me. We obey rules that make sense because they make sense not just because someone tells us, "because I am the boss."

Where is the latitude within these rules? Our whole economy is formulated upon covetousness isn't it? I want a nicer car, a bigger house, better food, and grass as green as my neighbors'. Don't steal? What if you are hungry and another has plenty? Sure you can ask first, but whom will you ask? Sam Walton? Bill Gates? Ma Bell?

Are there circumstances in which killing is acceptable? Exodus 21:15-17 "Whoever strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death. Whoever steals a man [slave] whether he sells him or is found in possession of him shall be put to death. Whoever curses his father or his mother shall be put to death." Well, obviously, the "Thou shall not kill" rule had its limits. I thought the statement was unequivocal. Meanwhile, the Bible puts limits on slavery: Hebrew slaves only have to serve 6 years (Ex: 21:2). Isn't slavery a form of stealing (the life of another)?

Ever since the council of Nicea, the whole sabbath thing got shifted by a day in Christian cultures. Personally, I like the idea of a day of rest. I even would prefer that it be common. I would like not to hear my neighbors' leaf blowers on Saturday and Sunday mornings, and I wish that the shop keepers would close up. Just please stop the motors, cars, trains, and airplanes for a day once a week. But it is not going to happen because someone, somewhere is going to say, "You are not the boss of me!"

When I see the signs by the side of the road that proclaim, “We need to talk. God.” I am tempted to hire one that says, “Please don’t presume to speak on my behalf. God.” My feeling is that one who claims to speak on behalf of a god, or gods, or unidentifiable-something-or-other is taking the his/her name in vain.

The Bible is rather explicit about bodily secretions. Lev: 12, 15: 16-25. Not only that but there is quite a to say about who should lie with whom Lev: 18:6-30. Returning to permanent press, Lev: 19:19 “nor shall there come upon you a garment of cloth made of two kinds of stuff.”

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Yet I am sure there are some values therein. Rules that should be axiomatic are Matt 5:43 “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.” The verse continues to the Lord’s prayer. To me the important point is “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Now, I am concerned about the imperative frame of voice. Who are we to petition a god for forgiveness. However, when the prayer is taken in a humanistic form, *i.e.* person-to-person, it contains an honest sentiment. And the fellow on the cross, who again implores forgiveness for his persecutors — there is an ideal to live up to.

You and I both can be vengeful, but vengeance only punishes the vengeful. Can vengeance lead us to a greater action. When I see the confederate flag that flies between Mississippi and Tillman’s corner, I try to remember to send a check to the Southern Poverty Law Center. At the very least, I consider the art-work of African-American artist John Sims, “The Proper Way to Display the Confederate Flag,” that displays the flag hanging from a noose on a 13 foot gallows.

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I don’t need to deify the main character of the gospels. The text themselves, even if they are an authentic retelling of the story, leave me confused on the intent of that individual. I think it is a more perfect world when we obey the second clause of golden rule because it is an axiom that makes

life more bearable for everyone. I like the version in John 13:34, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another even as I have loved you.”

It is not an easy rule to follow. But it is not a rule that needs to be followed just because someone said that he is the boss.

As an aside, I was looking through my mother’s bible for my quotes. I noticed that John was much less worn by her than the other gospels. I am sure that I grew up with a prejudice against the Gospel of John because of its mystical nature. I could have only learned this prejudice from my own mother, but I can’t remember her explicitly saying so.



The next topic that I want to discuss is that of the US Constitution, or more specifically the Bill of Rights.

1. Freedom of Religion, Freedom of Press
2. Right to Bear Arms — a well regulated Militia
3. “No soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without the consent of the Owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law.”
4. Protection against unreasonable search and seizures.
5. Grand Jury, double jeopardy, no witness against oneself, and to be afforded due process.
6. Speedy trial by an impartial jury, with council, and confront witnesses against the accused.
7. Jury trial in civil cases.
8. No excessive bails, excessive fines, nor cruel and unusual punishments.
9. You have the right even if the constitution does not explicitly say so.
10. States have rights that the Constitution does not explicitly delegate to the federal government.

These rights were written by Madison and supported by Jefferson. I think that they are a marvelous set of rules because they say, in essence, “the government is not the boss of the people.”

I mention Jefferson here because his religious convictions, as a deist, and his sympathy with Unitarianism includes him as one of our heros. Yet in my understanding, he is one of the founders who fought to limit the power and scope of the federal government. As such he *should be* one of the heros of the political right. As a political theory, limiting government scope and power seems to me to be “the right thing.” Still, I am a Roosevelt Democrat. Meanwhile, the Texas School Board wants to take him out of the history books. I would reckon that their motivation is because of his religious conviction.

Here is a place that I think it is good to examine our values. Jefferson should neither be worshipped nor should he be vilified. How can we reconcile limiting the power of the government with the so-called liberal desires to provide basic needs and services for all of the people.

More specifically, as a caring people, shouldn't we establish a social safety net to help all of our brothers and sisters? Aren't those the values and the dicta of the gospels? Or is the answer, “Sure you can do that if you want. You can do it through your church, through your community organization, but you can't make me do it because you are not the boss of me!”?



I will return to my life, here, now, as an adult, as a teacher, and as an administrator. As a teacher, I tell my students that which is the best way to learn. I live my life as a scholar with a love of knowledge that is only exceeded by the love that I have for my family and friends. I preach that love of knowledge, and I implore my students to emulate my example.

As a supervisor, I tell the faculty and staff the rules that we must obey. These usually are not rules that I have determined, but they are rules that are handed down to me from my bosses. In my division, we serve over 100 sections and roughly 3000 students per semester. Virtually none of the faculty nor staff require detailed supervision. I hope I am effective because I don't often tell others what to do.

Students require supervision more than do faculty, but as a population they are less likely to follow the rules of their supervisors. I suppose that one might say that they are still immature and not seasoned to a life in which

other adults act in a supervisory capacity. Or you could say that they have adopted the “You are not the boss of me” attitude. For that, I admire them.

Still there are cautions. My supervisors make rules that faculty and staff must follow. They can do so because we are salaried employees. In the case of faculty, we are often among the 20 or so experts in our field of study. I am much more willing to obey the capriciousness of an editor of a journal or the will of a referee of a grant because I know that the majority of my peers are smarter than I. I am never so sure about my supervisors.

By the same token, I imagine that my MD and my dentist have greater knowledge in their respective fields. So I will obey their rules because they may be helping preserve my quality of life. Meanwhile, my students do not always respect the rules that I set forth. I think the quality of their lives will suffer as a result.



So who is the boss of you?