

JORDAN B.
PETERSON



12 RULES
FOR LIFE

AN ANTIDOTE TO CHAOS

‘One of the most important thinkers
to emerge on the world stage for
many years’ THE SPECTATOR

allen lane

Jordan B. Peterson

12 RULES FOR LIFE

An Antidote for Chaos

Foreword by Norman Doidge
Illustrations by Ethan Van Scriver

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Foreword

Rules? More rules? Really? Isn't life complicated enough, restricting enough, without abstract rules that don't take our unique, individual situations into account? And given that our brains are plastic, and all develop differently based on our life experiences, why even expect that a few rules might be helpful to us all?

People don't clamour for rules, even in the Bible ... as when Moses comes down the mountain, after a long absence, bearing the tablets inscribed with ten commandments, and finds the Children of Israel in revelry. They'd been Pharaoh's slaves and subject to his tyrannical regulations for four hundred years, and after that Moses subjected them to the harsh desert wilderness for another forty years, to purify them of their slavishness. Now, free at last, they are unbridled, and have lost all control as they dance wildly around an idol, a golden calf, displaying all manner of corporeal corruption.

"I've got some good news ... and I've got some bad news," the lawgiver yells to them. "Which do you want first?"

"The good news!" the hedonists reply.

"I got Him from fifteen commandments down to ten!"

"Hallelujah!" cries the unruly crowd. "And the bad?"

"Adultery is still in."

So rules there will be—but, please, not too many. We are ambivalent about rules, even when we know they are good for us. If we are spirited souls, if we have character, rules seem restrictive, an affront to our sense of agency and our pride in working out our own lives. Why should we be judged according to another's rule?

And judged we are. After all, God didn't give Moses "The Ten Suggestions," he gave Commandments; and if I'm a free agent, my first reaction to a command might just be that nobody, not even God, tells me what to do, even if it's good for me. But the story of the golden calf also reminds us that without rules we quickly become slaves to our passions—and there's nothing freeing about that.

And the story suggests something more: unchaperoned, and left to our own untutored judgment, we are quick to aim low and worship qualities that are beneath us—in this case, an artificial animal that brings out our own animal instincts in a completely unregulated way. The

old Hebrew story makes it clear how the ancients felt about our prospects for civilized behaviour in the absence of rules that seek to elevate our gaze and raise our standards.

One neat thing about the Bible story is that it doesn't simply list its rules, as lawyers or legislators or administrators might; it embeds them in a dramatic tale that illustrates why we need them, thereby making them easier to understand. Similarly, in this book Professor Peterson doesn't just propose his twelve rules, he tells stories, too, bringing to bear his knowledge of many fields as he illustrates and explains why the best rules do not ultimately restrict us but instead facilitate our goals and make for fuller, freer lives.

The first time I met Jordan Peterson was on September 12, 2004, at the home of two mutual friends, TV producer Wodek Szemberg and medical internist Estera Bekier. It was Wodek's birthday party. Wodek and Estera are Polish émigrés who grew up within the Soviet empire, where it was understood that many topics were off limits, and that casually questioning certain social arrangements and philosophical ideas (not to mention the regime itself) could mean big trouble.

But now, host and hostess luxuriated in easygoing, honest talk, by having elegant parties devoted to the pleasure of saying what you *really* thought and hearing others do the same, in an uninhibited give-and-take. Here, the rule was "Speak your mind." If the conversation turned to politics, people of different political persuasions spoke to each other—indeed, looked forward to it—in a manner that is increasingly rare. Sometimes Wodek's own opinions, or truths, exploded out of him, as did his laugh. Then he'd hug whoever had made him laugh or provoked him to speak his mind with greater intensity than even he might have intended. This was the best part of the parties, and this frankness, and his warm embraces, made it worth provoking him. Meanwhile, Estera's voice lilted across the room on a very precise path towards its intended listener. Truth explosions didn't make the atmosphere any less easygoing for the company—they made for more truth explosions!—liberating us, and more laughs, and making the whole evening more pleasant, because with de-repressing Eastern Europeans like the Szemberg-Bekiers, you always knew with what and with whom you were dealing, and that frankness was enlivening. Honoré de Balzac, the novelist, once described the balls and parties in his native France, observing that what appeared to be a single party was always really two. In the first hours, the gathering was suffused with bored people posing and posturing, and attendees who came to meet perhaps one special person who would confirm them in their beauty and status. Then, only in the very late hours, after most of the guests had left, would the second party, the real party, begin. Here the conversation was shared by each person present, and open-hearted laughter replaced the starchy airs. At Estera and Wodek's parties, this kind of wee-hours-of-the-morning disclosure and intimacy often began as soon as we entered the room.

Wodek is a silver-haired, lion-maned hunter, always on the lookout for potential public intellectuals, who knows how to spot people who can *really* talk in front of a TV camera and who look authentic because they are (the camera picks up on that). He often invites such people to these salons. That day Wodek brought a psychology professor, from my own University of Toronto, who fit the bill: intellect and emotion in tandem. Wodek was the first to put Jordan Peterson in front of a camera, and thought of him as a teacher in search of students—because he was always ready to explain. And it helped that he liked the camera and that the camera liked him back.

That afternoon there was a large table set outside in the Szemberg-Bekiers' garden; around it was gathered the usual collection of lips and ears, and loquacious virtuosos. We seemed, however, to be plagued by a buzzing paparazzi of bees, and here was this new fellow at the table, with an Albertan accent, in cowboy boots, who was ignoring them, and kept on talking. He kept talking while the rest of us were playing musical chairs to keep away from the pests, yet also trying to remain at the table because this new addition to our gatherings was so interesting.

