

12 RULES FOR LIFE: AN ANTIDOTE TO CHAOS

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A friend of mine has been pushing me to look into Jordan Peterson for the past six months. I thought, since my friend is conservative, that Peterson offered right-wing politics, and it is true that he has recently been in the news for his thoughts on certain charged topics. However, Peterson does not, in fact, offer politics, which is refreshing in these days of rage. Rather, *12 Rules For Life* is a self-help book constructed like a Russian matryoshka doll, a nested construct. It talks, and works, on multiple levels, some of which may have political implications, but if so, they are incidental to what the book offers to each human person, both the broken and the whole.

The nested, complex nature of this book really should be no surprise, because Peterson's life's work is the study of the infinitely layered human mind, and his one earlier book, *Maps of Meaning*, was an exhaustive analysis of intricate human myths, their roots in our moral beliefs, and their implications for today. In Peterson's view, all moral traditions are, at their root, exemplifications and explications of the opposition of order and chaos, as well as a way of creating shared beliefs, which are immensely valuable to any human society. His basic point in his *Rules* is that every individual can avoid the extremes of menacing chaos and tyrannical order by following the Way, the line between order and chaos, "through the willingness of everyone to shoulder the burden of Being and to take the heroic path." This is to "live properly," and if we can do this, we can "collectively flourish." Thus, his twelve Rules are guides to this end.

As I say, this is not a political book, but politics is downstream of this book—that is, if you buy into what Peterson is offering, it probably changes some of your political views. Peterson's basic principle is the imperative need to recognize that reality exists, and given that so much of politics today is built around a wholesale denial of reality, Peterson's statements often seem political. In fact, they are political, even if that is not Peterson's intent, or at least not his major intent. This is especially true of his view of men and women, which permeates the book.

But let's treat the book as it is, rather than treating it as some form of archetype, for it is, if nothing else, highly original, and it is therefore hard to summarize. Peterson, both an academic and a practicing clinical psychologist, has spent a lifetime talking extensively to many people, most of them troubled, and he thinks very deeply about every word he says (as is clearly evident if you watch interviews with him available online). That doesn't mean he's didactic—his writing tone is conversational and packed with anecdotes, carefully chosen to illustrate or add impact to the points he makes. But it does mean that nearly every sentence is crowded with meaning.

Rule 1 is "Stand Up Straight With Your Shoulders Back." This is the backbone of all the rules, really, for in it Peterson explains that we are how we are. We are not malleable beyond a certain point. His illustration is lobsters, who were already incredibly ancient at the dawn of the dinosaurs, yet who have much in common with humans—so much so that anti-depressants perk defeated lobsters up. Lobsters have a dominance hierarchy. And, critically, male and female lobsters are radically different—they act differently, yes, but more broadly, male and female lobster teleology, their purpose, is different, and that is reflected in how each behaves. For lobsters, and all other creatures, "The dominance hierarchy, however social or cultural it might appear, has been around for some half a billion years. It's permanent. It's real. It is [rather than capitalism, or patriarchy, or some other ephemeral manifestation] a near-eternal aspect of the environment. . . . Dominance hierarchies are older than trees." Males, lobster or not, who fall in the dominance hierarchy have bad lives that get worse, often in a self-reinforcing loop; and they rise in the dominance hierarchy by fighting and winning, which means they get the best food, the best mental and physical health, the best shelter, and the best females. Similarly, females who rise (who fight only in their maternal stage, but compete otherwise at other stages) in the dominance hierarchy have the best mental health, and better physical circumstances by virtue of attracting high-quality suitors, that is, those high in the dominance hierarchy, whom they identify and pursue; those who fall, the reverse. Whether we like to admit it or not, humans are essentially the same as lobsters. They always have been, and they always will be.

