

The Twelve Laws of Life

Introduction

For the past 25 years, I have worked with individuals, couples, families, for-profit and non-profit organizations of all types and sizes and a variety of church organizations of different denominations. As I have worked with each, I have seen people continually struggle with very similar issues. They stumble on these issues alone and then, because individuals take the things they are still struggling with into all their relationships, personal, professional, social, and religious, they stumble on them with others who are also struggling. So, since organizations of all types, including families, are just collections of individual people, they too run into the same problems with which the individuals who compose them contend.

It has seemed to me that the much of the struggling behavior is because far too many people act as if they lack some basic or fundamental wisdom about how human life and human beings operate. It is almost as if many of us did not have basic “grandparent wisdom” taught to us early on or, if we did, we aren’t using it. In businesses, churches, social organizations, marriages, parenting, relationships, etc. too many people continue to fumble the same basic issues that might not have tripped us if we understood and applied the fundamental laws of life our grandparents (and parents) might have taught us. Sadly, our parents and grandparents, themselves, might not have received the information either and so could not pass on to us what they, themselves, did not have to give.

I have never been quite sure if the problem is that people *do not know* these “laws of life”, that they know them *but don’t act on* what they know or, if they have some level of knowledge about them, that they *think that the laws somehow don’t apply to them*. The net effect, however, is the same. People continue to waste lots of their time, effort, and energy, and never really seem to achieve what they could if they deeply understood the laws that govern life and behave in keeping with these principles instead of trying to fight them. I have written this book in the hope that, by describing *some* of the most important “laws of life” and clearly indicating very specific things people can do to change their behavior to flow with rather than against each law, we can all get more of what we want and less of what we don’t.

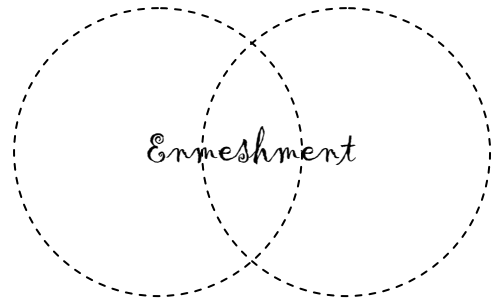
If even one person who reads this understands just one of these laws and changes even one behavior to get more of what s/he wants out of life, then I will have succeeded. That is my hope for you...and for me.

Chapter 1

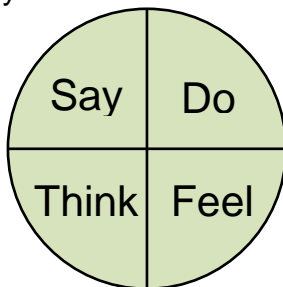
You, alone, are responsible for your behavior, and only your behavior.

When you look back at Earth from space you notice that there are no boundary lines between countries or between states or provinces. Blue water, greenish brown land, white clouds, and snowy mountain peaks—that’s what you see—but no boundaries. We humans have created the boundaries and we know where they are. That is a good thing in some ways since knowing where countries begin and end can make handling details like currencies and property disputes much easier. Knowing where *your* personal boundaries are is also a very good thing. Like the Earth, no one can look at you and see a line around the outside of you, but you have boundaries nonetheless. There is a place where you begin physically and even emotionally and there is a place where you end. Knowing where these boundaries are is a hallmark of maturity and psychological health.

Most people are pretty clear about their physical boundaries. They know where their body is and isn’t. The problem comes with emotional and psychological boundaries, though. Some people just don’t know where they begin and end psycho-emotionally. This is a big problem, too, because people who aren’t clear about their own psychological boundaries tend to “bleed” over into other people. Sometimes they do that so much they can’t tell at all anymore where *they* end and *someone else* begins. They get “enmeshed”. Enmeshment is a sign that somebody is taking way too much responsibility for someone else’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors or that someone has given up too much of their responsibility to another. The way to get un-enmeshed is to get very clear on *your* personal boundaries and personal responsibility. The first law of life can help us with this: You, alone, are responsible for your behavior, and only your behavior. Since this law has two parts, let’s look at each part separately and then we can put them back together.