He had this odd habit of speaking about the deepest questions to whoever was at this table—most of them new acquaintances—as though he were just making small talk. Or, if he did do small talk, the interval between “How do you know Wodek and Estera?” or “I was a beekeeper once, so I’m used to them” and more serious topics would be nanoseconds.

One might hear such questions discussed at parties where professors and professionals gather, but usually the conversation would remain between two specialists in the topic, off in a corner, or if shared with the whole group it was often not without someone preening. But this Peterson, though erudite, didn’t come across as a pedant. He had the enthusiasm of a kid who had just learned something new and had to share it. He seemed to be assuming, as a child would—before learning how dulled adults can become—that if he thought something was interesting, then so might others. There was something boyish in the cowboy, in his broaching of subjects as though we had all grown up together in the same small town, or family, and had all been thinking about the very same problems of human existence all along.

Peterson wasn’t really an “eccentric”; he had sufficient conventional chops, had been a Harvard professor, was a gentleman (as cowboys can be) though he did say *damn* and *bloody* a lot, in a rural 1950s sort of way. But everyone listened, with fascination on their faces, because he was in fact addressing questions of concern to everyone at the table.

There was something freeing about being with a person so learned yet speaking in such an unedited way. His thinking was motoric; it seemed he needed to think *aloud*, to use his motor cortex to think, but that motor also had to run fast to work properly. To get to liftoff. Not quite manic, but his idling speed revved high. Spirited thoughts were tumbling out. But unlike many academics who take the floor and hold it, if someone challenged or corrected him he really seemed to *like* it. He didn’t rear up and neigh. He’d say, in a kind of folksy way, “Yeah,” and bow his head involuntarily, wag it if he had overlooked something, laughing at himself for overgeneralizing. He appreciated being shown another side of an issue, and it became clear that thinking through a problem was, for him, a dialogic process.

One could not but be struck by another unusual thing about him: for an egghead Peterson was extremely practical. His examples were filled with applications to everyday life: business management, how to make furniture (he made much of his own), designing a simple house, making a room beautiful (now an internet meme) or in another, specific case related to education, creating an online writing project that kept minority students from dropping out of school by getting them to do a kind of psychoanalytic exercise on themselves, in which they would free-associate about their past, present and future (now known as the Self-Authoring Program).

I was always especially fond of mid-Western, Prairie types who come from a farm (where they learned all about nature), or from a very small town, and who have worked with their hands to make things, spent long periods outside in the harsh elements, and are often self-

educated and go to university against the odds. I found them quite unlike their sophisticated but somewhat denatured urban counterparts, for whom higher education was pre-ordained, and for that reason sometimes taken for granted, or thought of not as an end in itself but simply as a life stage in the service of career advancement. These Westerners were different: self-made, unentitled, hands on, neighbourly and less precious than many of their big-city peers, who increasingly spend their lives indoors, manipulating symbols on computers. This cowboy psychologist seemed to care about a thought only if it might, in some way, be helpful to someone.

We became friends. As a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who loves literature, I was drawn to him because here was a clinician who also had given himself a great books education, and who not only loved soulful Russian novels, philosophy and ancient mythology, but who also seemed to treat them as his most treasured inheritance. But he also did illuminating statistical research on personality and temperament, and had studied neuroscience. Though trained as a behaviourist, he was powerfully drawn to psychoanalysis with its focus on dreams, archetypes, the persistence of childhood conflicts in the adult, and the role of defences and rationalization in everyday life. He was also an outlier in being the only member of the research-oriented Department of Psychology at the University of Toronto who also kept a clinical practice.

On my visits, our conversations began with banter and laughter—that was the small-town Peterson from the Alberta hinterland—his teenage years right out of the movie *FUBAR*—welcoming you into his home. The house had been gutted by Tammy, his wife, and himself, and turned into perhaps the most fascinating and shocking middle-class home I had seen. They had art, some carved masks, and abstract portraits, but they were overwhelmed by a huge collection of original Socialist Realist paintings of Lenin and the early Communists commissioned by the USSR. Not long after the Soviet Union fell, and most of the world breathed a sigh of relief, Peterson began purchasing this propaganda for a song online. Paintings lionizing the Soviet revolutionary spirit completely filled every single wall, the ceilings, even the bathrooms. The paintings were not there because Jordan had any totalitarian sympathies, but because he wanted to remind himself of something he knew he and everyone would rather forget: that hundreds of millions were murdered in the name of utopia.

It took getting used to, this semi-haunted house “decorated” by a delusion that had practically destroyed mankind. But it was eased by his wonderful and unique spouse, Tammy, who was all in, who embraced and encouraged this unusual need for expression! These paintings provided a visitor with the first window onto the full extent of Jordan’s concern about our human capacity for evil in the name of good, and the psychological mystery of self-deception (how can a person deceive himself and get away with it?)—an interest we share. And then there were also the hours we’d spend discussing what I might call a lesser problem (lesser because rarer), the human capacity for evil for the sake of evil, the joy some people take in destroying others, captured famously by the seventeenth-century English poet John Milton in *Paradise Lost*.

And so we’d chat and have our tea in his kitchen-underworld, walled by this odd art collection, a visual marker of his earnest quest to move beyond simplistic ideology, left or right, and not repeat mistakes of the past. After a while, there was nothing peculiar about taking tea in the kitchen, discussing family issues, one’s latest reading, with those ominous pictures hovering. It was just living in the world as it was, or in some places, is.

In Jordan's first and only book before this one, *Maps of Meaning*, he shares his profound insights into universal themes of world mythology, and explains how all cultures have created stories to help us grapple with, and ultimately map, the chaos into which we are thrown at birth; this chaos is everything that is unknown to us, and any unexplored territory that we must traverse, be it in the world outside or the psyche within.

