

How to Live

What's in it for me? Uncover the secrets of a sixth-century rulebook on living well.

The learnings of a sixth-century monk aren't the life lessons most of us would ever imagine needing. But, believe it or not, there are many ways in which the sixth century mirrors our own. At that time, Roman society was changing. People were losing faith in political leaders, and concerns about race, religion, and foreigners were dividing the public. In the middle of this turmoil, a man named Benedict of Nursia believed there was a better way to live. So he started his own monastery and laid down clear ground rules for building a harmonious community. The Rule of St. Benedict was collected in 73 chapters. As you'll find out, it's just as relevant now as it was then. In these blinks, you'll learn

what the sci-fi movie *Arrival* teaches us about peaceful communication; how a haiku can act like a prayer session; and the Benedictine secrets to good work-life balance.

St. Benedict encouraged his community to listen deeply in order to better understand one another.

When St. Benedict established his monastery, he was trying to escape the greed and injustice of the world around him. You may think of monks as solitary – after all, monk comes from the Greek word *monos*, meaning one – but St. Benedict's intention was to build a happy community. To do so, he needed a set of principles to guide how that community would work. And so The Rules of St. Benedict were born. The pillars of Benedict's vision were simplicity, humility, hospitality, gratitude, and praise. But to make those stick, there was one rule he put above all others: the art of listening. The key message here is: St. Benedict encouraged his community to listen deeply in order to better understand one another. At the heart of the Benedictine rule book is a call for better listening and for people to clearly communicate and understand one another. Benedict believed that without these three things, a community is doomed to fall apart. If you've seen the 2016 movie *Arrival*, you'll know it has a similar message. When aliens descend on Earth, the world's superpowers are ready to start blowing things up – that is, until a linguist saves the day by listening, communicating and, eventually, understanding that the aliens are peaceful and just trying to help. As with the aliens from the movie, when we meet new people or people who are different from us, we need to call on the same skills. It's all too easy to block out voices that seem strange, but if we're going to thrive, we need to not just listen but, as Benedict urges us, to “listen with the ear of the heart.” This well-known Benedictine phrase means truly hearing other people. Of course, just because it's well-known doesn't mean it's easy. It takes an awareness of our own tendencies. The author, for example, was taken aback when a colleague said she could sometimes come across as aggressive and condescending in meetings. Even though it came as a bit of a shock, she took the advice to heart and found a way to listen more and be less forceful with her opinions. You are constantly listening to your own voice. In order to thrive as part of a community, Benedict

encourages you to listen to outside voices as well.

In order to live fully, you must awaken to your surroundings and to the inevitability of death.

One of the author's favorite fictional characters is Zorba, hero of the novel *Zorba the Greek*. Zorba is boisterous and larger than life. He embraces each day with enthusiasm, as if he may die at any minute. For the rest of us, of course, that all-or-nothing attitude is more rare. We're torn between wanting to embrace life and running on autopilot. When each day asks so much, it can be easy to fall into a routine to meet the constant demands. But living like this takes a toll on our well-being. Throughout *The Rule*, but especially in the early chapters, Benedict answers this concern with an urgent call to wake up – to open our eyes and make the most of the limited time we have. The key message is: In order to live fully, you must awaken to your surroundings and to the inevitability of death. When was the last time you were out in the middle of nature at three in the morning, when you could see the sky flooded with the stars of the Milky Way? When the author had this transformative experience, she was visiting the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky and was awake for first prayers at 3:15 a.m. Not only did she find it magical to gaze upon the stars at this time, but the silence of the night provided a powerful sensation. Benedict believed we should embrace these moments and that, by waking our senses to the sights, sounds, and smells around us, we begin to awaken our hearts. Benedict also believed in another key to living life to the fullest: not shying away from death. That's not to say we should look forward to it, but rather we should acknowledge its presence and use it as motivation to embrace life. During a visit to the monastery of Mount St. Scholastica in Kansas, the author describes how she got to spend time with many of the sisters, in particular an elderly nun called Sister Lillian who later died at the age of 96. Sister Lillian, like the others at the monastery, and unlike the author, wasn't at all afraid of death – perhaps, the author believes, because the sisters were comfortable that they had lived meaningful lives.

Silence and humility are important tools for living peacefully.

St. Benedict was smart. He knew that putting together a community of individuals could easily lead to fights, resentments, and any number of squabbles that cause problems for groups. In particular, he was worried about the harm that can come from gossip and complaining. Many chapters in *The Rule* deal directly with these concerns. They talk about how to build community so that we may live not just meaningfully, but peacefully. Among his nuggets of advice, Benedict warns us not to speak ill of others or grumble. In fact, he advises that, sometimes, it's better to bite your tongue completely. The key message here is: Silence and humility are important tools for living peacefully. Silence, then, is the key. Because while it can, of course, lead to fewer arguments, it can also lead to inner peace. True silence isn't just about shutting up. It's about quieting the mind, which – in our modern world – means stepping away from the noise of social media and putting away our phones. It's not always easy to get the right balance of silence and solitude – even monks find it hard. But they keep working at it because,

Even back in the sixth century, people knew that wisdom comes from nurturing your inner life – from avoiding distractions and quieting the mind. Another tool for peaceful living is humility. This can be tricky in a world where many of us have been taught to be bold and uncompromising to get what we want. But another way to look at humility is through a similar word: patience. Patience and love are what Benedict's call for humility is all about. He lays down 12 steps to get there, many of which are about knowing when and when not to talk. The steps are also about having more patience with others and asking others to be patient with us, because none of us is perfect. You'll recall the sisters from Mount St. Scholastica in the last blink. Well, this is why, when they're asked to work on a task together, they begin by facing each other and saying the words: "As Jesus would want it, have patience with me."