Unlike lobsters, though, humans can self-diagnose that they are at the bottom of the hierarchy, or heading there in a downward spiral, and they can take action to improve their situation. (Peterson's book is about taking action, most of all.) Falling in a human dominance hierarchy basically means you are being bullied, and though some can't fight back, almost always, it's that people won't fight back. While fighting back can be as simple as changing your view of life, "to accept the terrible responsibility of life, with eyes wide open," and "accepting the end of the unconscious paradise of childhood," ultimately "[t]here is very little difference between the capacity for mayhem and destruction, integrated, and strength of character." Given that I have always believed that violence, or at least its threat, is the solution to most problems of human oppression, this certainly resonates with me, though reconciling that with turning the other cheek is difficult, and not something Peterson has much use for, despite obvious deep sympathy with Christianity. Through standing up for oneself, straight with your shoulders back, using force as necessary (and the willingness to use force likely means it will not be necessary), leads the path to human flourishing, for all.

In Rule 2, "Treat Yourself Like Someone You Are Responsible For Helping," Peterson addresses why people sabotage themselves. He first delves deeply into human mythos, closely analyzing the first chapters of Genesis in particular, though also offering nods to other traditions, such as the Vedic. This is in service of a deeper exploration of the eternal opposition of order and chaos. Order is masculine; when good, it is the structure of society, the ice on which we skate; when bad, it is tyranny and stultification. Chaos is feminine; when good, it is the origin of all things and the maker of all things new, the substance from which all things are made; when bad, it is the dangerous unknown, the chthonic underworld, and the dark water under the ice. Calling these categories of reality masculine and feminine is not arbitrary; in fact, it comports with what may be the ultimate fundamental fact of human existence, the division into two very different sexes, male and female, "natural categories, deeply embedded in our perceptual, emotional and motivational structures." (You now begin to see why the gender ideologues are not thrilled with Peterson.) As with Adam and Eve and their self-sabotage, we sabotage ourselves, not viewing ourselves as worthy of respect, since we are capable of stupidity and evil. "And with this realization we have

well-nigh full legitimization of the idea, very unpopular in modern intellectual circles, of Original Sin.” But we can choose to embody the Image of God, instead. “Back is the way forward—as T. S. Eliot insisted [in *Little Gidding*—but back as awake beings, exercising the proper choice of awake beings.”

For Christians, though, this poses a perceived difficulty. Yes, as Peterson notes, Christianity reduced evil and barbarism in the areas it conquered. But it encouraged excessive self-sacrifice through erroneous thinking. “Christ’s archetypal death exists as an example of how to accept finitude, betrayal and tyranny heroically—how to walk with God despite the tragedy of conscious self-knowledge—and not as a directive to victimize ourselves in the service of others.” We have to care for others as we care for ourselves; only in that way can both of us flourish. Peterson explores this line of thought at considerable length; it is impossible to shorten his words and retain the meaning, but it is both fully compatible with Christian belief and an antidote to a certain line of Christian excessive self-abnegation (a failing I found in Thomas à Kempis’s *The Imitation of Christ*, though I hesitate to criticize a book of such renown).

Rule 3 advises us to choose and to see our friends clearly. You must not only see the best in people. You can show them to what they should aspire, but you cannot lift them up unless they wish to be so lifted. “Not everyone who is failing is a victim, and not everyone at the bottom wishes to rise.” “But Christ himself, you might object, befriended tax-collectors and prostitutes. How dare I cast aspersions on the motives of those who are trying to help? But Christ was the archetypal perfect man. And you’re you. How do you know that your attempts to pull someone up won’t instead bring them—or you—further down?” Again, nearly every word is perfect: “Success: that’s the mystery. Virtue: that’s what inexplicable. . . . Things fall apart, of their own accord, but the sins of men speed their degeneration. And then comes the flood.”

Rule 4 returns to an internal focus, advising us to “Compare Yourself To Who You Were Yesterday, Not To Who Someone Else Is Today.” Just because you can always find an area where someone, or everyone, is better, does not mean that area is or should be relevant to you. A myriad of games are possible in each person’s life; choose your game, choose your starting point, and improve yourself, incrementally and gradually.

In fact, you should reward yourself for doing so, as silly as that sounds. And if you resent someone else, you need to realize it is either stupid immaturity, in which case you should stop it, or it is a legitimate complaint, in which case you must address it, or it will only get worse and cause more problems.