Combining evolution, the neuroscience of emotion, some of the best of Jung, some of Freud, much of the great works of Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn, Eliade, Neumann, Piaget, Frye and Frankl, *Maps of Meaning*, published nearly two decades ago, shows Jordan's wide-ranging approach to understanding how human beings and the human brain deal with the archetypal situation that arises whenever we, in our daily lives, must face something we do not understand. The brilliance of the book is in his demonstration of how rooted this situation is in evolution, our DNA, our brains and our most ancient stories. And he shows that these stories have survived because they still provide guidance in dealing with uncertainty, and the unavoidable unknown.

One of the many virtues of the book you are reading now is that it provides an entry point into *Maps of Meaning*, which is a highly complex work because Jordan was working out his approach to psychology as he wrote it. But it was foundational, because no matter how different our genes or life experiences may be, or how differently our plastic brains are wired by our experience, we all have to deal with the unknown, and we all attempt to move from chaos to order. And this is why many of the rules in this book, being based on *Maps of Meaning*, have an element of universality to them.

Maps of Meaning was sparked by Jordan's agonized awareness, as a teenager growing up in the midst of the Cold War, that much of mankind seemed on the verge of blowing up the planet to defend their various identities. He felt he had to understand how it could be that people would sacrifice everything for an "identity," whatever that was. And he felt he had to understand the ideologies that drove totalitarian regimes to a variant of that same behaviour: killing their own citizens. In *Maps of Meaning*, and again in this book, one of the matters he cautions readers to be most wary of is ideology, no matter who is peddling it or to what end.

Ideologies are simple ideas, disguised as science or philosophy, that purport to explain the complexity of the world and offer remedies that will perfect it. Ideologues are people who pretend they know how to "make the world a better place" before they've taken care of their own chaos within. (The warrior identity that their ideology gives them covers over that chaos.) That's hubris, of course, and one of the most important themes of this book, is "set your house in order" first, and Jordan provides practical advice on how to do this.

Ideologies are substitutes for true knowledge, and ideologues are always dangerous when they come to power, because a simple-minded I-know-it-all approach is no match for the complexity of existence. Furthermore, when their social contraptions fail to fly, ideologues blame not themselves but all who see through the simplifications. Another great U of T professor, Lewis Feuer, in his book *Ideology and the Ideologists*, observed that ideologies retool the very religious stories they purport to have supplanted, but eliminate the narrative and psychological richness. Communism borrowed from the story of the Children of Israel in Egypt, with an enslaved class, rich persecutors, a leader, like Lenin, who goes abroad, lives among the enslavers, and then leads the enslaved to the promised land (the utopia; the dictatorship of the

proletariat).

To understand ideology, Jordan read extensively about not only the Soviet gulag, but also the Holocaust and the rise of Nazism. I had never before met a person, born Christian and of my generation, who was so utterly tormented by what happened in Europe to the Jews, and who had worked so hard to understand how it could have occurred. I too had studied this in depth. My own father survived Auschwitz. My grandmother was middle-aged when she stood face to face with Dr. Josef Mengele, the Nazi physician who conducted unspeakably cruel experiments on his victims, and she survived Auschwitz by disobeying his order to join the line with the elderly, the grey and the weak, and instead slipping into a line with younger people. She avoided the gas chambers a second time by trading food for hair dye so she wouldn't be murdered for looking too old. My grandfather, her husband, survived the Mauthausen concentration camp, but choked to death on the first piece of solid food he was given, just before liberation day. I relate this, because years after we became friends, when Jordan would take a classical liberal stand for free speech, he would be accused by left-wing extremists as being a right-wing bigot.

Let me say, with all the moderation I can summon: *at best*, those accusers have simply not done their due diligence. I have; with a family history such as mine, one develops not only radar, but underwater sonar for right-wing bigotry; but even more important, one learns to recognize the kind of person with the comprehension, tools, good will and courage to combat it, and Jordan Peterson is *that* person.

My own dissatisfaction with modern political science's attempts to understand the rise of Nazism, totalitarianism and prejudice was a major factor in my decision to supplement my studies of political science with the study of the unconscious, projection, psychoanalysis, the regressive potential of group psychology, psychiatry and the brain. Jordan switched out of political science for similar reasons. With these important parallel interests, we didn't always agree on "the answers" (thank God), but we almost always agreed on the questions.

Our friendship wasn't all doom and gloom. I have made a habit of attending my fellow professors' classes at our university, and so attended his, which were always packed, and I saw what now millions have seen online: a brilliant, often dazzling public speaker who was at his best riffing like a jazz artist; at times he resembled an ardent Prairie preacher (not in evangelizing, but in his passion, in his ability to tell stories that convey the life-stakes that go with believing or disbelieving various ideas). Then he'd just as easily switch to do a breathtakingly systematic summary of a series of scientific studies. He was a master at helping students become more reflective, and take themselves and their futures seriously. He taught them to respect many of the greatest books ever written. He gave vivid examples from clinical practice, was (appropriately) self-revealing, even of his own vulnerabilities, and made fascinating links between evolution, the brain and religious stories. In a world where students are taught to see evolution and religion as simply opposed (by thinkers like Richard Dawkins), Jordan showed his students how evolution, of all things, helps to explain the profound psychological appeal and wisdom of many ancient stories, from Gilgamesh to the life of the Buddha, Egyptian mythology and the Bible. He showed, for instance, how stories about journeying voluntarily into the unknown—the hero's quest—mirror universal tasks for which the brain evolved. He respected the stories, was not reductionist, and never claimed to exhaust their wisdom. If he discussed a topic such as prejudice, or its emotional relatives fear and disgust, or the differences between the sexes on average, he was able to show how these traits

evolved and why they survived.

