'12 Rules for Life': Jordan Peterson's advice on living well

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By Glenn C. Altschuler

In recent years, Jordan B Peterson has emerged from relative obscurity as a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto to prominence as a pop psychologist and public intellectual. Published in 1999, Mr. Peterson’s “Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief” suggested that ancient myths and religious faith could mitigate social conflict by helping people “develop and implement a universal system of morality.” When Mr. Peterson presented this thesis, along with a critique of modern liberal culture and a mental health improvement program, on YouTube and a 13-part public television series, he attracted millions of followers. He became an anti-“political correctness” rock star in 2016, when he opposed legislation in Canada that added “gender and identity expression” to a list of grounds on which allegations of discrimination could be based.

His second book, “12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos,” delivers self-help advice. Drawing on his personal experiences, his clinical practice, Bible stories, classic texts by Milton, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Freud, Jung, Orwell and Solzhenitsyn, and a few studies by neuroscientists and social psychologists, Mr. Peterson lays out lessons for addressing the struggle between order and chaos.

He sets these lessons in context with an assault on “postmodern Marxism.” The “nihilistic and destructive nature” of this philosophy, he writes, “is almost impossible to overestimate.” Mr. Peterson finds “not a shred of hard evidence” to support claims that Western society is “pathologically patriarchal” or that hierarchies were designed to exclude. Nature rather than men, he maintains, has been the primary source of the oppression of women. Masculine and feminine traits are not socially constructed. If pushed too hard to feminize, men “will become more and more interested in harsh, fascist political ideology.”

Human beings, Mr. Peterson emphasizes, have learned to live together and organize complex societies over long stretches of time. Behind reforms like liberalizing divorce and mandating affirmative action for some ethnic and racial groups, undertaken “in the name of some ideological shibboleth,” lurk “horror
and terror.” Laws mandating equal pay for equal work for women or disabled people, he adds, complicate salaries “beyond practicality.” Institutions and educators whose aim is “the demolition of the culture that supports them” should not receive public funding.

Instead of values he regards as toxic, Mr. Peterson advocates a conceptual framework based on two fundamental principles. Rationality, he declares, is over-rated. Inclined “dangerously to pride,” it produces a conviction that reality can be manipulated to achieve utopian ends. As rationality ascended “from the ashes of Christianity,” Mr. Peterson maintains, the “infernos” of Hitler’s Third Reich, Stalin’s Russia, Mao’s China and Pol Pot’s Cambodia were visited on humanity.

According to Mr. Peterson, religious faith is essential to the establishment of moral societies. Untroubled by religious dogmatism, Mr. Peterson deems it “necessary and desirable.” The Bible reveals things about what we believe and how we should act “that can be discovered in almost no other manner.” Obedience to God is an act of courage, not submission.

His analysis is, of course, not original, although, alas, in our ideologically polarized culture polemics remain potent. Some readers may make a similar assessment of Mr. Peterson’s 12 rules. They are designed, he acknowledges, “to reveal things you knew that you did not know you knew.” To be sure, Mr. Peterson delivers bromides with humor and in narratives that evoke empathy. But bromides they remain. You need to know where you are and where you are going, he reminds us. Articulate your principles and discipline yourself. Do not underestimate the power of vision and direction. When dissatisfied with what you have, remember those who have nothing and try to be grateful. When faced with difficult questions, consider them the gateway to the path of life.

Again and again, Mr. Peterson tells readers to take responsibility for their lives. He cites examples of people who “emerged from terrible pasts” to do “the impossible things” that benefited them, their families and those around them, instead of cursing fate, blaming capitalism or the iniquity of their enemies.

Exhortations to individual responsibility are, indeed, important and useful. But so is a recognition, not addressed by Mr. Peterson, that calling on the truly disadvantaged to “suck it up” is often a justification for blaming them and ignoring our collective responsibility to provide realistic opportunities for all citizens to live fulfilled lives.

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