

# Heavy Metal

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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In our Unitarian Universalist tradition, we often outline a process for seeking norms on how we'd like to get along with each other, and we refer to this process as being in *Covenant* – this is something we'll continue to explore in the coming weeks and months.

Now, let's start with one norm that many of you will be familiar with – the Golden Rule “*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*”. The Golden Rule appears in the gospels of Matthew (7:12) and Luke (6:31). It recalls wisdom from the Hebrew scriptures – in Leviticus, there is a commandment: “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). Other traditions have ethical pronouncements that echo the sentiment of reciprocity offered by the Golden Rule.

I'd like to invoke another kind of scriptural source here, which is the last book by astronomer Carl Sagan, called *Billions & Billions*. I like it because he devotes an entire chapter to discussing several ethical rules to live by. The chapter is called “The Rules of the Game” – and if you're curious, there's a link to it on the web version of this sermon.

In pointing out different ethical guidelines that have similar formulations, Carl Sagan lists them with according “metal” names. The

more noble-sounding ones, are given names of what are called “noble” metals, like gold and silver, which do not easily tarnish, while the approaches that sound less noble, tend to recall the names of lesser value metals.

Among these “metal” rules, is the similar-sounding Silver Rule – a negative formulation of its Golden counterpart – “*Do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto you*”. At first hearing, it sounds deceptively identical, except the Golden Rule promotes active positive action – to benefit others as you would like the same – while the Silver version seems more focused on preventing reciprocal harm. And depending on the situation, the outcomes might be different.

Similarly, the Brass or Brazen Rule is more reactive – *Do unto others as they do unto you*. It functions as a response to others’ actions. And it’s the basis of what is more commonly known as Tit-for-Tat. This is a fairly standard rule, perhaps one of the most widely followed, even without us realizing it. And perhaps this is because it does not call for the level of self-reflection as the Silver and Golden Rules do, as they ask us first *how* we love ourselves, so that this may be a guide towards how we treat others.

This is perhaps the ennobling attribute of the “nobler” metal rules – Silver and Gold – as they call for self-reflection and invite you to value self-love, which is even more valuable if this self-reflection becomes a guide on how you love your neighbour.

Back to the Brazen Rule, and its derivative, Tit-for-Tat – these also risk unhealthy cycles... it works all fine and good as long as others are playing along by treating you the way you’d like, and you treating them in kind. But as soon as someone treats their neighbour poorly, a never-ending cycle of retaliation is liable to begin in a kind of perpetual vendetta.

The reciprocal nature of these rules is broken by the more unscrupulous Iron Rule – *Do unto others as you like, before they do it unto you* – and

its moral compass seems to be based strictly on immediate self-interest and the capacity to get away with it.

There is also an odd hybrid between the Golden and Iron Rules – Sagan phrases it as *Suck up to those above you, and abuse those below* – and he calls this one the Tin Rule, describing it essentially as the Golden Rule for superiors and the Iron Rule for inferiors. Examples of this ethic are easy to find these days.

Lately, the Golden and Silver Rules come to mind around the question of why we wear masks. When health authorities began recommending them, they made it clear that their purpose was less about protecting oneself directly, and more about protecting others from potential harm... from *us*.

*If you value being protected from potential harm coming from others, and you applied either the Golden or Silver Rule, then the ethical outcome is quite clear – you wear a mask.*

But even this example exposes some of the issues that come with these noble metal rules. What happens when you apply the rule, but don't value that personal protection? Or, more generally, if you haven't explored in some depth what it means to love yourself?

If you apply the Golden Rule without a sense of what it means to love yourself, the Golden Rule won't do your neighbour much good, if they're treated in a way that isn't respectful of the self.

Or maybe you *do* love yourself and are totally game to treat others in the same way you honour yourself... but maybe it turns out that the way you honour yourself is not the way others would like to be honoured! What happens if someone *meant* to treat you well according to *their* standard, but the effect on you was the opposite, since the way they'd like to be treated might not line up with how *you'd* like to be treated?

In fact, one of the criticisms of the Golden Rule, is that it does not seem to take into account differences in personal *and* cultural expectations on what it means to treat your neighbour well. So, what does it mean when these well-intentioned ethical guidelines still fail to treat others with the respect they need, even if followed to the letter?

There is one “metal” rule that Carl Sagan doesn’t mention, but which has gained popularity. It is called the Platinum Rule – *Do unto others as they would like to have done unto them*. This one could be seen as more noble than the Silver and Golden versions, in that it shifts the focus from *our* wants or needs, to those of the recipient. In this way, it removes the risks of the Silver and Golden Rules, where the frame of reference is yourself, since you might happen to have different priorities than your neighbour.

One of my favourite aspects of the Platinum Rule is that it adds that extra dimension to the ethical dynamic. Not only is it an imperative to do a positive action toward your neighbour – the kind of action *they* would like, in fact – but it raises the question: What does your neighbour want, or need?

The Platinum Rule, therefore adds a layer of relationship-building. It invites you to explore the needs of your neighbour before acting towards them and potentially offering something that might well be detrimental – however well-intentioned you may have been – based on your own perception of your needs.

Nonetheless, the Platinum Rule runs a different risk than the other noble “metal” rules... it might minimize the layer of self-reflection that seeks to recognize self-love, by prioritizing your neighbour. Adopting an ethical basis based purely on the Platinum Rule might not only risk losing sight of the importance of self-care – it could, by extension, open one up to extreme vulnerability of self-neglect and abuse by others. And it wouldn’t necessarily benefit society as a whole – just because a neighbour wishes to be treated a certain way does not mean that it would be beneficial to your other neighbours, let alone yourself.

So where does this leave us?

The way I see it, the value of these rules lies less on a drive to live purely by any one of these rules, and rather, to wrestle with the questions they raise about how we value ourselves, how we value our neighbours, and how we value our community.

My friends, if we stay on our toes, and consider the questions and the considerations that these rules bring up, then we may well forge them into a sort of “Ethical Alloy”, that combines their mutual strengths into a more solid set of ethical guides. Asking what it means to love ourselves, considering how others might love themselves, exploring the needs of our neighbour, and remembering, the wider community of neighbours, and how actions might affect them – these are helpful skills to nurture when building a community of right relations.

My friends, when we build Covenants in our communities, we are not looking to simply optimize our self-interest, nor are we looking solely to selflessly serve others at the expense of our own needs and fulfillment – we are rather seeking to build a community of exploration, of healing, of forgiveness and acceptance. We seek to build a community where we can get to know our neighbours – where we can get to appreciate and value our neighbours... and where they can get to know and appreciate us. We seek to build a community where love is our guide – love for ourselves, love for others, and love for the interdependent web of which we are all part.

So may it be,  
In Solidarity,  
Amen