

## Set the Rules for Your Life

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

Several years ago, I was on the island of Kauai in a very small, out-of-the-way restaurant with my wife. We had driven to one of the more remote areas of the island far away from the resort where we were staying.

Seated at a table not too far from us was a group of four or five couples with young children. The children were wearing soccer shoes and the parents all seemed very familiar with one another. As I listened, I could tell that a few of the people at the table had New York accents. Since they were so close to us, we could overhear their conversations and it was clear the people were “local” and had probably moved to Kauai from somewhere else.

When we had finished eating and went up to pay for the bill, I decided to talk to one of the couples sitting at the table. In as indirect a way as possible, I asked them how long they had been living in Kauai. The man told me he had been a teacher in New York City and relocated with his wife a few years ago. Other couples sitting at the table had similar stories about moving to Kauai at some point in the past decade or so.

“It’s the best decision we ever made,” the man said. “This place is paradise. Everyone thought we were crazy but we love it.”

The other couples sitting at the table all nodded in agreement.

I am not sure if most people would be happy living on an isolated, small island in Hawaii. What I do know, though, is:

- This man and his family probably have a much calmer, sunnier, and relaxing life living on the outskirts of a small tropical island than they might have had they stayed in New York City.
- They probably also have far fewer **opportunities** for economic advancement, less access to culture, fewer people with similar interests.

There are trade-offs for every decision we make. What’s the best life for one person may not fit another’s at all.

Nothing is more important than designing the life you want. For the man I met, living in Kauai represented the life he wanted. For other people, living in a major city might represent this life.

A life on your own terms is more than about where you live geographically, though. A life on your own terms also involves such things as how many hours a day you work, the sort of work you do, the people you spend your free time with, the religion you choose to follow, what you do on the weekends, and more.

One of the most useful exercises you can do is to simply write down what you really like and want in your life. You need to create a life that makes you happy. I believe it is always a good idea to make a column of these things.

I have done an example of one myself here:

### Like

Sleeping 8 hours a night  
Reading interesting books  
Exercising  
Living at the beach  
Going out to dinner  
Reading to my children every night  
Being creative on a daily basis  
Working cooperatively with people  
Spending time with interesting people  
Working in a bright, sunny office  
Improving weekly

### Dislike

Not sleeping enough  
Not reading interesting books  
Not exercising  
Living in a city  
Staying home every night  
Being away from home in hotels alone  
Following orders and not being creative  
Fighting with people  
Spending time with arrogant people  
Working in giant skyscrapers  
Not improving, staying the same

You get the idea. I have made lists like this for at least the past fifteen years and I make them at least once a year. By making this list I am able to ensure that I am designing the life that gives me absolutely the most fulfillment possible and is a life designed on my terms.

Please keep in mind, that the life I “dislike” could be the life that someone “likes.” For example, the column I have written for “dislike” describes, to a great extent, what my life was like when I was an attorney. Many people enjoy life as an attorney and

there is absolutely nothing wrong with this life—it is just not the life I want.

One thing I have done in my life, for example, is live at the beach. I live in Malibu, California, and love living at the beach. It is really not more expensive to live at the beach than in other areas of Los Angeles—you can find a cheap rental apartment or house. It is a lifestyle choice. I live where I do because I like living in a beach community. I have lived in downtown Los Angeles, New York City, Detroit, and various suburbs and I think it is great where I live now. I live where I do because I made a decision long ago to design a life on my own terms—and not the terms of someone else.

Many people I know commute two or more hours each way to work each day. Some people hate living this sort of life. They dread the drive each day and hate sitting in traffic. Other people love this sort of life. One of my neighbors in Malibu is a doctor and drives two hours to work each day. He loves the drive because it is the only time he gets to listen to classical music uninterrupted. Prior to becoming a doctor, he was a musician and he relishes listening to classical music on a daily basis. He relishes driving a few hours to work each day.

I like to do things like yoga and meditation, riding my ATV, spending Saturday afternoon in bookstores, writing articles like this, and more. There are plenty of people I encounter on an ongoing basis who think my lifestyle is nuts. But it makes me happy. If I listened to other people in terms of how to live my life, I would never be happy. I have designed my own life on my terms.

- Had I gone to medical school and were I working in a hospital in a big city twelve hours a day, I would be extremely unhappy. I hate science. I dislike working under fluorescent lights. I cannot stand the sight of blood. I hate the smell of hospitals. I hate living in large cities.
- If I came home each night and I was married to a woman who did not speak any English, I would be even unhappier. (I have actually known men who married women overseas because they felt this was an asset!!) I love to communicate and this makes me happy.
- Furthermore, if I never got time to exercise, this would make me even unhappier.

In fact, just these three things wrong in my life would make me incredibly miserable. I would hate life and everything about it.

Many people spend their lives living on terms they are not happy with. They take **jobs** they cannot stand. They socialize with people they do not like and enjoy. They live in geographic areas that make them miserable. They spend their lives dreaming about doing something different with their time and energies instead of doing what they want now.

When you like what you are doing and you design your own life, your world changes and everything brightens. The world is a much happier place for you and you have more happiness, skill, and so forth to give to the world. One of the most important possible things you can do is to design your own life—and not have it designed by others.

The key to being happy in your life is designing your life to be on your own terms. It literally does not matter what you do. Your dream could be living in a small town as an auto mechanic, or it could be as a ski instructor at a large resort in Colorado. Whatever you do in your career and life, though, it should always be on your own terms. You need to structure your life in a way that is fulfilling for you and not a vision of what you think you should be—or a vision someone else has created for your life.

The problem with most lives and careers is that people are structuring them based on someone else's terms—or an idealized vision that they have in their head of the way their lives should be. If you do not choose the life you want for yourself, someone else will choose it for you and it is never going to be the life that you want and will never be as good as the life you can imagine on your own terms.

About the worst thing that can happen to us occurs when we are unable to design our own lives. To punish various crimes, the government typically takes away criminals' freedom and puts people either in prison or in mental hospitals. Here, the person's activities and time are tightly controlled and watched over. The person is told when to wake up, when to eat, when to sleep, when to exercise, when to shower, and more.

It is not easy designing your own life.

I am sure you have heard various statistics about people who get out of prison. Most of them end up going back within a short time. The reason for this, I believe, is often that people who get out of prison have not developed the skills to design the life they want. As is true with many people, they are often more comfortable having a life designed and set out for them than they are structuring and creating their own lives.

The greatest gift you have is the fact that you can design your own life in any way you choose—and on your own terms. You are completely in charge of what happens in your life. You set the rules.

Ultimately, what everyone wants is to be happy. To be happy, you need to create a life on your terms.

## THE LESSON

To be happy, you must create the life that you want on your own terms. Structure your life in a manner that is fulfilling to you, rather than a vision of what you want to be or a vision that outside influences have created for you. The inability to design your own life is one of the worst tragedies that can befall you. When you design your own life you are in complete charge of your life's events, and you set the rules any way you choose.