Next, in Rule 5, "Do Not Let Your Children Do Anything That Makes You Dislike Them," Peterson switches gears, from the world of adults to the world of children as it intersects with adults. He strongly objects to certain psychological tendencies in child-rearing, especially the protection of children from dangers at the expense of making them fully functioning and competent human beings (a problem mainly with male children and their mothers, he says). Children must be socialized; they are not inherently good (or inherently bad, for that matter). Individual problems do not call for social restructuring, which is mostly stupid. "Each person's private trouble cannot be solved by a social revolution, because revolutions are destabilizing and dangerous." Socialization means limitations; limitations facilitate creative achievement, not crimp it. Along the way, Peterson discusses tangential topics, such as that hierarchies are rarely, if ever, arbitrary. He recognizes, of course, that each child is very different, but certain basic approaches (including "discipline and punish," I assume a joke at Foucault's expense) are the most likely to lead to success, for all of child, parents, and society.

In Rule 6, Peterson returns to adult self-help, "Set Your Own House In Perfect Order Before You Criticize The World." He evaluates here, as he does in more than one place in this book, the nihilism of the smarter Columbine killer, Eric Harris. This is of course topical, with the present focus on school shootings. True, they have not actually increased in recent decades, but they have increased from forty or fifty years ago, when children carrying guns to school was unexceptional, and the reason is almost certainly some form of this nihilism. Peterson is violently opposed to the idea that humans are some kind of plague, as Harris maintained, and he identifies this sort of thinking, common among certain elites today, who adhere to the self-definition of Goethe's Mephistopheles as "the spirit who negates," as among the worst in the modern world. (Peterson would prefer Norman Borlaug to William Vogt, in Charles Mann's excellent recent *The Wizard and the Prophet*.) Yes, life is very hard, and suffering, great suffering, is nearly inevitable for

everyone. But transformation, not vengeance, is the answer. Abel, not Cain. Rather than blaming everyone else for what is wrong, stop today what you know to be wrong, and start doing what you know to be right. Thereby, you help yourself, and you strike a blow for Being, for the Way, and against nihilism.

Peterson continues the focus on suffering in Rule 7, "Pursue What Is Meaningful (Not What Is Expedient)." Here, he dives into Egyptian mythology, as well as several passages from the New Testament. He returns to, and expands on, his earlier thoughts about the impact of Christianity and the resulting new problems, noting that "In consequence [of Christianity], the metaphysical conception of the implicit transcendent worth of each and every soul established itself against impossible odds as the fundamental presumption of Western law and society. That was not the case in the world of the past, and is not the case yet in most places in the world of the present." (I've been saying this for years, but it's nice to find someone prominent who agrees with me!) But in addition to the tendency toward self-abnegation, long a potential problem for flourishing in this life, Christianity's decline has left a void. Here Peterson talks of Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Milton, Solzhenitsyn, and much more, including his own personal moral development, and returns again to suffering and nihilism, which are bad, but which at least point out, when addressed directly, that there is something good that opposes them. Expedience is lying and not facing up to your sins and the reality of things. Meaning is the balance between chaos and order, and it leads to good. "Meaning is the Way, the path of life more abundant, the place you live when you are guided by Love and speaking Truth and when nothing you want or could possibly want takes any precedence over precisely that." And by much the same token, but more personal and humanized, Rule 8: "Tell The Truth—Or At Least, Don't Lie." Deceit leads to evil, which leads to, and is embodied, suffering.

Rule 9 tells us to "Assume That The Person You Are Listening To Might Know Something You Don't." Here a plea for, in essence, humility, along with some fascinating ideas about how to conduct disagreements with one's spouse, and related thoughts on memory and wisdom. Rule 10 says "Be Precise In Your Speech." As I say, Peterson embodies this rule. I like to say (which probably says something about me), in the context of political arguments, that I am a professional killer. I have nothing

on Peterson, though. You can see the wheels turning when he is asked a question, and what comes out is precise and irrefutable, each word weighted with meaning and exquisitely interlocked, intertwining and supporting, with every other. (He never seems to say “um,” that’s for certain.) Lack of precision leads to chaos; lack of precision may be a failure of vocabulary, but it is more often a failure to communicate at all, to identify and address problems between two people before they grow to enormous, malevolent proportions. But, “If we speak carefully and precisely, we can sort things out, and put them in their proper place, and set a new goal, and navigate to it—often communally, if we negotiate; if we reach consensus. If we speak carelessly and imprecisely, however, things remain vague. The destination remains unproclaimed. The fog of uncertainty does not lift, and there is no negotiating through the world.”

