



## Jordan Peterson Is Not the Second Coming

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"If you think tough men are dangerous," University of Toronto psychologist and overnight YouTube superstar Jordan Peterson writes in his new book, "wait until you see what weak men are capable of." It's a warning shot for would-be social engineers trying to defang maleness and for Peterson's startlingly large audience of young dudes teetering on the edge of nihilism. Perhaps it is also a subconscious caution to the author himself.

January 2018 was the month Jordan Peterson went from unknown to inescapable. The two reasons for that were a Channel 4 News (U.K.) exchange that went viral after an increasingly hostile and flustered female interviewer failed to hang an unflappable Peterson as a misogynist, and then the appearance one week later of his *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (Random House Canada), which immediately shot up bestseller lists throughout the English-speaking world. "He has skyrocketed from relative obscurity to international celebrity in a couple of weeks," *Psychology Today* noted with wonder.

As befits a lecturer fixated on the "tightrope" between chaos and order, good and evil, yin and yang, "the Jordan Peterson moment" (so christened by *New York Times* columnist David Brooks) has produced an almost perfectly polarized response. Celeb psychologist Jonathan Haidt called Peterson "one of the few fearless professors"; Houman Barekat in the *L.A. Review of Books* deemed him a peddler of "toxic masculinity" and "reactionary chauvinism." He is "the most important and influential Canadian thinker since Marshall McLuhan" (Camille Paglia), or an "an intellectual fraud who uses a lot of words to say almost nothing" (Nathan J. Robinson).

What is indisputable—and what makes the Peterson pop phenomenon more interesting than the quality of his work—is the way it has galvanized a generation of wayward young men, including many who have clustered around the "alt-right." The numbers are staggering, and vaulting upward by the minute: As of early April, there were 49 million views of his YouTube videos, 1,008,000 subscribers to his channel (plus 584,000 Twitter and 256,000 Facebook followers), and, most impressively, an estimated \$90,000 a *month* donated to his account on the crowdfunding site Patreon. By Peterson's own reckoning, the solid majority of his sold-out audiences on the lecture circuit are males between the ages of 20 and 35; their gratitude for his "grow the hell up" message has moved the man to tears on several public occasions.

Peterson self-identifies as a classical liberal, frequently retweets content from the Cato Institute, and forthrightly criticizes the alt-right for playing the "collectivist game" of identity politics. Yet he's a lightning rod among libertarians too. I first became aware of the psychologist last fall

when his name came up serially at a private gathering of libertarian activists anxious about the real and perceived overlap between their world and the reactionary right. One participant counseled keeping Peterson at arm's length, lest "we end up with another cult-leader libertarian." Taking the opposite view at the website *Being Libertarian* was Adam Barsouk, who argued that "Peterson is able to do something no libertarian commentator before him could: he can argue that a freer, less coddled way of life is not just ethical, but also adaptive, better for humanity as a whole."

Peterson's popularity has demonstrated the happy fact that you can reach illiberal ears with a message that contains some classical liberal content. But he has gotten there not via persuasive argument about intellectual ideas but through the top-down, teacher-student, authoritarian exhortations of self-help. Playing Pied Piper for a lost generation of lefty-baiting edgelords has given an ambitious academic incentive to embrace his inner troll.

### **The Anti-Marxist Cobra**

If you heard of Peterson before 2018, it was probably due to his September 2016 battle against fancy new gender pronouns. In a three-part video series titled *Professor Against Political Correctness*, Peterson objected to a proposed amendment to Canada's Human Rights Act (since passed) making it a criminal offense to incite or promote hatred based on a target's gender identity or expression. His slippery-slope argument was that such a law, in Canada's First Amendment-free legal system, could eventually lead to "compelled speech" over silly-sounding jargon like "zhe" or "zher."

"These words are at the vanguard of a postmodern, radical leftist ideology that I detest, and which is, in my professional opinion, frighteningly similar to the Marxist doctrines that killed at least 100 million people in the 20th century," he explained in the *National Post*. "I am therefore not going to mouth Marxist words. That would make me a puppet of the radical left, and that is not going to happen. Period."

This is the version of Peterson—strident, logic-leaping, reductionist—that has stoked both his flock and his detractors. In an era when the left is forever policing the shifting boundaries of acceptable speech, the right is forever rewarding whoever provokes the left's ire, and the most cartoonish of both extremes are locked in a never-ending struggle over increasingly ridiculous political correctness on college campuses, Peterson's defiance polarized along predictable lines.

Yet this snarling character is not the one Peterson typically plays. With his sunken eyes, bushy brows, and resting frown, the professor resembles a *Dead Ringers*-era Jeremy Irons, at least until you hear his scratchy, high-pitched voice. Peterson can be cautious, even hesitant as he pokes around for the most precise word, careful not to step on a landmine. But when confronted with a hostile challenge or P.C. outrage, he swells up like a cobra, lashes out in counterattack, and then recoils before the victim knows what hit him.

