

Review of *12 Rules for life: an antidote for chaos* by Jordan Peterson (UK: Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Books, Penguin Random House UK; 2018).

In January 2018, Jordan Peterson, a 56-year-old Canadian clinical psychologist and professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, with a particular interest in the psychology of religious and ideological belief, published his second book, a popular self-help book *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*.



Jordan Peterson, June 2018 (from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jordan_Peterson)

This followed his first book, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*, published in 1999, which examined several academic fields to describe the structure of systems of **beliefs** and **myths**, their role in the regulation of **emotion**, creation of **meaning**, and **motivation** for **genocide**.

When he was 13, Peterson was introduced to the writings of [George Orwell](#), [Aldous Huxley](#), [Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn](#), and [Ayn Rand](#) by his school librarian Sandy Notley, whose mother, [Rachel Notley](#), was the leader of the [Alberta New Democratic Party](#) and 17th [Premier of Alberta](#). He worked for the [New Democratic Party](#) (NDP) throughout his teenage years, but grew disenchanted with the party due to what Orwell diagnosed in *The Road to Wigan Pier* as a preponderance of "the intellectual, tweed-wearing middle-class socialist" who "didn't like the poor; they just hated the rich". He left the NDP at age 18.

After completing a BA in political science in 1982 he took a year off to visit Europe where he developed an interest in the psychological origins of the [Cold War](#), particularly 20th century European [totalitarianism](#), and was plagued by apocalyptic nightmares about the escalation of the [nuclear arms race](#). As a result, he became concerned about humanity's capacity for evil and destruction, and delved into the works of [Carl Jung](#), [Friedrich Nietzsche](#), [Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn](#),^[1] and [Fyodor Dostoyevsky](#). He then returned to the University of Alberta and received a B.A. in [psychology](#) in 1984 and a Ph. D. in clinical psychology in 1991 from [McGill University](#). After working as an assistant professor at Harvard University he became a professor at the University of Toronto.

The book grew out of Peterson's hobby of answering questions posted on [Quora](#), one being "What are the most valuable things everyone should know?" and his answer included 40 rules. Peterson stated it "isn't only written for other people. It's a warning to me".^[3]

"Happiness is a pointless goal. Don't compare yourself with other people; compare yourself with who you were yesterday. No one gets away with anything, ever, so take responsibility for your own life. You conjure your own world, not only metaphorically but also literally and neurologically. These lessons are what the great stories and myths have been telling us since civilisation began."

The book is divided into chapters with each title representing a specific rule for life explained in an essay. The founding idea is that "suffering is built into the structure of being," but although it can be unbearable, people have a choice either to withdraw, which is a "suicidal gesture", or to face and transcend it.^[1] However, living in a world of chaos and order,^[9] each human being has "darkness" which can "turn them into the monsters they're capable of being" to satisfy their dark impulses in right situations. The scientific experiments like [Invisible Gorilla Test](#) show that perception is adjusted to aims, and it is better to seek meaning rather than happiness. Peterson noted that "it's all very well to think the meaning of life is happiness, but what happens when you're unhappy? Happiness is a great side effect. When it comes, accept it gratefully. But it's fleeting and unpredictable. It's not something to aim at – because it's not an aim. And if happiness is the purpose of life, what happens when you're unhappy? Then you're a failure".^[3]

The book advances the idea that people are born with the instinct for ethics and meaning and should take responsibility to search for meaning above their own interests (chapter seven, "Pursue what is meaningful, not what is expedient"). Such thinking is reflected in great contemporary stories such as [Pinocchio](#), [The Lion King](#) and [Harry Potter](#) or ancient stories from the [Bible](#).^[3] To "Stand up straight with your shoulders back" (title of first chapter) is to "accept the terrible responsibility of life", to make self-sacrifice,^[10] because the individual must rise above victimization and "conduct his or her life in a manner that requires the rejection of immediate gratification, of natural and perverse desires alike".^[9] The comparison to neurological structures and behavior of [lobsters](#) is used as a natural example to the formation of social hierarchies.^{[4][9][12][13][14][15][16]} The other parts of the work explore and criticize the state of young men, the upbringing which ignores [sex differences](#) between boys and girls (criticism of overprotection and [tabula rasa](#) model in [social sciences](#)), male-female [interpersonal relationships](#), [school shootings](#), religion and moral [nihilism](#), [relativism](#) and lack of respect to the values that build Western society.^{[4][9][12][13][14][15][16]} In the last chapter, Peterson outlines ways one can cope with the most tragic events in a person's life, events that are often out of that individual's control. In it, he describes his own personal struggle when it was discovered that his daughter, Mikhaila, had a rare bone disease.^[3] The chapter is a meditation on how to maintain a watchful eye and cherish life's small redeemable qualities (i.e., to "pet a cat when you encounter one"). It also outlines a practical way to deal with hardship: to shorten one's temporal scope of responsibility (e.g., focusing on the next minute rather than the next three months).^[17]

Outline of the book: ^[3]

1. Stand up straight with your shoulders back
2. Treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping
3. Make friends with people who want the best for you
4. Compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not to who someone else is today
5. Do not let your children do anything that makes you dislike them
6. Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world
7. Pursue what is meaningful (not what is expedient)
8. Tell the truth – or, at least, don't lie
9. Assume that the person you are listening to might know something you don't
10. Be precise in your speech
11. Do not bother children when they are skateboarding
12. Pet a cat when you encounter one on the street

Peterson takes the stance that life is a struggle and sooner or later obstacles will come in the way of everyone. One needs to prepare for this by getting one's life in order as the obstacles may otherwise be overwhelming and lead to chaos. In the book he frequently quotes passages from the Bible and treats these with reverence because he feels they contain great wisdom. He often refers to heaven and hell. He has not stated clearly whether or not he believes in a theistic God but has said that he acts as if there were such a God. He has posted many YouTube videos on his book which can be found by entering Peterson 12 rules for life in the YouTube search engine at www.youtube.com