This first part of this law is: “you, alone, are responsible for your behavior.” Actually, your own behavior is really one of the only things over which you have total control.



Since you have control over your own behavior, *you* are *responsible* for your behavior: what you *say*, *do*, *think*, and *feel*. “Responsible” means that what you do is a product of **YOUR choice** and **YOU** are the total *owner* of the behavior and its outcome. Not your mother, father, siblings, children, the government, etc. **YOU** are responsible, 100%, for what you say, do, think, and feel. There is no one else to blame for it and no one else who owns it or the outcomes of it. No one else can take

credit for it or deserves the good results that come after it. It is all about you because it is your behavior. You, alone, are the responsible party.

Everybody thinks that, right? Everybody knows, don't they, that they alone are responsible for themselves and their behavior? So we can just skip ahead past this law, right? Not so fast! Unfortunately we live in a modern society in which far too many people are pretty convinced that they *aren't* responsible for what they say or do. They think they are also not responsible for how they feel or what they think. They have turned over responsibility for what they say, do, think, and even feel to people around them. Sounds pretty much like they are victimized puppets, right? Well, they are certainly acting like that, aren't they? In fact, you probably know some or even lots of these people. You can tell which ones they are by what they say to themselves or others around them. You might even notice that, more often than you know, you say some of these things too. Let's listen to some and, as we do, notice if these are things you say to yourself or others frequently.

"He makes me so mad!"

"She made me say that."

"Nothing I do matters."

"I could lose weight if I were happier."

"It's your fault I don't have _____."

"He got me pregnant"... *or the male version*: "She trapped me by getting pregnant."

"If it weren't for my parents I would be happy."

"The real problem is my boss. Get rid of her and everything would be OK."

"If I didn't have all these negative thoughts, I would be happy."

"I can't wait for these kids to leave home...then things will be great again."

"If she would just get off my back our marriage would improve."

"I was happy until I married him—he's the problem."

"It's not my fault I am fat--McDonald's just serves really fattening food."

"I wouldn't think such nasty thoughts about him if he didn't deserve them."

"I'm the way I am all because of my parents/family."

Victim talk. Puppet talk. Disempowered talk. These are all statements indicating that the one who is thinking or saying them believes someone or something else is responsible for their emotions, actions, thoughts, words, etc. That is a lie, though, and it is one too many people desperately want to believe. In fact, the above statements are *all* lies that we may have told ourselves or others at some time in our lives. Maybe we have even said them many times in one day. Even today? The more we say them, the more we believe them, and the more we believe them and the victim-hood they describe, the more we act like a victim even if, in fact, we really aren't.

There really are true victims of the actions of other people or of events bigger than themselves but you and I are much less a victim that we often claim to be. Many of us like the title "victim" because we think it means that we don't have to take responsibility for our situation since the *fault* lies outside of us. The truth is that, in each of the above statements, the "fault" or, to use a better term, the "responsibility" lies in the lap of the

one saying or thinking each statement. Victim talk is a lie because you and I are always responsible for what we say and do and think and feel about a situation. We always have the choice of our response. It always belongs to us. How we choose to respond, no matter the events that happen or what someone else says or does to us, is always in our hands. Always. It is a law like other physical laws and it is one that cannot be ignored. Like Dracula when confronted with sunlight, people playing the role of “victim” hate to see the light of this truth because it means that they can’t hide anymore. It means that they have to stand up and take responsibility for themselves and their behavior. It means they have to grow up. The law of personal responsibility is unchangeable and until we each accept it and act based on it, we will simply get nowhere in life.