Above all, he alerted his students to topics rarely discussed in university, such as the simple fact that all the ancients, from Buddha to the biblical authors, knew what every slightly worn-out adult knows, that life is suffering. If you are suffering, or someone close to you is, that's sad. But alas, it's not particularly special. We don't suffer only because "politicians are dimwitted," or "the system is corrupt," or because you and I, like almost everyone else, can *legitimately* describe ourselves, in some way, as a victim of something or someone. It is because we are born human that we are guaranteed a good dose of suffering. And chances are, if you or someone you love is not suffering now, they will be within five years, unless you are freakishly lucky. Rearing kids is hard, work is hard, aging, sickness and death are hard, and Jordan emphasized that doing all that totally on your own, without the benefit of a loving relationship, or wisdom, or the psychological insights of the greatest psychologists, only makes it harder. He wasn't scaring the students; in fact, they found this frank talk reassuring, because in the depths of their psyches, most of them knew what he said was true, even if there was never a forum to discuss it—perhaps because the adults in their lives had become so naively overprotective that they deluded themselves into thinking that not talking about suffering would in some way magically protect their children from it.

Here he would relate the myth of the hero, a cross-cultural theme explored psychoanalytically by Otto Rank, who noted, following Freud, that hero myths are similar in many cultures, a theme that was picked up by Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell and Erich Neumann, among others. Where Freud made great contributions in explaining neuroses by, among other things, focusing on understanding what we might call a failed-hero story (that of Oedipus), Jordan focused on triumphant heroes. In all these triumph stories, the hero has to go into the unknown, into an unexplored territory, and deal with a new great challenge and take great risks. In the process, something of himself has to die, or be given up, so he can be reborn and meet the challenge. This requires courage, something rarely discussed in a psychology class or textbook. During his recent public stand for free speech and against what I call "forced speech" (because it involves a government forcing citizens to voice political views), the stakes were very high; he had much to lose, and knew it. Nonetheless, I saw him (and Tammy, for that matter) not only display such courage, but also continue to live by many of the rules in this book, some of which can be very demanding.

I saw him grow, from the remarkable person he was, into someone even more able and assured—through living by these rules. In fact, it was the process of writing this book, and developing these rules, that led him to take the stand he did against forced or compelled speech. And that is why, during those events, he started posting some of his thoughts about life and these rules on the internet. Now, over 100 million YouTube hits later, we know they have struck a chord.

Given our distaste for rules, how do we explain the extraordinary response to his lectures, which give rules? In Jordan's case, it was of course his charisma and a rare willingness to stand for a principle that got him a wide hearing online initially; views of his first YouTube statements quickly numbered in the hundreds of thousands. But people have kept listening because what he is saying meets a deep and unarticulated need. And that is because alongside our wish to be free of rules, we all search for structure.

The hunger among many younger people for rules, or at least guidelines, is greater today for good reason. In the West at least, millennials are living through a unique historical situation. They are, I believe, the first generation to have been so thoroughly taught two seemingly contradictory ideas about morality, simultaneously—at their schools, colleges and universities, by many in my own generation. This contradiction has left them at times disoriented and uncertain, without guidance and, more tragically, deprived of riches they don't even know exist.

The first idea or teaching is that morality is relative, at best a personal “value judgment.” *Relative* means that there is no absolute right or wrong in anything; instead, morality and the rules associated with it are just a matter of personal opinion or happenstance, “relative to” or “related to” a particular framework, such as one's ethnicity, one's upbringing, or the culture or historical moment one is born into. It's nothing but an accident of birth. According to this argument (now a creed), history teaches that religions, tribes, nations and ethnic groups tend to disagree about fundamental matters, and always have. Today, the postmodernist left makes the additional claim that one group's morality is *nothing but* its attempt to exercise power over another group. So, the decent thing to do—once it becomes apparent how arbitrary your, and your society's, “moral values” are—is to show tolerance for people who think differently, and who come from different (diverse) backgrounds. That emphasis on tolerance is so paramount that for many people one of the worst character flaws a person can have is to be “judgmental.”^{mi} And, since we don't know right from wrong, or what is good, just about *the most inappropriate thing an adult can do is give a young person advice* about how to live.

And so a generation has been raised untutored in what was once called, aptly, “practical wisdom,” which guided previous generations. Millennials, often told they have received the finest education available anywhere, have actually suffered a form of serious intellectual and moral neglect. The relativists of my generation and Jordan's, many of whom became their professors, chose to devalue thousands of years of human knowledge about how to acquire virtue, dismissing it as passé, “not relevant” or even “oppressive.” They were so successful at it that the very word “virtue” sounds out of date, and someone using it appears anachronistically moralistic and self-righteous.

The study of virtue is not quite the same as the study of morals (right and wrong, good and evil). Aristotle defined the virtues simply as the ways of behaving that are most conducive to happiness in life. Vice was defined as the ways of behaving least conducive to happiness. He observed that the virtues always aim for balance and avoid the extremes of the vices. Aristotle studied the virtues and the vices in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. It was a book based on experience and observation, not conjecture, about the kind of happiness that was possible for human beings. Cultivating *judgment* about the difference between virtue and vice is the beginning of wisdom, something that can never be out of date.

By contrast, our modern relativism begins by asserting that making judgments about how to live is impossible, because there is no *real* good, and no *true* virtue (as these too are relative). Thus relativism's closest approximation to “virtue” is “tolerance.” Only tolerance will provide social cohesion between different groups, and save us from harming each other. On Facebook and other forms of social media, therefore, you signal your so-called virtue, telling everyone how tolerant, open and compassionate you are, and wait for likes to accumulate. (Leave aside that telling people you're virtuous isn't a virtue, it's self-promotion. Virtue signalling is not virtue. Virtue signalling is, quite possibly, our commonest vice.)

