12 Rules for Life

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JORDAN B. PETERSON

Jordan Peterson grew up in rural northern Alberta. He studied political science and psychology at the University of Alberta and earned his Ph.D. in clinical psychology from McGill University. His career has varied widely: he's held blue-collar jobs ranging from dishwasher to railway line worker, and as a clinical psychologist, he's helped clients manage conditions like depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and schizophrenia. He taught at Harvard University from 1993–1998 and joined the psychology faculty at the University of Toronto in 1998. In October 2016, a protestor filmed Peterson dialoguing with students about a bill passed by the Canadian Parliament which added "gender identity and expression" to the Canadian Human Rights Act and Criminal Code. While critiquing aspects of political correctness in general, he specifically argued that the bill would make the use of certain gender pronouns "compelled speech." The protestor's video went viral, and after that, Peterson became something of an online celebrity: though he'd been uploading lectures to YouTube since 2013, his follower count climbed into the millions between 2018 and 2021. He took time away from his clinical practice and teaching to finish writing *12 Rules for Life* in 2018, and in 2021, he resigned from the University of Toronto in order to focus on writing and podcasting. Peterson has been married to his wife Tammy since 1989 and has two adult children, Mikhaila and Julian.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Peterson has long been fascinated by the defining tragedies of the twentieth century, especially the Holocaust, the Soviet gulags, and the Cold War nuclear standoff between the United States and the U.S.S.R. Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970, was a notable influence on Peterson. After criticizing Stalin in private correspondence, Solzhenitsyn was sentenced to eight years in a Soviet labor camp in 1945—an experience he recounted in a massive three-volume work, *The Gulag Archipelago: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*—and spent decades living in exile in the West, only returning to Russia in 1994. *The Gulag Archipelago* helped bring the horrors of the Soviet labor camp system to a wide readership for the first time. The era of the gulags overlapped with a period known as the Cold War, which roughly followed the end of World War II and lasted until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The Cold War was marked by geopolitical tension between the U.S. and the Soviet Union and their respective allies, expressed not so much through direct military clashes as through regional proxy wars, nuclear buildup, propaganda, espionage, and other jockeying for global influence. Because Peterson's childhood and early adult years took place entirely against a Cold War backdrop, it's not surprising that the ideological standoff—and the looming threat of a nuclear war—weighed so heavily on him, prompting his exploration into the meaning of life, especially in light of humanity's capacity to inflict suffering. Peterson's interpretation of religion, especially Christianity and the Bible, is also notably influenced by the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), who looked for patterns, or archetypes, in the human psyche, especially as expressed through things like dreams, mythology, and folklore. Peterson tends to follow Jung in interpreting theological concepts not primarily as objective facts, but as psychological concepts (as in Peterson's take on Christ's death on the cross, for example).

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Aristotle's philosophical treatise, *Nicomachean Ethics*, could be seen as an ancient precursor to *12 Rules*, since Aristotle's object was to identify the best way of life and what happiness consists of. In his book Peterson devotes much space to expounding and interpreting narratives from the Bible, especially Genesis, from an evolutionary psychology and Jungian psychology perspective. Peterson cites Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* as especially significant in helping him explore the meaning of life and suffering. Among influential novelists, Fyodor Dostoevsky is discussed most prominently in *12 Rules*, especially his *Brothers Karamazov* and *Notes from Underground*. Peterson's other books are *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief* (1999) and *Beyond Order: 12 More Rules for Life* (2021).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** 12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos
- **When Written:** 2012–2018
- **Where Written:** Toronto, Canada
- **When Published:** 2018
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Nonfiction, Philosophy, Psychology, Self-Help
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Art as a Warning. For decades, Peterson has collected Soviet-era art and displayed it in his home. He views his collection as a

reminder of the connection between art and propaganda, and how even idealism can turn into totalitarian oppression.

Art as a Teacher. When comic book artist Ethan Van Sciver developed the concept for the illustrations in *12 Rules for Life*, he drew on Peterson's interest in art history and came up with the idea of Peterson walking his two kids through "the coolest art museum in the world" and teaching them about the artworks' meanings. Most of the book's chapters open with a drawing of a young Mikhaila and Julian Peterson encountering a famous painting or sculpture.

PLOT SUMMARY

Jordan Peterson begins by sharing the origin of *12 Rules for Life*. The book started as a list of 12 sayings in response to a question on the website Quora: "What are the most valuable things everyone should know?" While studying 20th-century history, Peterson, a clinical psychologist, had come to believe that life's meaning has to do with developing one's character in the face of suffering, not primarily with happiness. After reading lots of myths, sacred texts, and other literature, he identified a "divine Way"—the border between order and chaos—as the path to building character and discovering meaning in life. He offers his 12 rules as the best guide he has to walking that border, hoping that as individuals learn to live well, humanity will collectively flourish, too.

Rule 1 is "Stand up straight with your shoulders back." In this chapter, Peterson considers **lobsters**' behavior as a model for human behavior. Dominant lobsters, who win fights over territory, have different brain chemistry than submissive lobsters: their high serotonin levels prompt them to strut aggressively. Meanwhile, "loser" lobsters, whose serotonin is low, skulk around and startle easily. This dynamic can also be observed in human society. People with low social status tend to have less serotonin and live a more stressed existence; on the other hand, people who feel secure in their status are more confident and prepared for the unexpected. Peterson says that standing up straight with one's shoulders back can go a long way toward helping someone—even "a loser"—change the way they feel and are regarded in society. Such posture symbolizes a person's willingness to meet the demands of existence, or Being.