I cracked open *12 Rules for Life* knowing mostly about Peterson's controversy-courting reputation and so presumed the book would be dominated by culture war bomb throwing designed for a post-adolescent audience. Yet the first time we start hearing about campus political correctness and "postmodern/neo-Marxist" claptrap is on page 302, and it's in one of the least convincing sections of a perfectly readable book.

*12 Rules for Life* is a popularized, self-help version of Peterson's denser, more academic lifework *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*, which failed to create much of a ripple upon release in 1999. Both are, as the author summarized in a recent *Quillette* interview, "an amalgam of a Jungian psychoanalytic approach to narrative and evolutionary biology" and "also an amalgam, in some sense, of theology and evolutionary biology." Why that combination? "I think that our religious preconceptions evolved. They are deeper than rationality, by a large margin. They reflect a reality that's deeper than that which we have been able to apprehend rationally so far."

In other words, Peterson thinks there is ancient, pre-rational wisdom and human wiring in both our DNA and our oldest religions. They combine to produce archetypes and archetypal behavior that we are better off understanding and respecting than tossing aside in the name of modernity or revolution. It's Old Testament-style rules, animal-kingdom mating patterns, and Disney movie mythology (no, really), not conflict avoidance, enforced equality of outcomes, and the death of God. It's Allan Bloom's *Western Civ* and Robert Bly's masculinity pep talks refracted through Jung and Nietzsche, with some Paglia-esque genre hopping to spice things up.

If the argument itself is not particularly novel, the argumentation is. It's filled with idiosyncratic specifics ("Pet a cat when you encounter one on the street" is one of the rules), deep readings of Genesis and *The Gulag Archipelago*, and, most endearingly, empathetic but pragmatic life-reboot lessons gleaned from Peterson's decades as a clinical psychologist.

These guidelines can be commonsensical to the point of tautology, yet they are presented in a way that has the potential to make the message stick longer than a New Year's resolution. Set achievable, incremental goals, with tangible mini-rewards, as a first step out of the rut. Get enough sleep, and eat a hearty breakfast. Tell the truth. Learn how to listen. Delay gratification. "Make friends with people who want the best for you." Stop helicopter parenting. Take a searing self-inventory. And most of all, "Pursue what is meaningful (not what is expedient)."

As listed in a paragraph, these sound almost tediously obvious, which is perhaps why some of the rules have whimsical titles like "Do not bother children when they are skateboarding." But reinforced through digressions into literature, evolution, therapeutic case studies, and Peterson's experiences, the folk wisdom begins to adhere. The Bible, after all, didn't work because it was a list of objective do's and don'ts; it worked because it distilled these moral teachings into captivating story and symbol and mystery and language, in addition to a few well-placed *thou-shalt-nots*. Peterson knows what he's doing here. Perhaps a bit too well.

## **The Lost Boys**

The most scathing critiques of Peterson usually zero in on his fan base of alienated young men. "Is Jordan Peterson the stupid man's smart person?" asked a headline in *Maclean's*. Author Tabatha Southey got right to it: "To be clear, Jordan Peterson is not a neo-Nazi, but there's a reason he's as popular as he is on the alt-right." TV critiques of his work luxuriate in the clumsy conspiracymongering at his audience Q&As.

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For Peterson, such contempt only illustrates the value of his project. "I've had many, many people write me from the right, or from the fringes of the radical right, saying precisely that listening to my lectures stopped them from going all the way," he told one recent interviewer. Asked on Twitter what it's like to have changed the lives of thousands, he replied: "It's the best thing that could possibly be hoped for. Period." He takes his soul-saving seriously.

There isn't much about contemporary electoral politics in *12 Rules for Life*. (You would not know from reading it, for example, how much Peterson loathes Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.) But what little gets mentioned is not flattering toward the presidential preference of many Petersonians. "If men are pushed too hard to feminize," he warns, "they will become more and more interested in harsh, fascist political ideology....The populist groundswell of support for Donald Trump in the US is part of the same process, as is (in far more sinister form) the recent rise of far-right political parties even in such moderate and liberal places as Holland, Sweden and Norway."

So why do kids with different politics flock to his words? It's not hard to see the attraction. Aside from the tough-love advice and consciously paternalistic rule setting (down to describing exact finger-flicking methods of corporal punishment to discipline children), Peterson provides in his sporadic cobra strikes against the social justice warrior state immense visceral pleasure among those who wish they could tell the smarmy betters in their lives to go to hell. There is a magnetism in saying something true (or true-sounding) in the face of lies backed by governmental or social pressure. An occasional venture over the line—such as Peterson's tweet last year asking, "Do feminists avoid criticizing Islam because they unconsciously long for masculine dominance?"—packs a transgressive thrill that a thousand research papers can't match.

In his more serious role, Peterson also arrives at conclusions that the male of the species may find congenial. For example, chaos, from which evil springs forth, is inherently feminine; order (the antidote) is masculine. Boys are stronger, more hardwired to dominate, and should be unleashed, not tamed. Talk of white male privilege is anti-humanistic garbage. Girls will like you better if you stand up straight and assert yourself.