Intolerance of others' views (no matter how ignorant or incoherent they may be) is not simply wrong; in a world where there is no right or wrong, it is worse: it is a sign you are embarrassingly unsophisticated or, possibly, dangerous.

But it turns out that many people cannot tolerate the vacuum—the chaos—which is inherent in life, but made worse by this moral relativism; they cannot live without a moral compass, without an ideal at which to aim in their lives. (For relativists, ideals are values too, and like all values, they are merely “relative” and hardly worth sacrificing for.) So, right alongside relativism, we find the spread of nihilism and despair, and also the opposite of moral relativism: the blind certainty offered by ideologies that claim to have an answer for everything.

And so we arrive at the second teaching that millennials have been bombarded with. They sign up for a humanities course, to study greatest books ever written. But they're not assigned the books; instead they are given ideological attacks on them, based on some appalling simplification. Where the relativist is filled with uncertainty, the ideologue is the very opposite. He or she is hyper-judgmental and censorious, always knows what's wrong about others, and what to do about it. Sometimes it seems the only people willing to give advice in a relativistic society are those with the least to offer.

Modern moral relativism has many sources. As we in the West learned more history, we understood that different epochs had different moral codes. As we travelled the seas and explored the globe, we learned of far-flung tribes on different continents whose different moral codes made sense relative to, or within the framework of, their societies. Science played a role, too, by attacking the religious view of the world, and thus undermining the religious grounds for ethics and rules. Materialist social science implied that we could divide the world into facts (which all could observe, and were objective and “real”) and values (which were subjective and personal). Then we could first agree on the facts, and, maybe, one day, develop a scientific code of ethics (which has yet to arrive). Moreover, by implying that values had a lesser reality than facts, science contributed in yet another way to moral relativism, for it treated “value” as secondary. (But the idea that we can easily separate facts and values was and remains naive; to some extent, one's values determine what one will pay attention to, and what will count as a fact.)

The idea that different societies had different rules and morals was known to the ancient world too, and it is interesting to compare its response to this realization with the modern response (relativism, nihilism and ideology). When the ancient Greeks sailed to India and elsewhere, they too discovered that rules, morals and customs differed from place to place, and saw that the explanation for what was right and wrong was often rooted in some ancestral authority. The Greek response was not despair, but a new invention: philosophy.

Socrates, reacting to the uncertainty bred by awareness of these conflicting moral codes, decided that instead of becoming a nihilist, a relativist or an ideologue, he would devote his life to the search for wisdom that could reason about these differences, i.e., he helped invent philosophy. He spent his life asking perplexing, foundational questions, such as “What is virtue?” and “How can one live the good life?” and “What is justice?” and he looked at different approaches, asking which seemed most coherent and most in accord with human nature. These are the kinds of questions that I believe animate this book.

For the ancients, the discovery that different people have different ideas about how,

practically, to live, did not paralyze them; it deepened their understanding of humanity and led to some of the most satisfying conversations human beings have ever had, about how life might be lived.

Likewise, Aristotle. Instead of despairing about these differences in moral codes, Aristotle argued that though specific rules, laws and customs differed from place to place, what does not differ is that in all places human beings, by their nature, have a proclivity to make rules, laws and customs. To put this in modern terms, it seems that all human beings are, by some kind of biological endowment, so ineradicably concerned with morality that we create a structure of laws and rules wherever we are. The idea that human life can be free of moral concerns is a fantasy.

We are rule generators. And given that we are moral animals, what must be the effect of our simplistic modern relativism upon us? It means we are hobbling ourselves by pretending to be something we are not. It is a mask, but a strange one, for it mostly deceives the one who wears it. *Sccccratccch* the most clever postmodern-relativist professor's Mercedes with a key, and you will see how fast the mask of relativism (with its pretense that there can be neither right nor wrong) and the cloak of radical tolerance come off.

Because we do not yet have an ethics based on modern science, Jordan is not trying to develop his rules by wiping the slate clean—by dismissing thousands of years of wisdom as mere superstition and ignoring our greatest moral achievements. Far better to integrate the best of what we are now learning with the books human beings saw fit to preserve over millennia, and with the stories that have survived, against all odds, time's tendency to obliterate.

He is doing what reasonable guides have always done: he makes no claim that human wisdom begins with himself, but, rather, turns first to his own guides. And although the topics in this book are serious, Jordan often has great fun addressing them with a light touch, as the chapter headings convey. He makes no claim to be exhaustive, and sometimes the chapters consist of wide-ranging discussions of our psychology as he understands it.

So why not call this a book of “guidelines,” a far more relaxed, user-friendly and less rigid sounding term than “rules”?

Because these really are rules. And the foremost rule is that you must take responsibility for your own life. Period.

One might think that a generation that has heard endlessly, from their more ideological teachers, about the rights, rights, rights that belong to them, would object to being told that they would do better to focus instead on taking responsibility. Yet this generation, many of whom were raised in small families by hyper-protective parents, on soft-surface playgrounds, and then taught in universities with “safe spaces” where they don't have to hear things they don't want to—schooled to be risk-averse—has among it, now, millions who feel stultified by this underestimation of their potential resilience and who have embraced Jordan's message that each individual has ultimate responsibility to bear; that if one wants to live a full life, one first sets one's own house in order; and only then can one sensibly aim to take on bigger responsibilities. The extent of this reaction has often moved both of us to the brink of tears.