As an example of his writing, from page 223, he states:

“It is our responsibility to see what is before our eyes, courageously, and learn from it, even if it seems horrible—even if the horror of seeing it damages our consciousness and half-blinds us. The act of seeing is particularly important when it challenges what we know and rely on, upsetting and destabilizing us. It is the act of seeing that informs the individual and updates the state. It was for this reason that Nietzsche said that a man's worth was determined by how much truth he could tolerate. You are by no means only what you already know. You are also all that which you could know, if you only would. Thus you should never sacrifice what you could be for what you are. You should never give up the better that resides within for the security you already have—and certainly not when you have already caught a glimpse, an undeniable glimpse, of something beyond.

In the Christian tradition, Christ is identified with the Logos. The Logos is the Word of God. That Word transformed chaos into order at the beginning of time. In his human form, Christ sacrificed himself voluntarily to the truth, to the good, to God. In consequence, He died and was reborn. The Word that produced order from Chaos sacrifices everything, even itself, to God. That single sentence, wise beyond comprehension, sums up Christianity. Every bit of learning is a little death. Every bit of new information challenges a previous conception, forcing it to dissolve into chaos before it can be reborn as something better. Sometimes such deaths virtually destroy us. In such cases, we might never recover or, if we do, we change a lot. ...

Set your ambitions, even if you are uncertain about what they should be. The better ambitions have to do with the development of character and ability, rather than status or power. Status you can lose. You carry character with you wherever you go, and it allows you to prevail against adversity. ...

If you pay attention, when you are seeking something, you will move towards that goal. More importantly, however, you will acquire the information that allows your goal to transform. A totalitarian never asks, "What if my current ambition is in error?" He treats it, instead, as the Absolute. It becomes his God, for all intents and purposes. It constitutes his highest value. It regulates his emotions and motivational states, and determines his thoughts. All people serve their ambition. In that matter, there are no atheists. There are only people who know, or don't know, what God they serve."

This passage illustrates how the term God can have different meanings. For some, being an atheist means not believing in a theistic God while Peterson suggests God is a term that refers to a person's highest values, and since everyone has values, of which some may be higher than others, everyone has a God and thus there are no atheists.

Peterson tends to speak rapidly as if there is a degree of pressure behind the words that tumble out of him. His talks on YouTube may be lengthy, e.g. 2 hours 56 minutes and 52 seconds for "Jordan Peterson LIVE: 12 Rules for Life—An Antidote to Chaos" Similarly, a YouTube video on "Jordan Peterson—12 Rules for Life—Rule 1" is 1 hour 7 minutes and 46 seconds.

He has a series on the Bible in which he may spend a couple of hours covering just a few verses in Genesis. If you put "Peterson genesis" in the YouTube search engine several of these will come up, e.g., "Biblical Series I: Introduction to the Idea of God" (2hr 38 min 29 sec), "Biblical Series II: Genesis 1: Chao & Order" (2 hr 32 min 33 sec), "The Psychological Significance of the Biblical Stories" which gives links to 17 videos in the Biblical Series: III: God and the Hierarchy of Authority (92 hr 40 min); IV: Adam and Eve: Self-Consciousness, Evil, and Death (2 hr 32 min), V: Cain and Abel: The Hostile Brothers (2 hr 31 min), VI: The Psychology of the Flood (2 hr 35 min), VII: Walking with God: Noah and the Flood (corrected) (2 hr 32 min), Background to Lecture VIII: Abrahamic Stories, with Matthieu & Jonathon Pageau (1 hr 25 min), VIII: The Phenomenology of the Divine (2:40), IX: The Call to Abraham (2:35), X: Abraham: Father of Nations (2:28), XI: Sodom and Gomorrah (2:31), XII: The Great Sacrifice: Abraham and Isaac (2:33), XIII: Jacob's Ladder (2:33), XIV: Jacob: Wrestling with God (2:32), XV: Joseph and the Coat of Many Colors (2:44), and The Death and Resurrection of Christ: A Commentary in Five Parts (1:03).

Thus, Jordan Peterson has produced a large amount of material on his approach to life involving the core concept that life is a struggle in which adversity will be encountered and to be able to cope with it (reach a heavenly state) we need to be prepared by developing a disciplined life with insight and character. Without these we risk going into a state of chaos (hell). He sees the mythical material in the Bible as encompassing great truths that can be learned from.

"Something we cannot see protects us from something we do not understand. The thing we cannot see is culture, in its intrapsychic or internal manifestation. The thing we do not understand is the chaos that gave rise to culture. If the structure of culture is disrupted, unwittingly, chaos returns. We will do anything – anything – to defend ourselves against that return."

— Jordan Peterson, 1998 (*Descensus ad Inferos*) ^[5]

At the Sea of Faith meeting on 20 September 2018, a brief introduction will be given to the views on religion from a human perspective of Jordan Peterson as expressed in his book *12 rules for life: an antidote to chaos*. As preparation for the meeting you might considered watching a presentation by Peterson on YouTube

Questions for discussion:

1. What do you think of Peterson's view of life and his religious approach to it including his understanding of the Bible?
2. What do you think of his concept that there are no atheists?
3. What comments do you have on his 12 rules for life?

Bruce Spittle

References:

1. 12 Rules for life Wikipedia
2. Jordan Peterson Wikipedia
3. Peterson J. 12 Rules for life: an antidote to chaos. UK: Allen Lane, Penguin Random House; 2018. Pp. 223-5.