

## CLORE LEADERSHIP



# A Design for Life:

A personal rumination on the value of rules

Ross Millard

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## About the author

### Ross Millard

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Ross Millard is a musician who, with his Sunderland-based band The Futureheads, has recorded 5 studio albums and toured all over the world to commercial and critical acclaim. Since 2013, Ross has also worked as guitarist and songwriter with Sunderland band Frankie & The Heartstrings.

He has worked as Musical Director on Unfolding Theatre's 'Putting the Band Back Together' and co-Musical Director on Wildworks' 'A Great Night Out'. Ross is also Director of 'Summer Streets', an annual music festival held in Sunderland. He is a board member of Sunderland MAC Trust, and co-chair of What Next? Sunderland.

In Sunderland, in the autumn of 2000, I formed a band with three of my closest friends. We were in our late teens, and in the very midst of that formative transition from thinking we knew everything to realising that we actually knew nothing. Now, in a band, understanding who you are becomes the very bedrock from which your best material can be excavated. After all, “the unexamined life is not worth living” (or at least so said Socrates). At the same time, when you’re 18 or 19, it’s far more common to be exploring the back catalogue of Nick Drake and discovering the existential effects of one-too-many pints of Diesel than it is to be gaining an understanding of the Johari Window. And even now I’m of an age where it’d be difficult not to muster a snigger at what it might mean to “know thyself”.

Looking back on it now, we were four young, white, Mackem lads with foppish haircuts and a love of guitars (reductive but certainly true) who felt duty bound to have a go at doing something together, solely because we were such good mates. Starting a band was realistically the only option. One obvious problem did loom, however. What would we do when we got into the rehearsal room (Barry and Dave’s garage)? The first notes of the first idea in a brand-new band would be extremely decisive, undoubtedly. Who would introduce that initial idea? Who would dare set the template? Heavy lies the head that wears the crown and all that...

Except it didn’t happen in quite this way. We were teenagers, and we were probably a bit cocky, and certainly pretentious. We had all been in bands before, so the idea of ‘doing that again’ seemed passé and dreary (I was 18-what a twerp). This time there’d be a concept, a purpose, a design, a – dare I say it – manifesto. Parameters would need to be set, we decided, so that this band wouldn’t wade into murky waters, where semi-tanned blokes with muscle t-shirts and five-minute songs about love and America would jam all night. We set some procedural rules that, surprisingly, would stick and come to define us. It was possibly the best decision we ever made as a band. Somehow, we did it before barely playing a note.

We swiftly drafted up our six-point plan for The Futureheads, that went something like this:

1. SING IN OUR OWN ACCENTS
2. NO TALKING IN BETWEEN SONGS
3. SAY SOMETHING ONCE, WHY SAY IT AGAIN? DON’T REPEAT ANY SECTIONS
4. IF LOVE MUST COME INTO IT, THEN IT MUST BE UNCONVENTIONAL - OTHERWISE BORING
5. WE MUST ALL SING, ALL OF THE TIME (NO UNISON ALLOWED)
6. THE MUSIC MUST BE PLAYED FAST AND HARD

This brief play-book of things that we were and were not allowed to do was revelatory. Quite suddenly, there was identity. There were ideas. There were solutions to tricky problems with things like song structures, dynamics, tempo, purpose, intention. *The constraints were actually helpful.* We could be as ludicrous as we liked, but as long as we adhered to the tenets of the band, then it was permissible. I must say, it felt gloriously creative.

*"I personally love restrictions because that forces you to create within boundaries, and maybe you think of neat ideas because of these restrictions."*

David Lynch, film-maker and artist.

Something I feel that I should say, is that in the abstract, these self-defined principles can be as value-driven, aesthetically-oriented or fundamentally philosophical as one chooses them to be. The purpose is that they simply exist in the first place, and that they are applied without exception. A steadfast extension of a personal philosophy, I suppose, that seeps into all aspects of a professional or creative life as an extra layer of internal governance. Yes, really.

I hadn't particularly thought about these self-imposed constraints for quite a long time prior to starting my Clore Fellowship. However, given that the band is now only one of many plates that I find myself spinning, it occurred to me at some point earlier this year that I have employed no such procedural rules to the rest of my professional life. I have difficulty with saying no to projects, and over the past five years or so, I think it'd be fair to say that I haven't been particularly strategic about the work that I've chosen to take on. There have been some happy accidents along the way, but certainly no "starting with the end in mind" as businessman and scholar Dr Stephen R Covey would have it. After some consideration, a great deal of reflection and possibly some pontification, I decided that it might be a good idea to devise some new rules for myself.

Throughout this year, whilst I've been adventuring and experiencing what it means to be a Clore Fellow, I've met some incredibly inspirational people who are running arts organisations large and small around the UK. Obviously, there are a lot of things to try and pay attention to when you're speaking with someone for the first time, especially when the window of opportunity is short. However, I've been struck on several occasions in the last year by cultural leaders who have mentioned their own personal or procedural rules during our conversations. Sometimes unprompted, too. Now, there has been a lot of focus in the last twelve months for me on *visions* and *mission statements* and suchlike, which I appreciate are absolutely vital a lot of the time, but that's not what I'm talking about here. They don't quite cut the mustard because they can run away with themselves. They can be interpreted or passed down, and part of their function is the very notion that they aren't personal at all, but rather presiding, and, in theory, eternal. No, in this instance, I'm more interested in the 'guiding lines' that individuals choose to impose on themselves, in order to create parameters, restrictions or situations for better focus, purpose or direction.