Sometimes these rules are demanding. They require you to undertake an incremental process that over time will stretch you to a new limit. That requires, as I've said, venturing into the unknown. Stretching yourself beyond the boundaries of your current self requires carefully choosing and then pursuing ideals: ideals that are up there, above you, superior to you—and that

you can't always be sure you will reach.

But if it's uncertain that our ideals are attainable, why do we bother reaching in the first place? Because if you don't reach for them, it is certain you will never feel that your life has meaning.

And perhaps because, as unfamiliar and strange as it sounds, in the deepest part of our psyche, we all want to be judged.

Dr. Norman Doidge, MD, is the author
of *The Brain That Changes Itself*

Overture

This book has a short history and a long history. We'll begin with the short history.

In 2012, I started contributing to a website called Quora. On Quora, anyone can ask a question, of any sort—and anyone can answer. Readers upvote those answers they like, and downvote those they don't. In this manner, the most useful answers rise to the top, while the others sink into oblivion. I was curious about the site. I liked its free-for-all nature. The discussion was often compelling, and it was interesting to see the diverse range of opinions generated by the same question.

When I was taking a break (or avoiding work), I often turned to Quora, looking for questions to engage with. I considered, and eventually answered, such questions as “What's the difference between being happy and being content?”, “What things get better as you age?” and “What makes life more meaningful?”

Quora tells you how many people have viewed your answer and how many upvotes you received. Thus, you can determine your reach, and see what people think of your ideas. Only a small minority of those who view an answer upvote it. As of July 2017, as I write this—and five years after I addressed “What makes life more meaningful?”—my answer to that question has received a relatively small audience (14,000 views, and 133 upvotes), while my response to the question about aging has been viewed by 7,200 people and received 36 upvotes. Not exactly home runs. However, it's to be expected. On such sites, most answers receive very little attention, while a tiny minority become disproportionately popular.

Soon after, I answered another question: “What are the most valuable things everyone should know?” I wrote a list of rules, or maxims; some dead serious, some tongue-in-cheek—“Be grateful in spite of your suffering,” “Do not do things that you hate,” “Do not hide things in the fog,” and so on. The Quora readers appeared pleased with this list. They commented on and shared it. They said such things as “I'm definitely printing this list out and keeping it as a reference. Simply phenomenal,” and “You win Quora. We can just close the site now.” Students at the University of Toronto, where I teach, came up to me and told me how much they liked it. To date, my answer to “What are the most valuable things ...” has been viewed by a hundred and twenty thousand people and been upvoted twenty-three hundred times. Only a few hundred of the roughly six hundred thousand questions on Quora have cracked the two-thousand-upvote

barrier. My procrastination-induced musings hit a nerve. I had written a 99.9 percentile answer.

It was not obvious to me when I wrote the list of rules for living that it was going to perform so well. I had put a fair bit of care into all the sixty or so answers I submitted in the few months surrounding that post. Nonetheless, Quora provides market research at its finest. The respondents are anonymous. They're disinterested, in the best sense. Their opinions are spontaneous and unbiased. So, I paid attention to the results, and thought about the reasons for that answer's disproportionate success. Perhaps I struck the right balance between the familiar and the unfamiliar while formulating the rules. Perhaps people were drawn to the structure that such rules imply. Perhaps people just like lists.

A few months earlier, in March of 2012, I had received an email from a literary agent. She had heard me speak on CBC radio during a show entitled *Just Say No to Happiness*, where I had criticized the idea that happiness was the proper goal for life. Over the previous decades I had read more than my share of dark books about the twentieth century, focusing particularly on Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the great documenter of the slave-labour-camp horrors of the latter, once wrote that the "pitiful ideology" holding that "human beings are created for happiness" was an ideology "done in by the first blow of the work assigner's cudgel."¹ In a crisis, the inevitable suffering that life entails can rapidly make a mockery of the idea that happiness is the proper pursuit of the individual. On the radio show, I suggested, instead, that a deeper meaning was required. I noted that the nature of such meaning was constantly re-presented in the great stories of the past, and that it had more to do with developing character in the face of suffering than with happiness. This is part of the long history of the present work.

From 1985 until 1999 I worked for about three hours a day on the only other book I have ever published: *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*. During that time, and in the years since, I also taught a course on the material in that book, first at Harvard, and now at the University of Toronto. In 2013, observing the rise of YouTube, and because of the popularity of some work I had done with TVO, a Canadian public TV station, I decided to film my university and public lectures and place them online. They attracted an increasingly large audience—more than a million views by April 2016. The number of views has risen very dramatically since then (up to eighteen million as I write this), but that is in part because I became embroiled in a political controversy that drew an inordinate amount of attention.

That's another story. Maybe even another book.

I proposed in *Maps of Meaning* that the great myths and religious stories of the past, particularly those derived from an earlier, oral tradition, were *moral* in their intent, rather than descriptive. Thus, they did not concern themselves with what the world was, as a scientist might have it, but with how a human being should act. I suggested that our ancestors portrayed the world as a stage—a drama—instead of a place of objects. I described how I had come to believe that the constituent elements of the world as drama were order and chaos, and not material things.

Order is where the people around you act according to well-understood social norms, and remain predictable and cooperative. It's the world of social structure, explored territory, and familiarity. The state of Order is typically portrayed, symbolically—imaginatively—as masculine. It's the Wise King and the Tyrant, forever bound together, as society is simultaneously structure and oppression.

Chaos, by contrast, is where—or when—something unexpected happens. Chaos emerges, in trivial form, when you tell a joke at a party with people you think you know and a silent and embarrassing chill falls over the gathering. Chaos is what emerges more catastrophically when you suddenly find yourself without employment, or are betrayed by a lover. As the antithesis of symbolically masculine order, it's presented imaginatively as feminine. It's the new and unpredictable suddenly emerging in the midst of the commonplace familiar. It's Creation and Destruction, the source of new things and the destination of the dead (as nature, as opposed to culture, is simultaneously birth and demise).