Rule 2 is "Treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping." First, Peterson further defines Chaos (unpredictable, unexplored territory) and Order (stable, familiar territory). This duality is deeply embedded in human culture and even in the brain's structure. Neither too much chaos is good (it can be overwhelming) nor too much order (it can become tyrannical); the ideal is balance between them. Peterson believes that in the Book of Genesis, the serpent in the Garden of Eden represents chaos. After Adam and Eve listen to the snake's temptation and become "conscious," they're aware not just of their own vulnerability to suffering, but of their capacity to *inflict* suffering—that is, to commit evil. They hide from God in shame, and God expels them from Paradise into the horrors of history. Peterson thinks people carry this ancient sense of shame and awareness of evil with them, and that's why people act as if they're not worthy of existence. More than that, though, it's humanity's unwillingness to face God—to contribute to the world—that makes them lack self-respect. Yet, time and again, people go to great lengths to help one another, even in the midst of great suffering. Therefore, Peterson says that instead of neglecting ourselves out of self-hatred, we should treat ourselves like those we're responsible for helping—and that starts with figuring out what's truly good for us (and, ultimately, for the world at large).

Rule 3 is "Make friends with people who want the best for you." Peterson reflects on old friends who seemed to get stuck in life, repeatedly seeking out companions who weren't good for them. While people sometimes do this because they believe they don't deserve any better, sometimes they do it out of a naïve desire to help the downtrodden. Often, though, it's more likely that doing this isn't really helping, but rather enabling bad behavior and possibly dragging a person down to their friends' level. In cases like this, it's often more effective to live your own life well and lead by example. And in doing so, it's healthy, not selfish, to surround yourself with people who will cheer you on and encourage you to be better.

Rule 4 is "Compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not to who someone else is today." Peterson suggests that instead of fixating on some arbitrary point of comparison to another person's life, dare to be honest about what *you* really want. Start by taking stock of your life and focusing on small changes that will make tomorrow better. While this is a big challenge, taking some responsibility for your own happiness (rather than choosing resentment at the world) enables you to gradually aim higher and higher, benefiting yourself and the world.

Rule 5 is "Do not let your children do anything that makes you dislike them." Peterson contends that modern parents hold a romantic—and unrealistic—view of their children's innocence. They're also afraid to make their kids dislike them, so they avoid the hard work of discipline—neglect that's harmful in the long run. Peterson urges parents to use both positive and negative reinforcement to maintain clear boundaries, which helps kids learn to get along with peers and adults in the outside world, benefiting everyone.

Rule 6 is "Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world." Peterson contends that it's logical to feel outraged about the world. While some people who suffer do end up lashing out at Being itself (such as mass shooters), many others emerge from the experience determined to do good. For example, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's sufferings under communism led to him writing *The Gulag Archipelago*, which

helped undermine Soviet tyranny. Peterson sees the same pattern in the Hebrew Bible's prophetic books, when Israel responded to suffering by choosing to repent and obey God more faithfully. The only alternatives to soul-searching and behavior change, as Peterson sees it, are resentment and revenge. When suffering threatens to overwhelm you, it's critical to focus on what *you* can fix. Otherwise, you risk becoming corrupted by bitterness instead of becoming a force for good in the world.

Rule 7 is "Pursue what is meaningful (not what is expedient)." Peterson returns to the Bible and the concept of sacrifice. Basically, sacrifice is delayed gratification—giving up something valued in the present for the sake of a better future. In Christ's temptations by Satan, Peterson sees Christ sacrificially refusing to take the easy way out of suffering, forging a path for humanity as a whole to reject evil. As he wrestled with doubts about life's meaning, Peterson concluded that "suffering" was the one thing he couldn't doubt, and that this evil must have an opposite good (that is, whatever stops evil from happening). This formed the basis of Peterson's moral beliefs. If a person lives to pursue good, they'll find more and more meaning revealed over time. While this meaning isn't identical to happiness, it achieves balance between order and chaos and provides an antidote to suffering. So, seek to do what's meaningful—even if that means sacrificing what's expedient.

Rule 8 is "Tell the truth—or, at least, don't lie." In his clinical practice, Peterson saw that people choose to lie when they're fixated on an "ill-formed desire" (either a goal or an ideology) and will do or say anything to get it. The problem with living this way is that it assumes you already know everything you need to know about the future. When a person lives with this kind of blindness for long enough, sometimes they have to sacrifice their entire value system in order to live more authentically. When a person pridefully refuses to do this, they often conclude that the world itself is unfair and end up brutalizing others as a result. Taken to an extreme, lies produce totalitarianism. So, it's crucial to be willing to learn from what you don't know, face reality truthfully, and pursue the good, even when that entails uncertainty or conflict.

Rule 9 is "Assume that the person you are listening to might know something you don't." Peterson learned that it's often most effective to just listen to his patients talk—it gives them a chance to organize their thoughts, which is often easier with a dialogue partner. A conversation partner can also help you distill your memories into a "moral of the story," which is the whole point of memory. Peterson says such "mutual exploration" is the highest form of conversation, which takes place on the border between order and chaos and demands that you assume your interlocutors have something new to teach you.

Rule 10 is "Be precise in your speech." Peterson notes that we usually live with a simplified version of reality. It works fine when life is going well, but when chaos erupts, it seems like your narrow vision has failed you. Sometimes chaos takes the form of a "dragon" of pent-up conflict that refuses to be ignored. If you specify a problem instead of ignoring it, you can make it solvable. Though facing conflict brings pain, the alternative is drifting through life in a fog and never fixing anything, which is destructive for relationships. Precise speech helps make chaos resolve into order.