Whilst keeping such thoughts respectfully anonymous, I've been inspired this year by the Director who won't have more than two meetings with a manager or agent before meeting the artist, and who won't programme a piece of work if it's also going to go to another venue somewhere else in the UK. I learned from an extraordinary organisation who spoke of "loyalty in return for freedom" through the implementation of task-based, rather than time-based, contracts. I attended a conference where a keynote speaker spoke of "reading for an hour a day, every day" and another who told of the importance of losing "the fear of being disliked" by actively choosing to speak up at all things they disagreed with, regardless of context.

There was a great piece of advice from one Director of a museum, a sector renowned for its paternalistic relationship with the public, who spoke of looking to “kill the father” when they joined the organisation as a leader. By that, I think, they implied that the old regime – the visible remnants of the previous Director - must be removed, or at the very least thoroughly disrupted, in order to bring about a new order of things – to signal a fresh start. There was an artist-leader who as a rule refused to ever use a studio, as it would feel “too much like work” to impose those confines. I heard from a retired politician and cultural advocate that they would never answer “no” but always “yes, if...”, and that person spoke very passionately about the change in positivity and focus within their organisation on account of this shift. On our second residential course, we heard from an Executive Director whose rule was to “always interview the unlikely candidate”, and, when discussing crisis management in particular, spoke of “setting the course, and delivering on it. Don’t deviate.” As cultural leaders, as with artists, there is process in everything we do, and there is meaning in everything we do. Sure, these rules as I’ve chosen to define them might walk a fine line between being defining factors of any given individual’s leadership style or *modus operandi*, and merely “pretty playthings” as American jurist and scholar Karl Llewellyn might have once flippantly described them. But there’s nothing to say that – at least occasionally – they can’t be both.

Of course, the rules for the band didn’t end up staying in place for our entire lifespan – things came and went, and we adapted the rules as we adapted our ideas on what the band was trying to achieve over the years. Over time our relationship with music changed, and new rules and ideas came into play. For each album, new rules. Each time, they’d become so implicit after a point that they would exist solely in our heads, unspoken. I often wonder if that was a mistake in itself. Even being scrawled on a whiteboard in the practice room might have served as a useful reminder at times.

Successes, failures, pressures and expectations all had their say, overtly or surreptitiously, over subsequent sets of rules. There were also times, later, that the rules periodically went out of the window altogether, and for me that’s where - artistically at least - we would sometimes fall a little short with some of the work.

I can’t overstate the value I place on the rules that we imposed, especially at the start of doing The Futureheads, and I’m annoyed with myself that I haven’t appropriated the idea for the rest of my working life before now.

Well, here goes with a new six-point set of procedural rules for implementation, starting now:

1. ONLY SAY YES TO PROJECTS WHERE THERE IS SCOPE FOR CREATIVITY
2. DON’T ALLOW ONE PROJECT TO TAKE UP ALL OF YOUR TIME, AT ANY GIVEN TIME
3. MAKE NEW WORK – OR PERFORM – EVERY WEEK
4. SAY YES TO CREATIVE OPPORTUNITIES THAT INVOLVE TRAVEL TO ANY NEW LOCATIONS
5. COLLABORATE TO CREATE AT LEAST ONE NEW LARGE-SCALE PROJECT EVERY YEAR

## 6. ADVOCATE FOR SUNDERLAND AND THE NORTH-EAST ANY CHANCE YOU GET

We live in an age where a multitude of online social channels provide endless possibilities for us to edit, sensor and re-format who we are and what we stand for. Might it not be a good idea to have something codifying to keep us on the right track, whatever track that might be? There are literally millions of quotes, memes and gifs flooding the online void with holistically-driven airy-fairy rubbish like “feelings are just visitors - let them come and go”, and these things do very little to advocate for the concept of personal rules. In fact, I can see why things like this would be enough to put someone off even trying to articulate theirs - but it was valuable to me once, and I have a feeling it’ll be valuable to me again.

During my year spent on the Clore Fellowship, there were two questions that came up that I haven’t been able to forget about. Both of these questions had me harking back to the rules of the band. They were: “What do you need in place in order for you to do your best work?” and “How, when you need to, do you do the most with the least?” The answer to both of these questions, for me, is provided through the focus and structure of having a personal manifesto, of sorts – a design for life. My life. I appreciate that for some, having a set of values, or a systematic ‘way of doing things’ is more than enough to be cracking on with. I also know that for many, there are enough constraints, biases and disadvantages already at play in the world that it might seem entitled and indulgent to wilfully look to impose more. But that would miss the point of this process. I think there is a discipline, integrity and compass in having such endemic rules. Sometimes it can be a way of ensuring you look after yourself. Sometimes it can be a bit of fun, no more no less. And sometimes – crucially – they just might end up being the rails that keep the train on the track.

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