

LYLE'S LAWS

Lyle's Law of Reasons

Card playing has never been an especially popular activity for me, but over the years I have enjoyed a few games of poker, hearts, and some others whose names I don't recall. The game of hearts is fun because it is reasonably simple, involves both luck and skill, and requires a certain amount of strategy. For those unfamiliar with the game, the entire deck is dealt to four players who then play their cards and take "tricks." The object of the game is to avoid taking hearts or, especially, the queen of spades. Each heart counts one point against you; the queen of spades—which has several uncomplimentary nicknames—counts 13.

There are other features of the game that could make taking the queen of spades a good thing, but usually, it hurts. One friend of mine, when someone stuck him with the queen, would always say, "Now why did you do that?" Why, indeed? Of course, everyone knew the answer. The sticker stuck the *stickee* to help the sticker win and the *stickee* lose. But my friend used the occasion to feign a whine and we all enjoyed a good laugh. That question, however, can provide a lot of insight and should probably be asked more often—not to analyze what we did but to guide what we should do. To this end, I will posit Lyle's Law of Reasons: *If you do things for the right reasons, you will probably do the right things.*

So how do we decide which reasons are right? A few misanthropes might argue that it is not right to feed the hungry or to shelter the homeless, but most people would say those are pretty good motives. At the other end of the spectrum, it is hard to believe that the desire to get revenge or to punish someone could be considered to be noble reasons for doing something. Between these two extremes—feeding the hungry and exacting revenge—things can get pretty fuzzy. What constitutes a right reason or a noble motive? Philosophers have pondered and argued this question for centuries, and I won't be so bold as to try to add anything to the discus-

sion. That's not the point of this law, anyway. We don't need to agree on what is right or on how right something is, because the only reason for doing so is that we could then apply the law to someone else. That's not what this law is for. It is for you to apply to yourself.

So how do you apply Lyle's Law of Reasons to yourself? It is simple, but it is not easy. We are always told to

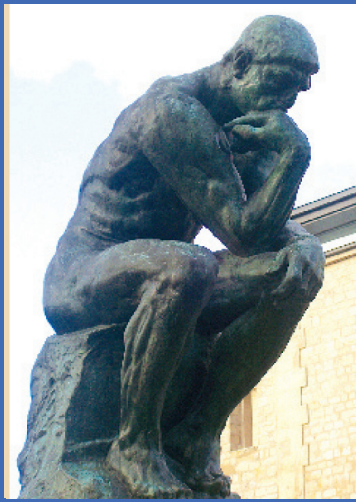
ask ourselves, "Is this the right thing to do?" This law says that it is even more helpful to ask, "Why am I doing this?" Am I doing this for the right reasons? And you have to be brutally honest. Why are you *really* doing it? And I would suggest that if the word "I" or the word "me" occurs in the statement of your reasons, you need to take another long, long look. Not that you don't have to take care of your own interests. Of course you do. But there is a difference between self-interest and selfishness, and only you can sort that out.

In our work and in our lives outside work, we are faced with many choices. Some are easy; for instance, should I obey the law? Well, of course you should. But it is remarkable how often people can convince themselves that this is a stupid law and probably doesn't apply to them or to this circumstance anyway. And you know, there are times when a law should be disobeyed. Civil disobedience was at the core of what Gandhi and Martin Luther King and, indeed, George Washington did. But those three—and

many others—would have passed the test of the Law of Reasons. They had good reasons for doing what they did. The right reasons. And sure enough, what they did was the right thing to do.

Let me hasten to add that just because you are doing the right things, it doesn't mean you are necessarily doing things right. There are many paths that are paved with good intentions, and we know where those paths lead. How often I have undertaken to do the right thing—and for the right reasons—and ended up botching the job. But correcting the problem of my ham-handedness is

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best left to laws authored by such luminaries as Peter Drucker and W. Edwards Deming rather than Lyle. I am comforted, though, by having tried to do the right thing for the right reasons. I would rather be criticized for not doing something well than for, well, not doing something.

If I may digress—and of course I may because I am doing the writing—I would like to suggest the application of the Law of Reasons to our criminal justice system. This system metes out various penalties, ranging from fines to public service to incarceration to death. I have often wondered what the system is designed to accomplish; *why* do we assign these penalties? If it is to remove the perpetrators from society so they cannot offend again or to teach the offender that such offenses will not be tolerated, those seem to me to be good reasons. But some penalties, it seems to me, are intended to exact revenge or just to punish because it makes us feel better. These reasons, I would suggest, are not worthy of an advanced society, which I hope we are. And if they are not the right reasons, the penalties we exact may not be the right things to do. It's worth considering.

Once again, as I write these words, I fear that I come off as preaching. That is not my intent. I am as frail as many, more frail than most, and certainly not qualified to preach. I have, however, thought at length about these things and want to share these thoughts with you. And I do believe I am doing so for the right reasons.

—Lyle D. Feisel, Ph.D., P.E., *Iowa Alpha '61*



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This small Bent, floating weightlessly in front of a window at the International Space Station, was photographed by **Capt. Stephen G. Bowen**, *Maryland Gamma '86*, when he was a mission specialist on space shuttle flight STS-126 during November 14-30, 2008. The Bent belongs to **Dr. Richard C. Rapson Jr., P.E.**, *Indiana Beta '63*, who works for NASA at Kennedy Space Center. Another Bent casting, polished by Dr. Rapson in 1963, traveled aboard mission STS-132 in May 2010.

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