Next to last, in Rule 11, Peterson returns to children, “Do Not Bother Children When They Are Skateboarding.” Danger, especially for men, is part of growth. And young men are the element of society at greatest risk today—this is not a major theme of this book, but it is a major theme of Peterson’s public thought. They are protected from developing properly, they are deliberately socialized like and as girls, yet they are blamed for the world’s ills, and as a result, some turn to nihilism, and fascism, encouraged by certain other men who, in essence, Peterson calls evil.

Here, Peterson returns emphatically to his proclamation of the deep and abiding differences between men and women. “[Some] insist, ever more loudly, that gender is a social construct. It isn’t. This isn’t a debate. The data are in.” For example, in the “emancipated” Scandinavian countries, girls choose traditionally feminine pursuits and behaviors at extremely high rates. And in the United States, it is just a lie that there are few women law firm partners due to discrimination; the reason is, purely, women’s choice. (I know this from personal experience, although you are forbidden to say it at a law firm—you would be fired instantly, yet another of many distortions of reality today, and a form of coerced lying and mass collective self-delusion.) The dominance hierarchy is only one example of this, but it is enormously important, like it or not, for young men, and making it so they can’t win in any aspect of it is catastrophic for men—and for women, who have a reduced selection of competent partners to meet their different, but complementary, needs.

The movie *Frozen* is “deeply propagandistic,” an embodied falsehood, not because a woman necessarily needs a man to rescue her, though she probably does to some extent, as does a man need a woman to make him whole, but because it pretends that masculine traits are of no consequence to human flourishing. The “oppression of the patriarchy” is a pack of lies. “The so-called oppression of the patriarchy was instead an imperfect collective attempt by men and women, stretching over millennia, to free each other from privation, disease and drudgery.” The miserable result of denying this is what we see today. “We do not teach our children that the world is flat. Neither should we teach them unsupported ideologically-predicated theories about the nature of men and women—or the nature of hierarchy.” He even boldly directly attacks transgender ideology. “Gender is constructed, but an individual who desires gender re-assignment surgery is to be unarguably considered a man trapped in a woman’s body (or vice versa). The fact that both of these cannot logically be true, simultaneously, is just ignored.”

The answer is simple. Rather than feeding or believing all these lies, men and women should each do, and be, what they are. “A woman should look after her children—although that is not all she should do. And a man should look after a woman and children—although that is not all he should do. But a woman should not look after a man, because she must look after children, and a man should not be a child. This means he must not be dependent.” In this is found what men should do, not in a turn to nihilism or fascism, and equally not in a turn to emasculation and feminization to avert stupid accusations of “toxic masculinity.”

Finally, in Rule 12, “Pet A Cat When You Encounter One On The Street,” Peterson turns most personal, describing the trials and suffering of his daughter from juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. It is moving stuff, and Peterson returns again to his theme of the inevitability of suffering. But being open to cats, and myriad other joys, means you can “get a reminder that for just fifteen seconds that the wonder of Being might make up for the ineradicable suffering that accompanies it.”

Peterson ends with a series of fascinating brief questions and answers, along with short explanations of the answers, posed from himself to himself, on everything from “What shall I do with my life?” (Answer: “Aim for Paradise, and concentrate on today”), to “What shall I do with a torn nation?” (Answer: “Stitch it back together with careful words of

truth”), to “What shall I do with my infant’s death?” (Answer: “Hold my other loved ones and heal their pain”). These are meant to, in a type of stream of consciousness, embody some of the basic principles underlying the rules in the book. Really, though, they are more; they are nearly an entire philosophy of life, which is probably why this book is so popular. If you are broken, there is much in it for you. But Peterson’s point is that everyone is broken, sometimes more, sometimes less—so there is something in this book for everyone.