

... From the Diary of a Bridge Savant...

As I advance into my decline, I am playing more and more at my local club. I sit quietly and observe the partnerships I play against. I am nauseated at how the individuals in these partnerships treat each other. Somehow, these individuals believe that their own thoughts and feelings are the only ones that matter. These individuals seem to have come to the belief that if only my partner would do this or do that--then everything would go well. What this individual forgets is that bridge is not an individual event--it is a partnership event.

When I was in my youth, posted on the wall, were The Ten Commandments. These ten aren't the ones found in the bible; these ten commandments are the foundation of building healthy and good long-term partnerships that can compete against anyone. I sit here and wonder what happened to this poster.

The first commandment is the building-block foundation of everything having to do with bridge: I should always obey my agreements. If I have an agreement--no matter how onerous I find it--I must obey the agreement. The basis of my partnerships is trust. Trust is earned by a disciplined expression of our agreements. If I violate my agreements--even just once--my partner will view me as untrustworthy and undependable.

The second commandment is a simple one: I should always trust my partner. The opponents are not on my side. The opponents are not trying to help me. In fact, the opponents seek to go out of their way to interfere with me. Why would I trust my opponents over my partner? I must trust my partner--my partner wants success as much as I do.

The third commandment is sometimes very difficult: I should respect my partner's judgment. Sometimes, I bid according to our agreements and my partner makes a penalty double. For any of a myriad of reasons, this double troubles me. Yet, I remember this commandment and no matter how much I hate my hand; no matter how much I think the double is wrong--I respect my partner's decision to double. After the dust settles, my partner is usually right.

The fourth commandment is ego-humbling: I should always take immediate responsibility for my mistakes. I find, in my decline, it always makes me more peaceful to say to my partner: my bad. That is all I have to say. A detailed conversation is not needed; we can do that later. Yet, a simple acknowledgment of a mistake I have made lets partner know that I have screwed up. They then feel no need to point out my mistake (a tragic undertaking).This offsets many problems at the table. The corollary to this is that bridge is a game of mistakes. My partner and I need to utilize our mistakes to become stronger players--rather than just discarding the mistake and never analyzing it. We can take a short period

after the game and go over where we went wrong. This constant assessment of how to improve our game can not help but make us better players

The fifth commandment is lost to the annals of time: I should only make simple system-clarifying statements at the table. Once the first hand is taken out of the first board and until the last hand of the last board is put away--there should only be very limited conversation. This conversation should be limited to: agreeing on the result; a "good job" to my opponent (never to my partner); or simple, easily resolved system questions between my partner and I. Gossip, remonstrations, and such should be reserved for the time between rounds. There is a tendency for slow play at our club. If each of us followed this commandment, I believe we would solve this problem.

The sixth and seventh commandments go hand-in-hand. These two commandments are the most abused and violated commandments at our club. If bridge were a religion, these commandments would damn most of us to hell. The sixth commandment is **PLAY THE NEXT HAND**. The seventh commandment is I should never embarrass partner at the table. Occasionally, my partner makes a mistake and I get upset. When I get upset, I become less rational and more someone I don't like very much. If I attempt to talk to my partner now, I violate the fifth and sixth commandments. I will also--in all likelihood--violate the seventh commandment. I have to stop. I have to play the next hand. This allows time for my emotions to dissipate some and for my rationality to return. This allows my partner and I to have a discussion where a positive outcome has a greater chance of occurring.

The eighth commandment is so very, very subtle: I should not make unilateral decisions. Sometimes, when I am playing with an inexperienced player, I make a decision without including them in the process. Sometimes--rather than sharing the responsibility of making a choice--I make the choice I think is best: for right or wrong. As I stated, this is very subtle. Once, I played with a competent partner who made three unilateral decisions in the first ten boards without even realizing it. As much as possible, I need to include my partner in the decisions of each hand. This goes back to the second commandment.

The ninth commandment is another ego-humbling commandment: I should consult others on matters of opinion. If I have a dispute with my partner when we are building a bidding-system, there are two ways I can settle this. The first way is the one I currently use: I compromise. We do this one thing my way, and we do this one thing your way. When I was fresher and younger, the second way appealed to me: I would poll two or three experts and see what they said to do. My partner and I would agree to abide by this poll. The second class of disputes I have had with my partners is about how to bid a hand. This is best settled privately, yet if this does not work--then I would poll two or three experts. I would give them both hands and any agreements about conventions and style pertinent to the hand. What I must never do is set forth to prove decisively that my partner is an idiot in this matter.

The tenth commandment is a summation of all the other commandments--and therefore the most important commandment: I should pay attention to my partner. I must not forget that my success is dependent on my partner. If my partner is nervous, then I must reassure him. If my partner is demoralized; then I must, brick-by-brick, rebuild his confidence. If my partner is suffering, then I must go out of my way to be kinder and more understanding. If my partner seems confused, then I must become a beacon. If my partner is becoming cocky and arrogant, then I must remind him to sit in his chair and play our agreements. I must put my partner before myself.

Some of these commandments may seem wrong and counter-intuitive, yet what if everyone followed these commandments--understanding that progress is more important than perfection. I surmise that not only would the atmosphere of the club improve--the quality of bridge played would also improve.