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Life Isn't Fair — Deal With It

By Mike Myatt
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Mike Myatt is a bestselling author and a columnist. Commonly recognized as an authority on the subject of leadership, he believes that leadership "exists to disrupt mediocrity." As you read this opinion piece, take notes on the author's tone.

- [1] There seems to be a lot of talk these days about what is fair, and what is not. President Obama seems to believe life should be fair — that “everybody should have a fair shake.” Some of the 99% seem to believe life has treated them unfairly, and some of the 1% feel life hasn’t treated them fairly enough.¹ My questions are these: What is fair? Is life fair? Should life be fair? I’ll frame the debate, and you decide...



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We clearly have no choice about how we come into this world, we have little choice early in life, but as we grow older choices abound. I have long believed that while we have no control over the beginning of our life, the overwhelming majority of us have the ability to influence the outcomes we attain. Fair is a state of mind, and most often, an unhealthy state of mind.

In business, in politics, and in life, most of us are beneficiaries² of the outcomes we have contributed to. Our station in life cannot, or at least should not, be blamed on our parents, our teachers, our pastors, our government, or our society — it’s largely based on the choices we make, and the attitudes we adopt.

People have overcome poverty, drug addiction, incarceration, abuse, divorce, mental illness, victimization, and virtually every challenge known to man. Life is full of examples of the uneducated, the mentally and physically challenged, people born into war-torn impoverished backgrounds, who could have complained about life being unfair, but who instead chose a different path — they chose to overcome the odds and to leave the world better than they found it. Regardless of the challenges they faced, they had the character to choose contribution over complaint.

1. The "99%" refers to income inequality and wealth distribution between the wealthiest 1% and the rest of the American population. In September 2011, demonstrators protesting greed and corruption among corporations, financial institutions, and politicians gathered in Zuccotti Park, located in New York City's Wall Street financial district. They began a movement known as "Occupy Wall Street," intended to draw attention to the massive divide of wealth in the United States. According to economist Joseph Stiglitz, "[I]n our democracy, 1% of the people take nearly a quarter of the nation's income.... In terms of wealth rather than income, the top 1% control 40%."
2. **Beneficiary** (*noun*) a person who derives an advantage or benefit from something

[5] I don't dispute that challenges exist. I don't even dispute that many have an uphill battle due to the severity of the challenges they face. What I vehemently³ dispute is attempting to regulate, adjudicate,⁴ or legislate⁵ fairness somehow solves the world's problems. Mandates⁶ don't create fairness, but people's desire and determination can work around or overcome most life challenges.

It doesn't matter whether you are born with a silver spoon, plastic spoon, or no spoon at all. It's not the circumstances by which you come into this world, but what you make of them once you arrive that matter. One of my clients came to this country from Africa in his late teens, barely spoke the language, drove a cab while working his way through college, and is now the president of a large technology services firm. Stories such as this are all around us — they are not miracles, nor are they the rare exception. They do however demonstrate blindness to the mindset of the fairness doctrine.

From a leadership perspective, it's a leader's obligation to do the right thing, regardless of whether or not it's perceived as the fair thing. When leaders attempt to navigate the slippery slope of fairness, they will find themselves arbiter⁷ of public opinion and hostage to the politically correct. Fair isn't a standard to be imposed unless a leader is attempting to impose mediocrity. Fair blends to a norm, and in doing so, it limits, inhibits, stifles, and restricts, all under the guise of balance and equality. I believe fair only exists as a rationalization or justification. The following 11 points came from a commencement speech widely attributed to Bill Gates entitled *Rules for Life*. While many dispute the source, whether it was proffered by Bill Gates or not, I tend to agree with the hypothesis:

Rule 1: Life is not fair — get used to it!

Rule 2: The world won't care about your self-esteem. The world will expect you to accomplish something BEFORE you feel good about yourself.

[10] **Rule 3:** You will NOT make \$60,000 a year right out of high school. You won't be a vice-president with a car phone until you earn both.

Rule 4: If you think your teacher is tough, wait till you get a boss.

Rule 5: Flipping burgers is not beneath your dignity. Your Grandparents had a different word for burger flipping — they called it opportunity.

Rule 6: If you mess up, it's not your parents' fault, so don't whine about your mistakes, learn from them.

Rule 7: Before you were born, your parents weren't as boring as they are now. They got that way from paying your bills, cleaning your clothes and listening to you talk about how cool you thought you are. So before you save the rain forest from the parasites of your parent's generation, try delousing⁸ the closet in your own room.

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3. **Vehemently** (*adverb*) with strong feelings; enthusiastically or forcefully
 4. to make an official judgment or decision about a dispute or problem
 5. **Legislate** (*verb*) to write and pass laws
 6. **Mandate** (*noun*) an official order or commission to do something
 7. **Arbiter** (*noun*) having ultimate authority in a matter
 8. "Delousing" refers to the process of ridding someone or something of lice and other parasitic insects.

[15] **Rule 8:** Your school may have done away with winners and losers, but life HAS NOT. In some schools they have abolished failing grades and they'll give you as MANY TIMES as you want to get the right answer. This doesn't bear the slightest resemblance to ANYTHING in real life.

Rule 9: Life is not divided into semesters. You don't get summers off and very few employers are interested in helping you FIND YOURSELF. Do that on your own time.

Rule 10: Television is NOT real life. In real life people actually have to leave the coffee shop and go to jobs.

Rule 11: Be nice to nerds. Chances are you'll end up working for one.

Here's the thing — we all face challenges, and life treats us all unfairly. We all make regrettable choices, and we all suffer from things thrust upon us due to little if any fault of our own. When I suffered a debilitating⁹ stroke at an early age, I certainly asked myself “why did this happen to me?” I could have felt sorry for myself and became bitter, I could have thrown in the towel and quit on my family and myself — I didn't. It took two years of gut-wrenching effort, but what I thought was a great injustice at the time changed my life for the better. Today, you couldn't tell I ever had a stroke. The greatest adversity life can throw at you simply affords you an opportunity to make changes, improve, and get better.

[20] By the title of today's column you have no doubt surmised I believe life is not fair, nor do I believe we should attempt to socially or financially engineer it to be such. Fair is not an objective¹⁰ term — it is a matter of perspective filtered by a subjective¹¹ assessment. My subjective assessment is that fair is an entitlement¹² concept manufactured to appease those who somehow feel slighted. Life isn't fair — #occupyrealty

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9. **Debilitating (adjective)** making someone very weak or sick
 10. **Objective (adjective)** not influenced by a person's opinions or feelings
 11. **Subjective (adjective)** based on personal opinions and feelings rather than on facts
 12. **Entitlement (noun)** the belief that a person is deserving of something