Order and chaos are the yang and yin of the famous Taoist symbol: two serpents, head to tail.^{mi} Order is the white, masculine serpent; Chaos, its black, feminine counterpart. The black dot in the white—and the white in the black—indicate the possibility of transformation: just when things seem secure, the unknown can loom, unexpectedly and large. Conversely, just when everything seems lost, new order can emerge from catastrophe and chaos.

For the Taoists, meaning is to be found on the border between the ever-entwined pair. To walk that border is to stay on the path of life, the divine Way.

And that's much better than happiness.

The literary agent I referred to listened to the CBC radio broadcast where I discussed such issues. It left her asking herself deeper questions. She emailed me, asking if I had considered writing a book for a general audience. I had previously attempted to produce a more accessible version of *Maps of Meaning*, which is a very dense book. But I found that the spirit was neither in me during that attempt nor in the resultant manuscript. I think this was because I was imitating my former self, and my previous book, instead of occupying the place between order and chaos and producing something new. I suggested that she watch four of the lectures I had done for a TVO program called *Big Ideas* on my YouTube channel. I thought if she did that we could have a more informed and thorough discussion about what kind of topics I might address in a more publicly accessible book.

She contacted me a few weeks later, after watching all four lectures and discussing them with a colleague. Her interest had been further heightened, as had her commitment to the project. That was promising—and unexpected. I'm always surprised when people respond positively to what I am saying, given its seriousness and strange nature. I'm amazed I have been allowed (even encouraged) to teach what I taught first in Boston and now in Toronto. I've always thought that if people really noticed what I was teaching there would be Hell to pay. You can decide for yourself what truth there might be in that concern after reading this book. :)

She suggested that I write a guide of sorts to what a person needs “to live well”—whatever that might mean. I thought immediately about my Quora list. I had in the meantime written some further thoughts about of the rules I had posted. People had responded positively toward those new ideas, as well. It seemed to me, therefore, that there might be a nice fit between the Quora list and my new agent's ideas. So, I sent her the list. She liked it.

At about the same time, a friend and former student of mine—the novelist and screenwriter Gregg Hurwitz—was considering a new book, which would become the bestselling thriller *Orphan X*. He liked the rules, too. He had Mia, the book's female lead, post a selection of them, one by one, on her fridge, at points in the story where they seemed apropos. That was another piece of evidence supporting my supposition of their attractiveness. I suggested to my agent that I write a brief chapter on each of the rules. She agreed, so I wrote a book proposal suggesting as

much. When I started writing the actual chapters, however, they weren't at all brief. I had much more to say about each rule than I originally envisioned.

This was partly because I had spent a very long time researching my first book: studying history, mythology, neuroscience, psychoanalysis, child psychology, poetry, and large sections of the Bible. I read and perhaps even understood much of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Goethe's *Faust* and Dante's *Inferno*. I integrated all of that, for better or worse, trying to address a perplexing problem: the reason or reasons for the nuclear standoff of the Cold War. I couldn't understand how belief systems could be so important to people that they were willing to risk the destruction of the world to protect them. I came to realize that shared belief systems made people intelligible to one another—and that the systems weren't just about belief.

People who live by the same code are rendered mutually predictable to one another. They act in keeping with each other's expectations and desires. They can cooperate. They can even compete peacefully, because everyone knows what to expect from everyone else. A shared belief system, partly psychological, partly acted out, simplifies everyone—in their own eyes, and in the eyes of others. Shared beliefs simplify the world, as well, because people who know what to expect from one another can act together to tame the world. There is perhaps nothing more important than the maintenance of this organization—this simplification. If it's threatened, the great ship of state rocks.

It isn't precisely that people will fight for what they believe. They will fight, instead, to maintain *the match between* what they believe, what they expect, and what they desire. They will fight to maintain the match between what they expect and how everyone is acting. It is precisely the maintenance of that match that enables everyone to live together peacefully, predictably and productively. It reduces uncertainty and the chaotic mix of intolerable emotions that uncertainty inevitably produces.

Imagine someone betrayed by a trusted lover. The sacred social contract obtaining between the two has been violated. Actions speak louder than words, and an act of betrayal disrupts the fragile and carefully negotiated peace of an intimate relationship. In the aftermath of disloyalty, people are seized by terrible emotions: disgust, contempt (for self and traitor), guilt, anxiety, rage and dread. Conflict is inevitable, sometimes with deadly results. Shared belief systems—shared systems of agreed-upon conduct and expectation—regulate and control all those powerful forces. It's no wonder that people will fight to protect something that saves them from being possessed by emotions of chaos and terror (and after that from degeneration into strife and combat).

There's more to it, too. A shared cultural system stabilizes human interaction, but is also a system of value—a hierarchy of value, where some things are given priority and importance and others are not. In the absence of such a system of value, people simply cannot act. In fact, they can't even perceive, because both action and perception require a goal, and a valid goal is, by necessity, something valued. We experience much of our positive emotion in relation to goals. We are not happy, technically speaking, unless we see ourselves progressing—and the very idea of progression implies value. Worse yet is the fact that the meaning of life without positive value is not simply neutral. Because we are vulnerable and mortal, pain and anxiety are an integral part of human existence. We must have something to set against the suffering that is intrinsic to Being.^{fn2} We must have the meaning inherent in a profound system of value or the horror of existence rapidly becomes paramount. Then, nihilism beckons, with its hopelessness

and despair.