If you need any more evidence of rampant victim thinking, just look at what is depicted on TV. Let me share with you just two examples. First, over the years more and more smarmy ads from certain lawyers send the message to millions who want to see themselves as victims that somehow and in some way they have been hurt or damaged and deserve a monetary settlement from a doctor, insurance company, hospital, business, etc. for some injury they have “received.” The focus of the ad isn’t on fixing the problem it is on “how much money I can get for you if you retain me as your lawyer.” It really appeals to wannabe victims. Such ads are both an expression of a victim mentality that already exists and are reinforcers of even more victimhood and the ugly sense of “entitlement” (somehow I deserve for someone to give me something) that has grown in American society over the past 50 years. Second, we are assaulted each weekday with far too many daytime programs that depict dysfunctional, psychologically and emotionally unhealthy people acting out their dysfunction for the viewing audience to see as entertainment. Much of their behavior and nearly all their statements to each other are profound examples of the shirking of personal responsibility, unmanaged and uncontrolled anger spewed like mud at one another, and reflect the nastiest forms of victimhood. It is, somehow, always the other dysfunctional family member’s “fault” for something, isn’t it? Rarely does anyone take personal responsibility for their thoughts, words, or actions and the blame and shame goes on and on until the next commercial. Again, all this daytime dirt both reflects the victimhood that is already present in too many in our society and just reinforces more of it. Bottom line: TV demonstrates to us how much we already act like victims and provides us with more models of how to do it even better. It is sad and it is profoundly destructive—and it is called “entertainment.”

Let’s focus on something more positive. Something to put in place of all the victims we have been discussing and that will shed lots of light on the law of our responsibility for our behavior. That “something” is heroes. Heroes are people we admire, look up to, would like to emulate, and feel are models of some particular characteristic we think is excellent in human beings. It might seem that the time of heroes is past. Our information age in which we can learn even the tiniest details of the lives of noteworthy people has made it possible for us to discover unflattering things about people we might otherwise wholly admire. To some extent all the information dims the light of potential heroes. Perhaps it is healthy for us to realize that no one has achieved perfection and that even the best among us has failings. This does not mean, however, that we should

abandon honoring the greatness we see in others or that we should fail to be inspired by those who have achieved something notable. There is still a place for heroes. Honoring them and their achievements wakes us out of the dead space of victimhood. That is because heroes are actually the opposite of victims. They are the ones who realized that the law of responsibility for their own behavior *did* apply to them and they acted accordingly. They acted, owned their actions, were responsible for them, and enjoyed the positive results even if these results took years to reach fruit. Focusing on large and even small heroes around us inspires us to take similar action. Taking action based on our growing sense of personal responsibility is important because *you cannot, at the same time, act like a hero and act like a victim.*

Who are your heroes? Who do you admire or, at least, whose behavior do you admire in history, religion, sports, politics, social change, science, etc.? Who has done something noble or just or generous in your eyes? Even if they are not known to anyone but you—who has acted with honesty or integrity or selflessness in such a way as to inspire you? These are your heroes and it is good to identify them and keep them in mind because it will help you avoid the trap of irresponsible victim thinking.

Who isn't a hero to you? Whose behavior does not deserve your admiration? Do people who habitually say any of the above fifteen victim statements or ones like them inspire you? Does the behavior of people who *could* work but feel they are entitled to have someone else or the government take care of them fill you with admiration? Do the kind of statements and thoughts expressed by the mud-slinging people on those daytime TV shows make you proud? Do you really get excited by the mistaken idea that someone can "make" you mad, glad, sad—that someone can "make" you think or say or do or feel anything? Do you want to be like the people who cannot control their own anger and who explode without warning damaging relationships wherever they go? No. None of these are heroic or noble or admirable behaviors. These behaviors and the thoughts behind them take us down, not up. These are the worst of what you and I can do. And we know we can do better and be better. Much, much better. The key to doing and being better is taking total responsibility for your own behavior. The fact is, as the first part of the first law of life states, "you, alone, are responsible for your behavior." That is good and hopeful news.