Peterson provides more than just a heroic path out (for those willing to put in the manly work to get there). His vision of bottomless evil haunting our every shaky step forward is appealingly dark, even metal. "If you are suffering—well, that's the norm. People are limited and life is tragic," he writes in one of countless such passages. "Violence, after all, is no mystery. It's peace that's the mystery. Violence is the default," comes another. He invites us all to admit that we could be guards at Auschwitz, that we daydream about mass murder, that our desire for success is the flip side of a will to inflict maximum pain.

Peterson is haunted by the 20th century killing fields of fascism and communism, as well as the potential nuclear holocaust undergirding the Cold War. Readers get the sense that he's fought off years of darkness and chosen improbably to reject suicide. "The tragic irrationalities of life must be counterbalanced by an equally irrational commitment to the essential goodness of Being," he writes, and that grim truce is about the best we can hope for. There's no paradise around the bend, but maybe you can successfully edge away from the cliff.

### **The Reluctant Messiah**

There are three truly weird moments in *12 Rules for Life* that have largely escaped notice, though they should have set off alarm bells among reviewer and author alike. The first comes in the introduction, where Peterson describes a dream he had while writing *Maps of Meaning* in which he was "suspended in mid-air, clinging to a chandelier, many stories above the ground, directly under the dome of a massive cathedral." Messiah much? He keeps going: "My dream placed me at the centre of Being itself, and there was no escape. It took me months to understand what this meant... The centre is marked by the cross, as X marks the spot. Existence at that cross is suffering and transformation—and that fact, above all, needs to be voluntarily accepted."

The second is another dream about halfway through the book, in which our hero was again in the air, this time with a view of massive glass pyramids, "all full of people striving to reach each pyramid's very pinnacle." Yet there was a further space above all that, "the privileged position of the eye that could or perhaps chose to soar freely about the fray; that chose not to dominate any specific group or cause but instead to somehow simultaneously transcend all." Jesus.

The final eyebrow-raiser comes in the coda, where Peterson tells a symbolic story about being wowed by a friend's night-lighted pen, asking for it as a gift, writing down on a piece of paper, *What shall I do with my newfound pen of light?* then waiting for revelatory response. Among the answers about life that tumbled forth: "Aim for Paradise, and concentrate on today" and "honour your wife as a Mother of God." Among the questions, *What shall I do with a fallen soul?* and *How shall I educate my people?* The final couplet of this inspirational session: "What shall I do when the great crowd beckons? Stand tall and utter my broken truths." The only question is whether he's the second coming or merely John the Baptist.

Asked by *Quillette* whether it was worrying to be called a prophet, Peterson chose to take the question with an almost cagey literalness: "Of course. For anyone sensible, that would be worrying. First off, you have to consider the fate of prophets. It's not necessarily a category you want to be tossed into."

In recent interviews, Peterson has said he needs "three more years" before he can really sort out his beliefs about the Jesus resurrection story in a way he feels comfortable articulating in public. He does not, for example, attend church, but he is wrestling with it all. In *12 Rules for Life*, he writes with genuine emotion about the martyrdom of Socrates and Christ's 40-day struggle in the desert with Satan's temptations. From a distance, it looks as though he is preparing himself for a transcendent new level of ministry.

Therein lies danger. Peterson may articulate an end goal of balance, but at the moment he's offering order against chaos, yang against yin. The effort is, by definition, reactionary, counter-revolutionary. But once you place yourself squarely on one side of the pendulum, you'll inevitably exaggerate the collective demerits of the other while indulging in-group excesses. Dogma throughout history has had its freedom-killing flaws, he readily admits, but, well, sometimes people just need to be told what to do. This is conscious authoritarianism, and Peterson is volunteering for the job.

Power corrupts, and relationships alter behavior. "This risk of being changed is one of the most frightening prospects most of us can face," Peterson writes at one point. In setting himself up as rule-maker to an adoring flock and flirting openly with the idea that he is being visited with capital-*r* Revelation, the professor threatens to become unmoored from the winning pragmatism

of his clinical practice. Stepping into an exalted role as avenging angel against a feminine chaos can descend quickly into self-parody.

"You call me a fascist?" Peterson tweeted at Pankaj Mishra in March, after Mishra's negative review in *The New York Review of Books*. "You sanctimonious prick. If you were in my room at the moment, I'd slap you happily." It's like 21st century Norman Mailer for the sunken-chested crowd.

Peterson is too important to—and reliant on—the great campus culture wars to have any realistic hopes of transcending them. But in creating popular new meaning from his neglected old intellectual maps, he has perhaps unwittingly sketched out some guidelines that those of us in the persuasion and argument business should heed. Like: Those on the front lines of righteous free speech fights have a tendency to get shrill. And: Don't give up on audiences, but don't get captured by them either.