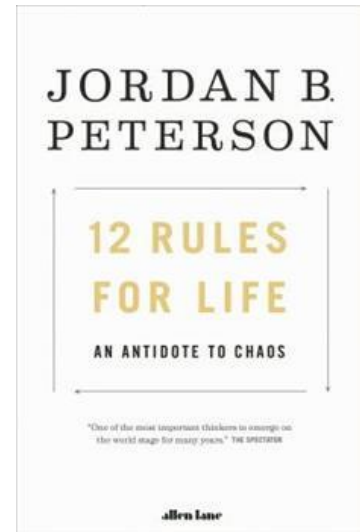


**“Not Bad, But Too Preachy and
Sometimes Off-kilter”**

a review by Dick Burkhardt of

12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos

By Jordan Petersen
(2018)



Yes, there's plenty of common sense in this book, but Peterson also comes across as a long-winded preacher who's a little off-kilter at times.

For example, Peterson is sometimes simply wrong-headed. Take “beliefs”, for example. In reality, your beliefs are what you can articulate as what you think is true, based on what you've been taught or learned. But Peterson claims that an avowed atheist is not an atheist if he or she behaves in virtuous ways: “You can only find out what you actually believe by watching how you act” (p 103). But actions are often determined by social mores, civic standards, psychological quirks, etc., having little or nothing to do with beliefs. This is precisely why people can behave virtuously under the sway of vastly different belief systems.

This also points up the shortcomings of the stimulating Forward by Norman Doidge. He rightly critiques the relativism and phony “tolerance” that comes out of postmodern philosophy, since many people can't hack it and end up in nihilism on one extreme or dogmatic ideology on the other. What Doidge fails to point out is that the bedrock of relativism is the statement I just made above – that although having a good belief system certainly promotes virtuous behavior, the actual beliefs are secondary.

So relativism says to not “get hung up on beliefs, rituals, and the like” but to try to understand the behaviors and actions in their cultural and ecological context. In other words, think like an anthropologist - to “think outside the box”. What is expected is that the anthropologist will be less judgmental of others and less dogmatic about his or her own beliefs. In other words, relativism does not mean that “all belief systems are equally true”, leaving people rudderless. It simply

means that you must dig deeper – beyond superficial beliefs - just like the Greek philosophers, to find those golden nuggets of universal wisdom.

From a scientific point of view, Heying and Weinstein (“A Hunter-Gather’s Guide to the 21st Century”) describe time-tested traditional beliefs (dogma or superstition) as “literally false but metaphorically true”. Example: the desire to get into heaven encourages virtuous behavior, even without their being a literal heaven. This is one way to dig deeper. Later Peterson discusses Nietzsche’s “God is dead” dictum, but without making it clear that Nietzsche is really talking about dogma and the spreading skepticism among the educated, with new totalitarian or utopian ideologies rushing in to fill the vacuum before science and sound philosophy have had the decades needed to flesh out a more viable intellectual landscape. Peterson does demonstrate some scientific knowledge but in rather narrow and scattered ways, often out-of-date and without the depth needed to take on the big-name philosophers.

Also wrong-headed is Peterson’s identification of male and female with Order and Chaos, his principal dichotomy of human life. In fact Heying and Weinstein cite both historical knowledge and sociological and psychological studies that among humans the female has had the principal responsibility for the establishing and maintaining the order of home and hearth, especially domesticating the wild male. Meanwhile the male has done most of the exploring, risk taking, investigating, war-making, etc., associated with change and chaos. The typically male roles of big-man, chief, or ruler (to impose order) are more recent in evolutionary terms. Note that in modern societies, leaders and managers may be either male and female, depending on the social context.

Even more disturbing is how Peterson is mired in the cynicism of Original Sin. To him badness is the natural, easy way out, while virtue requires the hard work of personal responsibility. “Vice is easy. Failure is easy too. It’s easier to not think, not to do, and not to care” (p 80). But “Success: that’s the mystery. Virtue: that’s what’s inexplicable”. This justifies what sounds like a blame-the-victim mentality: “Maybe your misery is what you brandish in your hatred for those who rose upward while you waited and sank” (p 81).

Maybe that is what he sees in his clinical practice but humanity has survived harsh environments precisely because of our social resilience. For example, for most hunter-gathers sharing, or mutual reciprocity, was mandatory for the survival of the group, so it is built into our genes, at least partially, despite the fact there were

always some freeloaders or psychopaths who had to be exiled, punished, or even killed.

Today that means that most people pay their taxes and contribute to civic stability, despite some exploiters and parasites in all classes. So Original Goodness is more on the mark, historically, though always subject to challenge during times of hardship or rapid change, especially by the alpha males who ruled many of our hominid ancestors. Peterson gets back on track when he recognizes that symbolic sacrifices demonstrate a commitment to a higher good – beyond immediate gratification of the self and associates.

I found Peterson's discussion of Christianity to be intriguing. He views Christianity as a great leap forward over paganism: equality before God means that one's "betters" are also accountable, even one's enemies worthy of respect. But all this was corrupted over time: loyalty to the Trinity is what gets you into heaven after you die, not good works in this life. Rituals, or fake virtue (called "virtue signaling" today), will do in practice. Instead Peterson advocates for emulating the actual actions and attitudes of Jesus, which is akin to liberation theology. Clearly Peterson is a progressive, not "born-again" Christian.

Where Peterson is very weak is in his lack of understanding of real-world economics and technologies. In particular he has trouble comprehending the horrors of the 21st century because he is mired in ideology and psychology, not the effects of rapidly changing economics - the "hyper-novelty" of Heying and Weinstein. This rapid industrialization has affected very different societies in similar ways. Energy, resources, technology demand their own pound of flesh (= sacrifice of resources and ecosystems, not just people and animals).

Historically, both capitalists and Marxists have cared a lot more about the distribution of power and wealth than about the planet or about the workers, who were viewed as pawns by both sides – cheap work force to be exploited or proletariat to man the revolution. When ordinary people are dragged along, kicking and screaming, well, that's what you get – horror in one form or another.

I find Peterson to be better grounded on gender, accepting the biological differences between men and women, rather than jumping on board the latest ideological bandwagon from Critical Gender Theory. He directly addresses the increasing feminization of education, especially higher education, and how that has damaged marriage prospects. But he seems to have missed one trend – I have two close relatives – "successful" women, whose husbands have adjusted well to

supportive, rather than bread winner, roles, and I know of similar examples close by.

Peterson also takes on postmodernism and critical theory in a more general sense, as utopianism gone too far. Strangely, he focuses on the power theorizing and deconstruction of Derrida (p 310) but without any mention of Foucault. But he certainly nails it: the claim that “everything is interpretation” or “socially constructed” (p 311) combines with an assumed “will to power” to yield nasty results: “If only power exists, then the use of power becomes fully justifiable” (p 314), as in today’s cancel culture.

Peterson concludes with both a sign of hope and a red flag: “People are very tough. They can survive through much pain and loss. But to persevere they must see the good in Being. If they lose that, they are truly Lost” (p 351).