Rule 11 is "Do not bother children when they are skateboarding." Looking at growing success gaps between men and women, Peterson argues that while oppressive patriarchy must be criticized, differences between men and women should be respected, too. In recent decades, philosophers like Derrida have begun to construe distinctions, even biological differences, primarily in terms of power—which is too simplistic. When society implements such theories by, for example, trying to socialize daredevil boys to adopt traditionally "feminine" behaviors instead, things tend to backfire. Healthy, strong women want and deserve mature men as partners. So, adults shouldn't suppress boundary-pushing behavior in children, especially boys.

The final rule, Rule 12, is "Pet a cat when you encounter one on the street." Peterson recalls his daughter Mikhaila's terrible struggle with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. Watching her pain, he eventually concluded that *thinking* about suffering can't solve it; rather, *noticing* is the key. The first thing to notice is that you love people *because* of their limitations, not apart from them—without limits, they wouldn't be themselves. Yet limitation inevitably brings suffering with it. Peterson suggests that the only way to cope with suffering is to find the courage to believe that the wonder of Being might actually outweigh its horror—something Mikhaila taught him how to do. Taking a moment to pet a cat (or a dog!) is an example of the kind of small, momentary wonder you can find if you just pay attention.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jordan Peterson – Jordan Peterson is the author and narrator of *12 Rules for Life*. Peterson grew up in rural Canada and has worked as a clinical psychologist and as a professor at Harvard University and the University of Toronto. Troubled by 20th-century atrocities like the Holocaust and the Soviet gulags, Peterson studied the world's mythical and religious writings, as well as history and psychology, in an effort to understand life's meaning in the face of suffering. In the book, he distills the lessons he gleaned in the form of 12 "rules," aimed at an everyday audience.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn – Solzhenitsyn was a survivor of the Soviet gulags, or labor camps, and the author of *The Gulag Archipelago*. Peterson mentions Solzhenitsyn several times as

an example of someone who, though he may have been entitled to become bitter about his sufferings, instead chose to improve himself and Being (existence) in general—especially by writing *The Gulag Archipelago*, which ultimately helped undermine communist oppression in the Soviet Union.

Chris – Chris was a friend of Peterson's while the two were growing up in rural Alberta, Canada. Peterson uses Chris as an example of someone who fails to take responsibility for Being, or existence. Angry and resentful in his youth, Chris drifted in and out of Peterson's life and never seemed to pull his own life together successfully. Chris's adult years were marked by guilt and self-loathing due to what he saw as his complicity in others' suffering, and he ultimately committed suicide.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Viktor Frankl – Viktor Frankl was an Auschwitz survivor, psychiatrist, and author of *Man's Search for Meaning*. Peterson cites Frankl's insistence that lies are a precursor to totalitarianism.

Jacques Derrida – Derrida was a French postmodern philosopher whose ideas gained academic prominence in the 1970s. His work focused on hierarchical structures as means of exclusion and oppression.

Mikhaila Peterson – Mikhaila is Peterson's daughter who was diagnosed with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis in early childhood. Watching Mikhaila fight through many years of debilitating pain and difficult treatments forced Peterson to grapple with the problem of human suffering and the meaning of life like nothing else did.

TERMS

Order – Order refers to familiar territory and stable, predictable norms. While studying the world's great mythical and religious stories, **Peterson** concluded that, to our ancestors, the most important elements in the world weren't material things, but the elements of order and chaos. This order/chaos duality is deeply embedded in human culture and perhaps even in our brains. When order reigns in human lives, the world's behavior matches our expectations, and things turn out as we want them to. In myths, order is symbolically portrayed as masculine. Though order provides stability, the dark side of order is that too much of it can become tyrannical. Peterson believes that walking the border between order and chaos is the path to a meaningful life.

Chaos – Chaos refers to unexplored territory, the new and unexpected erupting in the midst of what's commonplace and familiar. While studying the world's great mythical and religious stories, **Peterson** concluded that, to our ancestors, the most important elements in the world weren't material things, but the elements of order and chaos. This order/chaos duality is deeply embedded in human culture and perhaps even in our brains. Chaos can be both creative and destructive. As the antithesis of order, chaos is symbolically portrayed as feminine. In myths and fairytales, it often takes the form of the underworld. Though chaos offers the possibility of adventure and growth, too much of it can become overwhelming. A primary responsibility of Being, or existence, is transforming chaos into order.

Being – "Being" refers to reality. As **Peterson** uses it, the term refers especially to the burden and joy of human existence. Being inevitably involves suffering, but the key to not becoming overwhelmed by suffering, Peterson believes, is to find the courage to believe that life's suffering is outweighed by its goodness. Willingness to shoulder the burden of Being—to strive to improve Being both for oneself and for others, instead of shrinking from the responsibility and choosing resentment, bitterness, or revenge instead—is foundational to Peterson's 12 rules for life.

Nihilism – Nihilism is a perspective on human life that basically views existence as meaningless. Such an attitude holds that since nothing ultimately matters, then it doesn't matter how a person behaves.

Dominance Hierarchies – Dominance hierarchies are social structures in which successful creatures maintain a high, or dominant, social status—in terms of territory, resources, mating opportunities, and other valuable things—while others tend to get stuck in a low or submissive status. Though such hierarchies are most easily observed among simple creatures like lobsters, **Peterson** points out that they have been an enduring feature of the natural world for millennia, even persisting among humans to this day.