It is also good news that the second part of this law states that you are responsible for "only your behavior"—not anyone else's. This is another place where knowing your boundaries comes in handy. Knowing where you "end" psychologically and personally tells you where your responsibility ends. Within your boundaries you are responsible. Within my boundaries I am responsible. People who are "enmeshed" get that way because they have blurred the boundaries that define where they begin and end or allowed the borders to erode altogether. They take too much responsibility for someone else's words, thoughts, deeds, feelings or give up too much responsibility for their own—or, even worse, they do both. The classic case of this is the dependent relationship that often develops between those related to drug and alcohol addicts. A spouse or other family members begin to take responsibility for the addict's substance use, try to "cover" for the addict, explain away their behavior, etc. This might have

started in tiny ways because of love for the addicted relative but it develops into a messy situation in which the addict remains addicted to the substance and the family becomes organized around the addiction, actually coming to depend on it. But the same kind of acceptance of too much responsibility for another's behavior can happen in lots of other relationships in which alcohol or drugs play no part. It is never healthy and almost always starts slowly, imperceptibly, and in tiny ways.

What do people who are taking too much responsibility for someone else's behavior say to themselves and those around them? How can we recognize them? Here are some examples:

"Oh, I'm sorry I made you feel that way."

"I can make you do it if I want to."

"It's my fault you didn't do your homework...I should have reminded you."

"Don't even bother asking him, I can tell you what he thinks."

"If it weren't for me you could have landed that job."

"It's my fault they got divorced."

"I know I made you say that."

"I'm really the reason she is so successful...she never could have done it without me."

"It's not his fault. I made him mad and he hit me."

"She's clueless unless I tell her what to think."

"Joan's in a bad mood again—it's my fault."

"If I had been kinder to him he wouldn't think so negatively of me."

"Mom is yelling because of me."

"If I were a better kid my parents wouldn't fight so much."

"Well, if I don't do it for him he won't do it for himself."

"If you get married your father will have to stop helping you financially."

Can you hear the "responsibility grabbing" in each of these statements? The person thinking or saying each is taking way too much responsibility for what someone else says, does, thinks or feels. You might even try reading each one of these statements again and see if you can tell, in each, whether the person is taking too much responsibility for someone else's: (1) words (2) actions (3) thoughts or (4) feelings. Why is taking too much responsibility for someone else's behavior so dangerous? Because to the extent that you take on the responsibility that actually belongs to someone else you:

- (1) relieve them of both the right and obligation to choose their own words, actions, thoughts, and feelings;
- (2) communicate to them and to yourself the lie that somehow you *should* do the choosing for them, and;
- (3) teach them that they are not really responsible for what they say, do, think, feel and so do not deserve, 100%, either the positive or negative results.

By taking over the responsibility that belongs to someone else you cheat them out of what belongs to them and you cheat yourself out of focusing on that for which YOU are responsible. After all, if you are taking over my responsibility, you are simultaneously neglecting your own to some degree. We both lose. You learn to be overly responsible for things that don't belong to you and I learn to be irresponsible. You crash through my boundaries and I let you stomp where you will--very unhealthy for both of us.

What is the cure? Simple. Each person must look very critically at where the boundaries should be drawn and who is responsible for what. The easiest way to redraw the appropriate boundaries is to focus on behavior. You are responsible for everything you say, do, think, or feel—all of that is your territory around which your personal boundary is drawn. I, likewise, am responsible for everything I say, do, think, or feel. Look and listen for any statement or action that suggests that someone is taking responsibility for someone else's words, deeds, thoughts, feelings or not taking enough responsibility for their own. Flag it. Point it out. Correct it immediately. Perhaps the easiest way to keep yourself on the up and up about this is to memorize and say to yourself the first law of life: "You, alone, are responsible for your behavior, and only your behavior." Live it.