Tools like prayer and poetry can help you lead a more balanced life.

Building the perfect life is an impossible task. The same goes for relationships, family, community – there will always be problems. So don't try for perfection; instead, focus on how you can reduce the problems that come your way and look for the best approaches to resolving them. As we've learned, for his part, Benedict stressed the importance of humility, silence, and having a rich inner life to find balance. But those weren't the only things. Benedict also wanted to establish the value of work within the community. And, in particular, he wanted to remind people about the importance of not working. The key message is: Tools like prayer and poetry can help you lead a more balanced life. The author describes herself as an overachiever and a workaholic. In fact, at one point in her life she was hospitalized with anemia and exhaustion because she'd been ignoring the needs of her body for the sake of work. Benedict says this is the wrong approach. Work shouldn't cause distress, and we should never take on more than we can handle. Just as we devote time to our daily tasks, so we should also set aside moments for rest, leisure, and prayer. Monks do this by keeping to dedicated prayer times throughout the day in what is called the Liturgy of the Hours. But you needn't think of prayer as being strictly religious. Many secular activities serve a similar purpose – helping you step back from the demands of the day and refocus on the world around you and your place within it. In many ways, the haiku poetry form is similar to prayer – something which the author learned from Brother Paul during her time at Gethsemani Abbey. Traditionally, a haiku has three lines: the first is five syllables, the second seven, and the third five again. These short poems often refer to nature and the seasons, so writing one can offer you a moment to pause and capture the world around you in a brief observation. It's a practice that very much follows Benedictine principles, and one that can bring some peace of mind during a hectic day.

Forgiveness and hospitality are the keys to peaceful living.

As you're probably well aware, forgiveness isn't always easy to come by. If someone's hurt you or betrayed your trust, it can seem simpler to cut them off than find a path to forgiveness. But this kind of drastic action can leave you saddled with heavy emotional baggage. And in the long run, that's difficult to carry. St. Benedict knew this. He was certainly no pushover – the consequence for repeatedly breaking his rules was,

ultimately, excommunication – but he also had a policy of forgiveness. The key message here is: Forgiveness and hospitality are the keys to peaceful living. Before her parents died, the author was given the responsibility of handling their finances. Her name was put on their bank accounts so that she could handle funeral arrangements and take care of any other issues. The problem was, when her brother found out, he wasn't happy. He accused her of trying to take advantage and gain access to their parents' money. The accusation stung and the author got angry and lashed out at her brother. Now, 20 years have passed with barely a word spoken between them. Bearing a grudge is like carrying a heavy sack of stones with you wherever you go. It can both weigh you down and cloud your mind. This is why Benedict tells us, "If you have a dispute with anyone, make peace before the sun goes down." The Rule also says to be patient with people who've hurt you, and not to repay one bad turn with another. Instead of reacting with anger, the author now knows that she should've been more empathetic. Her brother had spent so much time taking care of their parents after they retired that it wasn't surprising that he was upset. She should have been more understanding. This kind of empathy is also at the heart of Benedict's call for hospitality. These days, we tend to revere the rich, showering them with special treatment. But if we follow The Rule we should switch this logic and recognize that it is the poor and hungry who deserve more from us. The Benedictine monasteries in America show this hospitality in action when they sponsor refugee families or help people in need in their communities, regardless of their beliefs or backgrounds.

The Rule offers wisdom not only on how to face our faults, but also on how to become better leaders.

Consider how you might like to be remembered when you're gone. What will keep you in people's minds? Will it be the wealth you've accumulated? The number of cars or homes you own? For Benedictine monks, it is the actions and the work that we undertake that will last. Trying to help those in need is central to these monks' efforts to lead a full life. But Benedict knew full well that it isn't always easy to make the right decisions. The key message here is: The Rule offers wisdom not only on how to face our faults, but also on how to become better leaders. In his autobiography, Bob Dylan recalls a formative moment when his grandmother shared some wise words: "Everyone you'll ever meet is fighting a hard battle." Benedict seems to have known something similar. We are all on a journey that is full of challenges; our troubles can get their hooks into us and refuse to let go. And if we're not careful, our thoughts and emotions can control us. This is why Benedict called on his community to admit their faults immediately, because in doing so they strip those faults of their power. It's something that's important for today's leaders to understand as well. The author is trying to let go of her desire for power and control. She knows firsthand how unhelpful it can be when a boss issues a do-it-because-I-say-so order. At the monastery, decisions are a process in which everyone has a say before anything is finalized. Again, this is an important step in maintaining a healthy community. In fact, for Benedict, it's more than that. Another word for leader is servant. We should consider that a leader ultimately works for the community. At their best, a leader is a teacher, never a tyrant. Leaders don't accept bonuses while cutting their employees' wages; they don't cover up misdeeds or blame others for their mistakes. They do what's best for those in their charge because they understand that their responsibility is to others, not themselves.

