



From Chaos To Order

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Professor Jordan Peterson is a clinical psychologist and professor of psychology at the University of Toronto. He has posted thousands of hours of content on YouTube on subjects ranging from the psychological significance of the Bible, to political correctness and postmodernism. This content has been viewed tens of millions of times. Just one recent interview with Cathy Newman on the British news and current affairs channel, Channel Four News, has been viewed 9 million times.

Peterson became known to the broader public for his refusal to use government-enforced gender-neutral pronouns. While rehashing this episode is beyond this review, it is in the context of rising popularity and media-concocted controversy that Professor Peterson published his second book, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*. In this book Peterson seamlessly weaves insights from evolutionary biology, psychology, ancient mythical stories, religion (Christianity in particular), and political philosophy. The only field missing is culinary arts (but even there he notes the importance of eating well in *Rule 3: Treat Yourself Like Someone you are Responsible for Helping*).



The key message of the book is that individuals have responsibility, and the ability, to improve their own lives. Taking responsibility for the conditions of life—not swallowing the steady diet of rights and entitlements that so many today are fed—provides a source of meaning. Lifting up the burden of being is an important antidote to the nihilism that besets so many of today's youth.

But it is no new-age, drum-circle self-help book. For individuals have not only the responsibility for their own thoughts, actions, and lives, but also for the thoughts, actions, and lives of everyone else. This may sound harsh. But Peterson argues that the degeneration of cultures and societies is the cumulative consequence of the degeneration of individuals in those societies. Lapses in personal responsibility, wilful blindness, and sins of omissions, not only allow, but invite, tyranny to spread.

As Peterson states in *Rule 1: Stand up Straight with Your Shoulders Back* (p.24):

Many bureaucracies have petty authoritarians within them, creating unnecessary rules and procedures simply to express and cement their power. Such people produce powerful under-currents of resentment around them which, if expressed, would limit their expression of pathological power. It is in this manner that the willingness of the individuals to stand up for him or herself protects everyone from the corruption of society.

Standing up to such petty tyranny can bring serious personal cost, not least of which includes losing one's job. And sometimes the right thing to do is to keep your head down. But the cost of not acting can be far worse. Peterson, in *Rule 8: Tell the Truth – Or at Least Don't Lie*, quotes Viktor Frankl, the psychiatrist and Nazi concentration camp survivor who authored *Man's Search for Meaning*, who argued that 'deceitful, inauthentic individual existence is the precursor to social totalitarianism'.

If cultural decay lies in the moral decay of a sufficient number of individuals who comprise that culture, then those same individuals also have the ability to set things right. In lecture XI: *Sodom and Gomorrah from his Psychological Significance of the Bible series* (which is a wonderful accompaniment to the book, available on YouTube), Peterson refers to a passage from the *Book of Genesis* (18:31). It is a back and forth, of sorts, between Abraham and God, that takes place before God is to deliver his judgement of the corrupt cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Abraham inquires if God will spare the cities if he finds fifty righteous people in it, to which the Lord responds he will. Abraham eventually barter God down to ten people, meaning the Lord will show mercy on the corrupt cities if just ten amongst their inhabitants are righteous and have resisted corruption.

So, corrupt cities can be saved by a small number of righteous people. But cities and cultures cannot be saved by people crusading ideologically to change everyone else's behaviour.

They are saved by individuals within those cities saving themselves—this is the key lesson of *Rule 6: Set Your House in Perfect Order Before you Criticise the World*

. In this chapter, Peterson advises, simply enough, that people should stop doing what they know to be wrong and, instead, do things which they could do, and that they know they could do, that would make things around them better. Peterson states:

Don't reorganise the state until you have ordered your own experience. Have some humility. If you cannot bring peace to your household, how dare you try to rule a city?

Peterson's focus on the individual is a powerful antidote to today's collectivism, and particularly identity politics. Collectivism teaches people to sublimate themselves to group identity, and to become blind parrots of the ideology underpinning that collectivism. One of the slogans the radical left have been chanting is 'Words are Violence' which, by equivalence, means violence is words.

And it is that collectivist desire to control speech that is perhaps most threatening to individual empowerment. As Peterson writes in *Rule 9: Assume That the Person you are Listening to Might Know Something you Don't*, 'people organise their brains with conversation. If they don't have anyone to tell their story to, they lose their minds'. The deprivation of speech leads to the deprivation of thought and renders the individual powerless to mount their own defences against the corruption that surrounds them.

This is why when Winston first picks up a pen to write down his thoughts in George Orwell's *1984* he writes unintelligible gibberish. He has been unable to openly talk, write, or communicate for most of his life, and his brain has turned to mush as a result.

But Peterson also hits on something deeper. Free speech not only allows one to organise their thoughts and to set themselves straight. It also allows discovery—of new ideas, thoughts, and ways of life. Inherent in discovery is a venture into the unknown and away from convention. And voyaging into the unknown is where individuals grow, become stronger, and fortify themselves against sloppy, weak, and self-serving ideologies. This is something totalitarians cannot abide by because, as Peterson explains, totalitarian means 'everything that needs to be discovered has been discovered'.

Free speech prevents people, like Winston, being contorted into truly believing that they love Big Brother.

The importance of free speech to personal growth is not just psychological, it is also deeply physiological. Dr Norman Doidge, a Canadian psychoanalyst, provides an extensive Forward to Peterson's book. Doidge himself is the author of a popular book, *The Brain that Changes Itself*. In that book Doidge outlines the properties of neuroplasticity, which refers to the fact that the brain's structure is not fixed, but changes in response to what we do and our mental experiences. Keeping the brain active, through working on difficult problems and discovering new things, is essential to maintaining and improving cognitive capacity, and can ward off diseases such as Alzheimer's. Tyrannical suppression of discovery not only harms us psychologically; it quite literally causes our brains to rot.

However, while *12 Rules* is big on promoting the individual, Peterson is no radical individualist. Scattered throughout the book are references to the importance of received culture and wisdom. Indeed, much of the book draws on ancient mythologies and religious stories, translated for our modern times. Peterson argues:

some reliance on tradition can help us establish our aims. It is reasonable to do what other people have always done, unless we have very good reason not to do it.

That is, don't reinvent the wheel, you haven't the time.

The motif that re-occurs through the book is chaos and order. That is archetypal—you are always in one or the other or straddling both. Tradition is order and departure from tradition is chaos. But it is through venturing into chaos that self-discovery and learning take place. To Peterson, the place to be is on the edge—on the line between yin and yang. Just enough order to confidently stride into what is yet to be discovered, and just enough chaos to keep things interesting and stimulating.

All orders become corrupt over time. The key is to fix and rejuvenate, not to destroy. Yet, a concerted group of activists and intellectuals are hell-bent on destroying western culture, not improving it or themselves. This has caused many, and especially the young, to have no fixed point of reference, and to descend into the deepest chaos of all, from a psychological perspective, and that is nihilism—a belief that nothing is worth believing in.

This, perhaps, is why Peterson's book is about how to re-establish order and fight chaos, first at the level of the individual, then family, then community, then, and only then, society more broadly. The key lesson from *12 Rules* is this: if enough people straighten themselves out, perhaps our culture and nation will avoid being destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah.

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