

**WHEN MOTIVATIONAL WRITINGS DEVELOP
INTO SOPHISTICATED INTERDISCIPLINARY WORKS**

Book review

Jordan B. Peterson

12 Rules for Life. An Antidote to Chaos

Random House, Canada, 2018

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In only a decade, Professor Jordan B. Peterson turned from a specialist in psychology and neuroscience into an internationally celebrated author and lecturer. His fame partially came from his ability to put together and make a palatable synthesis of his extensive knowledge of history, religious writings, social and political issues, mythology or poetry, and partially from his unconventional way of revealing his opinions extensively online, in the form of recorded university courses, interviews or simple lists of questions on Quora.

12 Rules for Life is the author's second non-fiction approach, following what he calls a "very dense book" about the moral purpose of myths and religious tales, called *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief* and which also formed the basis for courses he taught in Harvard and Toronto respectively. His latest book tackles a different area of human psychology and culture, namely our dependence on rules and norms viewed as a synthesis of life itself. Yet its subtitle arguably creates an intricate, albeit easily perceptible link with the *Maps...*, by calling out attention to "chaos" – the opposite of "order" in all the separate pieces that form life as we know it.

The title itself may raise a brow or two, due to its presumed similarity with tens of other motivational, self-help books promising magic by numbers. Amazon, for instance, lists quite a few of such examples of promises "to learn a foreign language in (X number) of days" or to share "(Y number) of ways to become a better professional" in any field, with tens million copies sold and bought by people with great hopes for improvement. The inclusion of Jordan Petersen's book on this list is, therefore, not surprising either.

But this is a different kind of book, and "self-motivation" may well be the last of potential goals the author had in mind when writing it. After all, we are dealing with someone used to sharing thorough knowledge in academic environments,

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where superficiality has no place at all. He is the kind of lecturer that “speaks directly to and watches the response of single, identifiable people, instead of doing something clichéd, such as ‘presenting a talk’ to an audience” (p.251).

So, professor Peterson proposes “12 rules” in order to bring light into the shadows of human life; 12 rules which, closely connected to his biblical knowledge, may give a hint to the number chosen by him for his guidance. Nevertheless, apart from the biblical symbolism, there are also twelve labours of Hercules, which may relate to the fact that reaching perfection, even with the help of self-served rules, is indeed very difficult, if ever possible. There are also twelve months in a year – should we, then, apply each of these rules during one of them, then add more experience and knowledge with each one that goes by?

We are all accustomed to rules in every part of our lives; we are also aware that life is made of darkness and light, positive and negative, good and bad, beauty and evil. For anything there is a counterpart on the other side of the coin – and Jordan Peterson touches the core of the most complex, and inclusive of them all: order versus chaos.

And this topic, which also stands as a subtitle for his book, spinned up into a heated controversy, due to what some consider to be the author’s patriarchal or even patronising attitude towards the gender gap or the relationship between male and female – whereas males stand for order and females for chaos. Yet some of us may remember, from early accumulated background knowledge, that, besides standing for the primordial void prone to later creation of anything and everything, chaos can also be translated as the turning point for change – and renewed order. The perfect, unique, still moment whereby everything later emerges afresh.

Far from being a frustrated middle-aged man trying to explain the way in which all household feuds can be solved to perfection, Peterson uses his philosophical knowledge and psychological training by trying to answer questions that most of us do not dare to ask. Do you feel insecure and search for a safe haven in life? Then follow *Rule no. 1 – Stand up straight with your shoulders back*. Are you ready to accept that you are the result of personal growth and accumulation – and enjoy what you see in the mirror, without comparing yours to others’ achievements? Then follow *Rule no. 7 – Pursue what is meaningful (not what is expedient)*. Do you want to surround yourself by useful things and have a real insight into the core of objects and people? Then follow *Rule no. 10 – Be precise in your speech*. And so on. Biblical quotes, the myths of ancient Egypt, Nietzsche or Dostoevsky – among others – will guide your every step, in a book that is not easy to read, but surprising to discover. Or, in the author’s own words:

It is not vision as such, and not a plan devised to achieve vision, that is a fault under such circumstances. A vision of the future, the desirable future, is necessary. Such a vision links action taken now with important, long term, foundational values. It lends actions in the present significance and importance. It provides a frame limiting uncertainty and anxiety. (p. 213)

In truth, the purpose of a book review is not to disclose details to potential readers, but rather to say just as much as needed in order to entice them to open the first page, then get in the right mood required to get to the last page.

Jordan Peterson's latest work is such a book. Apart from controversies and personal opinions or beliefs, it proposes a viewpoint on self-discovery that needs to be taken seriously into account.

Webography

<https://www.amazon.com/Best-Sellers-Books-Motivational-Self-Help/zgbs/books/4744>
<https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/jordan-peterson-interview-2018>