Postmodernism – Postmodernism is a philosophical school that emerged over the course of the 20th century, especially among radical Marxist thinkers like **Jacques Derrida**. Postmodernism tends to view distinctions in society primarily in terms of power differences and therefore as socially constructed, not simply natural—like gender distinctions, for example. Thus, postmodernism's moral imperative is to change the structures of society, dismantling socially constructed distinctions, so as to achieve equitable outcomes. At his most radical, Derrida argued that even language is to be understood in terms of power and lacks stable meanings—as **Peterson** glosses it, "everything is interpretation," a perspective he denounces as nihilistic and destructive.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in

black and white.

ORDER, CHAOS, AND MEANING

In an attempt to understand 20th-century tragedies and conflicts (including the Holocaust and the Cold War), Jordan Peterson immersed himself in the world's great myths and religious writings. In doing so, he noticed a repeated pattern of order and chaos. By "order," he means people acting according to predictable social norms—familiar, stable structures that keep society functioning smoothly. "Chaos," on the other hand, is the unexpected bursting into the familiar, which can be both creative and destructive. Cultures, religions, and even individual human consciousness all contain both order and chaos, which constantly push and pull at each other. For example, the Taoist **yin-yang** symbol depicts chaos (black) intertwined with order (white), as well as the potential for chaos to manifest within order and vice versa (the contrasting dots on either side). The dividing line between the two sides represents "the Way," or the ideal life path, a perfect balance of order and chaos.

Peterson believes that walking this border between order and chaos is the key to thriving and fulfillment. It's here, he explains, that people find meaning within and beyond life's inevitable suffering. As people instinctively recognize, too much stability can inhibit learning and change, yet too much change can overwhelm and disorient them. In addition, seeking meaning on the border between order and chaos has a larger benefit: it resists a nihilistic, expedient approach to life and helps make existence better not just for the individual, but for others, too. The book's 12 rules are meant to provide a guide to living on that boundary by helping people articulate purposeful order in their lives and in the world without becoming closed off to chaos's creative benefits.

SUFFERING, EVIL, AND RESPONSIBILITY

Peterson posits that "life is suffering," a basic truth that he traces back to humanity's oldest belief systems. And when life's challenges inevitably cause people to suffer, it's easy for them to become resentful of Being (existence) itself, which can then cause them to *inflict* suffering—something he defines as objectively evil. But rather than lashing out at existence at large, Peterson suggests that it's more effective (and more meaningful) to "aim up"—to orient our values and actions toward the good. "Good" must be whatever stops evil from happening, or what "mak[es] Being better."

In practice, "making Being better" entails taking responsibility for ourselves and others—voluntarily "shoulder[ing] the burden of Being" as best as we can. This requires recognizing that everyone contains the potential for both good and evil, disciplining our worst impulses, and choosing to focus on the good in oneself and in the world. It also entails sacrificing what's expedient (what's convenient and pleasurable in the short term) for what's meaningful (what's good for oneself and others in the long term) and striving for improvement. Peterson suggests that the reader start small, by examining their own life and fixing what they can about it. Then, they'll be in a stronger position to potentially fix the world beyond themselves. Taking responsibility in this way is what constitutes a meaningful, virtuous life. Peterson even equates such a path to embodying the teachings of Jesus Christ, who "determine[d] to take personal responsibility for the full depth of human depravity."

Of course, living with good as one's goal won't completely eradicate wanton evil or unexplained suffering, as these are fundamental aspects of life. Peterson suggests, nevertheless, that "each person must assume as much of that responsibility as they can by telling the truth, fixing what's broken, and doing whatever is possible to reduce suffering in the world." Taking on the responsibility to "mak[e] Being better" is the most fruitful and meaningful response to evil and suffering—more effective than seeking an intellectual answer. If a person does this, they might learn that the joy of Being is even greater than the inevitable suffering that accompanies it.

TRUTH

According to Peterson, to "live in truth" is the "meta-goal" that all other life goals should be oriented toward. Such a goal is practical—since lies tend to be destructive and complicated to maintain—but also requires immense courage, since staying in denial is much more comfortable than expressing oneself truthfully and facing the harshness of reality. If we fail to accept the truth, Peterson says, it's impossible to recognize and fix our own flaws or try to solve the problems we see in the world. If we can't clearly and honestly articulate our goals, it will be impossible to aim at them, and you can't hit something without aiming toward it. By the same token, if we avoid interpersonal conflict and honest, precise communication—in other words, if we commit "sins of omission"—our relationships will suffer. Although telling the truth to oneself and others can be scary, Peterson says that dishonesty and denial are even scarier: they guarantee that problems stay vague and looming, growing ever-larger and more intimidating in one's imagination. In fact, dishonesty (whether actively lying or failing to recognize a lie for what it is) can spiral into a "life-lie" that someone shapes their values around—and undoing such a big, elaborate lie requires a great deal of personal sacrifice.

Furthermore, dishonesty has ramifications far beyond the personal. Drawing on Viktor Frankl, Auschwitz survivor and author of *Man's Search for Meaning*, Peterson argues that "deceitful, inauthentic individual existence is the precursor to social totalitarianism." In other words, lies can corrupt not only individuals but human society as a whole, because

unchallenged lies are the foundation of murderous ideologies (Nazism, for example). Telling the truth—or, at least, refraining from lying—may be terrifying and painful in the short term, but it's necessary to grow as an individual, build trust with other people, and maintain a healthy society.

KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM

Peterson defines wisdom as the continual search for knowledge, and he values examining a breadth of information in that search. As a psychologist, he finds it valuable to look deep into history to understand human behavior. This includes looking far back into the evolutionary past and also looking at how humans have thought about and symbolized their actions and standards of behavior for millennia—often through myths and other literature, historical events, and even science. For example, the biological simplicity of **lobsters** can help us understand more complex human behavior, especially how we respond to challenges. Peterson also finds archetypal meanings in stories ranging from humans' ejection from the Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis to modern "myths," like Disney adaptations of fairy tales. Such stories express the age-old pattern of a person emerging into maturity by embracing the burden of consciousness. Finally, Peterson draws illustrations from history, like Solzhenitsyn's experiences in Soviet labor camps, to show how embracing lies, even on an individual level, can lead to societal tyranny.

Peterson doesn't see any of these bodies of knowledge as infallible. In fact, he argues that it's always important to be mindful of what you don't know and be open to hearing other people's perspectives and changing your mind, instead of insisting that you already know all you *need* to know and merely trying to reinforce your preexisting beliefs (which he suggests is the path to tyranny). Instead, he describes how open and honest conversation helps us learn, clarify our ideas, and better understand ourselves. And looking to science, to the past, and to enduring stories provides a starting point and a measure of stability from which humans can develop, change, and grow wiser—which, in turn, will help them navigate the boundary between order and chaos.

CHARACTER-BUILDING AND HIERARCHY

When Peterson searched for life's meaning in light of great suffering, he concluded that building character—learning to respond effectively to conflict and adversity—is a better strategy than chasing happiness. This is because happiness is conditional and fleeting, and what makes you happy isn't necessarily what's best for you. Moreover, virtually all groups of beings—from human society to **lobster** pods—are organized into dominance hierarchies, in which the strongest, smartest, and most industrious tend to prevail and succeed, while the weakest tend to fail. This "unequal distribution" naturally arises in everything from wealth distribution to artistic innovation to the dating pool. Peterson decries the tendency to view hierarchies as exclusionary and oppressive (an idea that he attributes to postmodernist ideology), instead drawing on evolutionary biology to suggest that they are an inevitable, ingrained reality. He thus encourages the reader to become the most competent and resilient possible version of themselves, both to set themselves up for success (to rank highly in the social dominance hierarchy) and to equip themselves to endure suffering. This can start with something as simple as "standing up straight with your shoulders back" (Rule 1). Doing so is not simply a physical posture—it encourages an attitude of assuming that life will be difficult, but being prepared to respond to challenges instead of passively bracing for catastrophe. He cautions against being overly passive, naïve, or kind to a fault, as such traits leave people vulnerable to being taken advantage of or becoming despondent when they inevitably fail. Instead, people should aim to be tough and formidable (both physically and mentally) in order to buffer themselves against hardship.

GENDER AND RELATIONSHIPS

Peterson traces the categories of male and female deep into humanity's primordial history. For millennia, these predictable forms have been symbolically associated in human consciousness with order and chaos, respectively. He argues that this dichotomy doesn't reflect a value difference between male and female. Its origins might have to do with the fact that much of human and animal society is structured according to male hierarchies (order), and that all human beings are born out of the unknown (chaos, which is symbolically associated with femininity). In any case, while Peterson doesn't suggest that this distinction can be woodenly applied to men and women today—it's just an archetype—it does reflect the fact that, in his view, men and women are generally different.

In modern society, this gender difference gets expressed in a variety of ways. One example with societal ramifications is that, across cultures, women usually value a male partner who's equal or higher in status to them. But since women are increasingly exceeding men in many fields, desirable partners are harder to find—and Peterson suggests that since modern education doesn't accommodate male behaviors well, boys increasingly struggle to grow up into suitable, well-adjusted partners. If they don't have outlets for daring, boundary-pushing behavior, then, young men remain weak and susceptible to overly harsh, even fascistic ideologies to compensate for their weakness. Basically, Peterson proposes that if boys are allowed to act like boys are usually naturally inclined to do, both men and woman ultimately benefit. So, while Peterson doesn't hold that male/female distinctions

should be viewed as innate and inflexible, he advises being aware of their deep roots in human consciousness and working with them, not against their grain.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

LOBSTERS

Peterson uses lobsters' behavior patterns to symbolize the fundamental importance of human attitudes toward Being, or existence. Peterson mainly discusses lobsters in reference to Rule 1, "Stand up straight with your shoulders back." Because lobsters have relatively simple nervous systems, scientists understand their neurochemistry and behavior quite well, and they provide a helpful basis for comparison with humans. While staking out territory on the ocean floor, lobsters engage in escalating levels of combat to establish dominance. The winning lobster has high levels of the brain chemical serotonin, which causes it to assume a strutting posture, extending its limbs to look dangerous. On the other hand, the defeated lobster assumes a drooping posture, and it has high levels of the chemical octopamine and low levels of serotonin, which cause it to have a heightened tail-flick reflex—rather like a heightened startle reflex in a human with PTSD. Victorious lobsters tend to win future fights, while defeated lobsters tend to keep losing.