We must neglect nothing and remember to live with awe.

Piers Sellers was an astronaut who made three trips to the International Space Station. These journeys allowed him a view of planet Earth that few have ever seen. It was only upon seeing the planet from the distance of space that he understood how fragile and precious Earth is. We tend to think of the world's resources as being at our disposal. But in reality, we are only borrowing. Our homes, our relationships, our bodies, as well as our rivers and forests, are only on loan to us. They've been placed in our trust, and it is up to us to care for them. The key message is: We must neglect nothing and remember to live with awe. Simplicity is one of the pillars of Benedictine life. Most of us already have too many disposable goods and spend money on things we don't really need. But perhaps even more important than finding ways to live more simply is finding ways to live more in harmony with nature. In Chapter 31 of *The Rule*, Benedict tells us to "Regard all utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels of the altar." In other words, look at all parts of the world as contributing to the whole. When we see the Earth as made up of interconnected parts it becomes clearer that when one of those parts stops working, the whole community suffers. Take, for example, the US Forest Service, which started killing gray wolves in order to protect deer and cows, only to see the deer population explode. Not only that, but the deer then cleared vegetation from entire mountainsides, which endangered the lives of other animals. As Benedict shows us, we are just one part of a community: of animals, plants, soil, water, and air. For our own well-being, we must look after it all and neglect none of it. In monastic life, the monks express their awe and thanks to the world daily by offering blessings. Poets do this too by sharing the beauty they find in even the most harsh or mundane surroundings. Benedict tells us it is something that we must all keep in mind.

Meaningful work comes from having love for the world and combining action with contemplation.

Some of the world's greatest minds – historical figures like Aristotle and Plato – talk of work as something that gets in the way of the important business of thinking. The author's had the same problem. She's experienced the struggle of doing work that she loves while also trying to find the time for a more contemplative life. She loves her career as a journalist, but she's never found happiness in breaking the big story or seeing her name in print. Nor did happiness come when she landed a job at a bigger newspaper and won awards. Throughout her career she's worked tirelessly yet always felt something was missing. The key message here is: Meaningful work comes from having love for the world and combining action with contemplation. Benedict wanted to make work a holy pursuit. But to achieve this, work needs to be part of a life that is also respectful, that helps those who are helpless, and treats all that is given to you as sacred. In other words, your work should be one part of a life that is in service of loving the world. The Benedictine motto, *ora et labora*, means "pray and work." And the two are laid out in a balanced way throughout *The Rule*. It's clear that Benedict was aware that work without contemplation does not lead to a fulfilling life. The author tells the story of one of her favorite poets, William Carlos Williams, who kept a busy job as a

private practice doctor, yet also managed to maintain his contemplative nature and love for the world. He would say, “I take my poems where I find them,” and would happily jot down his thoughts on a prescription pad in between seeing patients. We need contemplation alongside work in order to nurture a rich inner life. But thinking all the time and never doing can be just as unfulfilling as being a workaholic. It’s all about finding that balance. Finally, there’s one last phrase from The Rule that you’re encouraged to keep in mind: *conversatio morum*. People have interpreted it in different ways: perhaps “conversion of morals” or “conversion of life.” But with the help of the sisters at Mount St. Scholastica the author understands that *conversatio* is the ongoing process – the everyday struggle that never really ends. Benedict doesn’t suggest that The Rule will turn people into perfect holy beings. What he does is simply offer guidelines that point us toward a better way of living.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: Even though it dates back to the sixth century, The Rule of St. Benedict still has a great deal of wisdom to offer. Benedict wanted to give newcomers to his monastery guidelines for living a peaceful life, including listening from the heart, not pushing your opinions on others, and leaving your ego at the door. He also stressed the importance of finding a balance between work, rest, and contemplation. It’s advice for all of us hoping to find more meaning and purpose in the world. Actionable advice: Reflect on how you define the Benedictine value of *conversatio* in your life. St. Benedict refers to *conversatio* as a way of turning toward a more virtuous way of living. But he also says that it can be a narrow path and a struggle to stay on. Consider the parts of your own life where turning toward a different path might help you make progress. For example, when thinking about the disagreements you have with other people, remember that they may be facing struggles of their own. If, as the monks do, you reflect on these questions each day, it may help you develop more patience and understanding. Got feedback? We’d love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with How to Live as the subject line and share your thoughts! What to read next: The Power of Ritual by Casper ter Kuile If you’re hungry for spiritual fulfillment but wary of organized religion, then head over to our blinks to The Power of Ritual. You’ll find lots of ideas on how to get the most out of your everyday activities, as well as helpful advice on how to break with feelings of disconnection and disillusionment. As these blinks show, you don’t need to be religious to find community and meaning in life.