So: no value, no meaning. Between value systems, however, there is the possibility of conflict. We are thus eternally caught between the most diamantine rock and the hardest of places: loss of group-centred belief renders life chaotic, miserable, intolerable; presence of group-centred belief makes conflict with other groups inevitable. In the West, we have been withdrawing from our tradition-, religion- and even nation-centred cultures, partly to decrease the danger of group conflict. But we are increasingly falling prey to the desperation of meaninglessness, and that is no improvement at all.

While writing *Maps of Meaning*, I was (also) driven by the realization that we can no longer afford conflict—certainly not on the scale of the world conflagrations of the twentieth century. Our technologies of destruction have become too powerful. The potential consequences of war are literally apocalyptic. But we cannot simply abandon our systems of value, our beliefs, our cultures, either. I agonized over this apparently intractable problem for months. Was there a third way, invisible to me? I dreamt one night during this period that I was suspended in mid-air, clinging to a chandelier, many stories above the ground, directly under the dome of a massive cathedral. The people on the floor below were distant and tiny. There was a great expanse between me and any wall—and even the peak of the dome itself.

I have learned to pay attention to dreams, not least because of my training as a clinical psychologist. Dreams shed light on the dim places where reason itself has yet to voyage. I have studied Christianity a fair bit, too (more than other religious traditions, although I am always trying to redress this lack). Like others, therefore, I must and do draw more from what I do know than from what I do not. I knew that cathedrals were constructed in the shape of a cross, and that the point under the dome was the centre of the cross. I knew that the cross was simultaneously, the point of greatest suffering, the point of death and transformation, and the symbolic centre of the world. That was not somewhere I wanted to be. I managed to get down, out of the heights—out of the symbolic sky—back to safe, familiar, anonymous ground. I don't know how. Then, still in my dream, I returned to my bedroom and my bed and tried to return to sleep and the peace of unconsciousness. As I relaxed, however, I could feel my body transported. A great wind was dissolving me, preparing to propel me back to the cathedral, to place me once again at that central point. There was no escape. It was a true nightmare. I forced myself awake. The curtains behind me were blowing in over my pillows. Half asleep, I looked at the foot of the bed. I saw the great cathedral doors. I shook myself completely awake and they disappeared.

My dream placed me at the centre of Being itself, and there was no escape. It took me months to understand what this meant. During this time, I came to a more complete, personal realization of what the great stories of the past continually insist upon: the centre is occupied by the individual. 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. It is possible to transcend slavish adherence to the group and its doctrines and, simultaneously, to avoid the pitfalls of its opposite extreme, nihilism. It is possible, instead, to find sufficient meaning in individual consciousness and experience.

How could the world be freed from the terrible dilemma of conflict, on the one hand, and psychological and social dissolution, on the other? The answer was this: through the elevation and development of the individual, and through the willingness of everyone to shoulder the

burden of Being and to take the heroic path. We must each adopt as much responsibility as possible for individual life, society and the world. We must each tell the truth and repair what is in disrepair and break down and recreate what is old and outdated. It is in this manner that we can and must reduce the suffering that poisons the world. It's asking a lot. It's asking for everything. But the alternative—the horror of authoritarian belief, the chaos of the collapsed state, the tragic catastrophe of the unbridled natural world, the existential angst and weakness of the purposeless individual—is clearly worse.

I have been thinking and lecturing about such ideas for decades. I have built up a large corpus of stories and concepts pertaining to them. I am not for a moment claiming, however, that I am entirely correct or complete in my thinking. Being is far more complicated than one person can know, and I don't have the whole story. I'm simply offering the best I can manage.

In any case, the consequence of all that previous research and thinking was the new essays which eventually became this book. My initial idea was to write a short essay on all forty of the answers I had provided to Quora. That proposal was accepted by Penguin Random House Canada. While writing, however, I cut the essay number to twenty-five and then to sixteen and then finally, to the current twelve. I've been editing that remainder, with the help and care of my official editor (and with the vicious and horribly accurate criticism of Hurwitz, mentioned previously) for the past three years.

It took a long time to settle on a title: *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*. Why did that one rise up above all others? First and foremost, because of its simplicity. It indicates clearly that people need ordering principles, and that chaos otherwise beckons. We require rules, standards, values—alone and together. We're pack animals, beasts of burden. We must bear a load, to justify our miserable existence. We require routine and tradition. That's order. Order can become excessive, and that's not good, but chaos can swamp us, so we drown—and that is also not good. We need to stay on the straight and narrow path. Each of the twelve rules of this book—and their accompanying essays—therefore provide a guide to being there. "There" is the dividing line between order and chaos. That's where we are simultaneously stable enough, exploring enough, transforming enough, repairing enough, and cooperating enough. It's there we find the meaning that justifies life and its inevitable suffering. Perhaps, if we lived properly, we would be able to tolerate the weight of our own self-consciousness. Perhaps, if we lived properly, we could withstand the knowledge of our own fragility and mortality, without the sense of aggrieved victimhood that produces, first, resentment, then envy, and then the desire for vengeance and destruction. Perhaps, if we lived properly, we wouldn't have to turn to totalitarian certainty to shield ourselves from the knowledge of our own insufficiency and ignorance. Perhaps we could come to avoid those pathways to Hell—and we have seen in the terrible twentieth century just how real Hell can be.

I hope that these rules and their accompanying essays will help people understand what they already know: that the soul of the individual eternally hungers for the heroism of genuine Being, and that the willingness to take on that responsibility is identical to the decision to live a meaningful life.

If we each live properly, we will collectively flourish.

Best wishes to you all, as you proceed through these pages.

Dr. Jordan B. Peterson
Clinical Psychologist and Professor of Psychology