Besides showing that dominance hierarchies have been present in the natural world for a very long time, lobster behavior models dynamics that are present in human society, too. Peterson says that every person has a "primordial calculator" in their brain that keeps track of their precise social position. When a person's status is low, the brain releases less serotonin, which causes a person to react to their circumstances with greater stress. On the other hand, when a person's status is secure, their brain releases plenty of serotonin, so they feel safe, calm, and able to plan for the future. Peterson points out that this status-counter function can create a positive feedback loop: if someone *acts* like a defeated lobster, then others will treat them that way, their brains will produce less serotonin, and the cycle of anxiety and stress will continue. However, changing one's posture can go a long way toward breaking this cycle. Standing up straight with one's shoulders back—acting like a dominant lobster—can make a person feel more confident, which in turn affects the way they're regarded and treated by others. Peterson says posture also has a deeper psychological impact. Standing up straight can help a person feel prepared to meet life's challenges and demands, to "accept[] the burden of Being." If a person skulks around like a defeated lobster, though, they won't be taken seriously, and they're more likely to experience life as a series of catastrophes than as a challenge to embrace.

While lobsters serve as an early example of Peterson's interest in evolutionary insights into human behavior, the significance of lobster posture also sets the tone for the book. Most of the 12 rules focus in some way on our fundamental stance toward the challenges of life—either embracing them as joyfully and responsibly as possible or retreating from them with bitterness.

YIN-YANG

The yin-yang symbol symbolizes the intertwined nature of order and chaos. This Taoist symbol portrays order (white) and chaos (black) as two intertwined serpents. The symbol's white half contains a black dot, and the black half contains a white dot, indicating the possibility of order transforming into chaos and vice versa. Taoists believe that walking the border between order and chaos is "the divine Way." As he studied world mythologies and religions, Peterson came to believe that this "Way" is the key to Being, or reality. Order is necessary for stability, while too much order can become oppressive; similarly, too much chaos can be destabilizing, yet without chaos, learning and growth aren't possible. Thus, the yin-yang symbolizes the balance Peterson sees as ideal and recommends to readers through his 12 rules.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House Canada edition of *12 Rules for Life* published in 2018.

Overture Quotes

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 […] 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." 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.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker), Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

Related Themes:

Page Number: xxvi-xxvii

Explanation and Analysis

Peterson begins the book by giving both a short history and a longer history of how *12 Rules for Life* came about. The short version is that Peterson proposed 12 things everyone should know on the website Quora, and those sayings were adapted into the book; the long version is that Peterson had been thinking for a long time about the problem of life's meaning in a world filled with suffering. Here, he gives part of the long version, which included an appearance on a Canadian radio broadcast in 2012.

In the radio program, Peterson criticized the idea that happiness is the goal of human life. This criticism emerged from his years of studying some of the twentieth century's worst atrocities, such as the Holocaust and the Soviet gulags. Peterson quotes from the second volume of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, a nonfiction account of prisoners' experiences in the Soviet labor camps and a work that greatly impacted Peterson's outlook. Solzhenitsyn contended that the first time a prisoner experiences pointless brutality, they are forced to give up any notion that happiness is the mark of a meaningful life. Indeed, Peterson suggests that this notion isn't strong enough to survive even more ordinary suffering. That's why Peterson's broadcast argued that people need a more durable goal than mere happiness in order to get through life's difficulties—an argument he develops more fully in *12 Rules for Life*.

❝ Order and chaos are the yang and yin of the famous Taoist symbol: two serpents, head to tail. 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.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: xxviii

Explanation and Analysis

Peterson introduces order and chaos, key concepts that come up repeatedly in his discussion of the 12 rules. Order and chaos are elements of life that surface over and over again in mythical, religious, and other literature across time and cultures. Order can be generally summed up as what's familiar, stable, and predictable; chaos is what's unknown, destabilizing, and unpredictable. In the Taoist yin-yang symbol, Peterson finds an ideal illustration of the relationship between order and chaos. Though they're opposites, order and chaos are closely related and even inseparably intertwined—the two serpents' head-to-tail position shows this, as well as the opposite-color dots marking both serpents. This close relationship illustrates a dynamic that Peterson will return to as he discusses the potential of human life: nothing stays stable and secure forever, and at the same time, chaos can generate new, fruitful possibilities. The key to navigating this dynamic is balance—a person must learn to walk the fine line between order and chaos without becoming trapped in suffocating sameness or overwhelmed by constant change.

❝ 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.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: xxxiii

Explanation and Analysis

Peterson has just been describing a dream in which he was suspended from the dome of a great cathedral. From his studies of religious symbolism, Peterson knew that cathedrals are traditionally constructed in the shape of a cross, with the center of the cross right under the dome. Further, in Christian theology, the cross is understood to be the center of human existence, since it's the place where Christ underwent the greatest suffering on humanity's behalf, and thus also the gateway to human redemption. Thus, the dream placed Peterson right in the symbolic center of human experience—of Being.

As a psychologist, Peterson holds that dreams can reveal truths that the conscious, reasoning mind hasn't yet discerned or can't articulate. In this case, his dream helped Peterson figure out a path for humanity that avoids both excessive order and excessive chaos. Too much order can lead to "slavish adherence to the group," or tyranny, while too much chaos can unravel into meaninglessness, or nihilism. But the dream suggested to Peterson that a focus on cultivating the individual—particularly strengthening the individual's ability to respond to suffering—can steer between these two pitfalls and ultimately benefit not just the individual, but humanity as a whole.

Rule 1 Quotes

❝ High serotonin/low octopamine characterizes the victor. The opposite neurochemical configuration, a high ratio of octopamine to serotonin, produces a defeated-looking, scrunched-up, inhibited, drooping, skulking sort of lobster, very likely to hang around street corners, and to vanish at the first hint of trouble. Serotonin and octopamine also regulate the tail-flick reflex, which serves to propel a lobster rapidly backwards when it needs to escape. Less provocation is necessary to trigger that reflex in a defeated lobster. You can see an echo of that in the heightened startle reflex characteristic of the soldier or battered child with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 7-8

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage Peterson is talking about lobsters. When lobsters get into scuffles on the ocean floor, winning lobsters and losing lobsters emerge from the conflict with opposite brain chemistry. A serotonin surge enables victorious lobsters to strut around aggressively, enjoying the territory and females they've won. But a defeated lobster's brain doesn't release much serotonin; instead, its brain floods with octopamine, a neurochemical that governs the response known as fight-or-flight. The chemical difference is clearly reflected in the losing lobster's behavior: it droops, skulks, and shrinks from contact with others. Peterson's comment that this lobster is "very likely to hang around street corners" is obviously meant to be humorous anthropomorphism, but it gets the idea across—a defeated lobster doesn't confidently dominate its own space, but furtively loiters around dominant lobsters' space.

Lobster imagery is a good example of Peterson's use of evolutionary psychology for insight into human psychology. Humans are a great deal more complex than lobsters, of course, but the parallel between backwards-scuttling lobsters and an easily startled, traumatized human helps prepare the reader for Peterson's Rule 1—that adopting a confident posture instead of a timid one can actually affect a person's mindset and their experience in the world.

❝ But standing up straight with your shoulders back is not something that is only physical, because you're not only a body. You're a spirit, so to speak—a psyche—as well. Standing up physically also implies and invokes and demands standing up metaphysically. Standing up means voluntarily accepting the burden of Being. Your nervous system responds in an entirely different manner when you face the demands of life voluntarily. You respond to a challenge, instead of bracing for a catastrophe.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Peterson explains the importance of his first "rule," which encourages people to stand up straight with their shoulders back. He recognizes that this piece of advice sounds pretty superficial at first. After all, standing up straight cannot repair a background filled with trauma or ensure that someone will experience success instead of failure. But the rule is founded on Peterson's belief that human beings are a union of body and spirit. According to this perspective, then, your posture unavoidably impacts your psychology in some way (and vice versa). Indeed, Peterson puts it more strongly than that—standing up straight "implies," "invokes," and "demands" a stronger inner posture as well. Even if you don't *feel* confident, in other words, *enacting* confidence over time trains your interior to match your exterior.

But when Peterson talks about standing up straight, he isn't talking about an indiscriminate brashness or aggression. He's specifically talking about what it means to "[accept] the burden of Being," or the unavoidable pain of reality. Everyone faces difficulty in life to some degree, but it makes

a huge psychological difference whether you face the difficulty head-on or shrink from it. Even if you're afraid, facing it head-on can give you strength even if you fail; on the other hand, shrinking back from a challenge might not *guarantee* that you'll fail, but it certainly won't help you overcome it. This framework goes back to Peterson's discussion of lobsters and how winning lobsters tend to *act* like winning lobsters and thus to keep on winning; losing lobsters tend to act like losers and therefore stay at the bottom of the lobster hierarchy.

Rule 2 Quotes

❝ Humanity, in toto, and those who compose it [...] deserve some sympathy for the appalling burden under which the human individual genuinely staggers; some sympathy for subjugation to mortal vulnerability, tyranny of the state, and the depredations of nature. It is an existential situation that no mere animal encounters or endures [...] It is this sympathy that should be the proper medicament for self-conscious self-contempt, which has its justification, but is only half the full and proper story.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61-62

Explanation and Analysis

In discussing Rule 2, Peterson argues that most people don't take good care of themselves. He suggests that because of the human capacity to commit evil, people feel an instinctive unworthiness that leads them to neglect themselves, believing deep down that they, and humanity as a whole, don't deserve to exist.

While Peterson doesn't dispute the fact that people can be horrible, he argues that, collectively, people also deserve a lot of credit. Here, he points out that life is overwhelmingly hard: people are vulnerable to sickness and death, corrupt governments, and natural disasters, among other horrors. Yet in the midst of all that, people keep enduring, and surprisingly often, they even try to help and support one another while dealing with their own suffering.

When Peterson says that "no mere animal" shares humanity's "existential situation," this also hearkens back to his earlier point that human beings and animals have different moral capacities. Predators kill prey in order to eat, but animals aren't wantonly cruel. Human beings *can* be cruel and often are. On the flipside of this argument, though, animals don't bear the same burden of conscious existence that humans do. Humans might be able to commit evil in a way that animals can't, but they're also capable of moral goodness that animals can't attain. Ultimately, then, Peterson argues that while contempt for humanity is justifiable, it doesn't acknowledge the full scope of what people are capable of: with the latter in mind, sympathy is every bit as justified as contempt.

Rule 4 Quotes

❝ Pay attention. [...] Notice something that bothers you, that concerns you, that will not let you be, which you could fix, that you would fix. You can find such somethings by asking yourself (as if you genuinely want to know) three questions: "What is it that is bothering me?" "Is that something I could fix?" and "Would I actually be willing to fix it?" If you find that the answer is "no," to any or all of the questions, then look elsewhere. Aim lower. Search until you find something that bothers you, that you could fix, that you would fix, and then fix it. That might be enough for the day.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is an example of how to put Peterson's Rule 4 into practice. Throughout this chapter, he has argued that it's pointless to compare yourself to anyone else because people's life circumstances are so different, and we tend to be unaware of the bigger picture of someone else's life. Instead, he encourages readers to develop the habit of "paying attention." By "pay attention," Peterson means to be self-aware and to notice things in your life that you aren't satisfied with. However, he's not recommending that readers try to fix anything and everything at once. It's important to take a realistic view of the problems you notice. If something is beyond your ability to fix—or if, being honest with yourself, you're just unwilling to take it on right now—then you should seek a different goal. The implication is that it's better to set your sights lower and tackle an achievable goal than to tackle something that's beyond you and get so discouraged that you stop seeking improvement altogether. The former is a sustainable basis for ongoing change; the latter isn't.

It's worth noting that while this quote could sound like a demanding list, it's Peterson's way of encouraging readers to make real changes in their lives instead of fixing on

theoretical changes that never happen. Real change in an individual's life, he believes, can eventually lead to a real impact on others—on "Being" generally. It all starts with becoming more aware of oneself and one's surroundings.

Rule 5 Quotes

❝❝ Parents have a duty to act as proxies for the real world—merciful proxies, caring proxies—but proxies, nonetheless. This obligation supersedes any responsibility to ensure happiness, foster creativity, or boost self-esteem. It is the primary duty of parents to make their children socially desirable.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

This chapter is basically Peterson's parenting advice. The crux of his advice is that it's important to confront children's unacceptable behaviors early on so they won't persist into adulthood. While this seems straightforward, Peterson argues that many modern parents avoid disciplining their kids for fear that their children will dislike them for it. In response, he argues that if kids aren't disciplined when they're young, they will grow up into people that *no one* likes or wants to associate with—worse, possibly even people who mistreat others. He points out that if parents fail in this, then the "real world" will end up doing the job for them, as their kids suffer the consequences of their antisocial behaviors. It's much kinder for loving parents to think of themselves as "proxies" with the job of preparing their children to participate in the world, Peterson thinks.

Notably, Peterson sees "discipline" as a broad spectrum—anything from positive reinforcement to time-out to a restrained use of physical punishment—depending on the context and the given child's personality. When he talks about helping a child become "socially desirable," Peterson doesn't necessarily mean "popular," but refers to qualities that make someone a good playmate and friend—important building blocks for contributing to adult society later on.

Rule 6 Quotes

❝❝ The ancient Jews always blamed themselves when things fell apart. They acted as if God's goodness—the goodness of reality—was axiomatic, and took responsibility for their own failure. That's insanely responsible. But the alternative is to judge reality as insufficient, to criticize Being itself, and to sink into resentment and the desire for revenge.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

In Rule 6, Peterson begins to deal with the problem of suffering in more detail. But he starts from an unexpected angle. Throughout this chapter, he encourages readers to respond to struggles in their lives first of all by looking inward and identifying positive changes they can make. By doing this, Peterson doesn't necessarily imply that suffering is someone's fault or that they shouldn't seek redress for wrongs that have been done to them. However, he encourages looking inward—including acknowledging ways that a person might be contributing to their own suffering—because, generally speaking, the alterative of blaming the world for one's suffering is worse. Blaming reality, or "Being," for its general unfairness tends to breed resentment and bitterness, Peterson argues; and these qualities encourage a person to turn away from Being, doing no good for themselves or others. In this passage, Peterson uses the people of Israel in the Old Testament as an example of how to respond to suffering. When the people suffered—for example, were exiled to other lands—they didn't lash out at God (or at least that's not what the biblical prophets urged them to do). Instead, they sought to repent of their wrongdoing and align their lives with God's commandments once again. They took it for granted that God was good and that, therefore, they must need to fix their lives. Peterson encourages readers to adopt a similar attitude when they face troubles of their own—of assuming that Being is still good and worthwhile instead of turning against it.

Rule 7 Quotes

During [tens or hundreds of thousands of years], the twin practices of delay and exchange began to emerge, slowly and painfully. Then they became represented, in metaphorical abstraction, as rituals and tales of sacrifice, told in a manner such as this: "It's *as if* there is a powerful Figure in the Sky, who sees all, and is judging you. Giving up something you value seems to make Him happy—and you want to make Him happy, because all Hell breaks loose if you don't. So, practice sacrificing, and sharing, until you become expert at it, and things will go well for you."

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

In his discussion of Rule 7, Peterson has been talking about how, in ancient history, humans learned the value of delaying gratification—for example, saving extra goods for later in order to trade them with others, thereby gaining other necessary goods and cementing relationships in the process. He suggests that this practice became reflected in religious rituals and stories in the concept of sacrifice. In this passage he sums up how ancient people might have talked about this concept: by proposing that people act as if there's an omniscient god watching everything they do, that this god is pleased when people refrain from gratifying all their desires, and that when they don't, bad things happen. In short, sacrificing is a way to ensure that life goes well.

Of course, this isn't how ancient people thought about their religious beliefs. But Peterson shows how, from his standpoint as a psychologist, those beliefs evolved in ways that benefited society, and how religious structures worked to reinforce those beliefs and associated practices. In that regard, it's a good example of how Peterson views religion in general—as a means to a bigger social end and not an end in itself.

Each human being has an immense capacity for evil. Each human being understands, *a priori*, perhaps not what is good, but certainly what is not. And if there is something that is *not good*, then there is something that *is good*. If the worst sin is the torment of others, merely for the sake of the suffering produced—then the good is whatever is diametrically opposed to that. The good is whatever stops such things from happening.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 197-198

Explanation and Analysis

Just before this quote, Peterson has been talking about how he struggled with the question of life's meaning as a younger man. He'd come to reject traditional religion, but he also saw its purported replacements—like 20th-century socialist and communist movements—as deeply morally bankrupt. Ironically, though, observing the catastrophic fallout from those movements helped him arrive at certain settled beliefs. For one, he believed that human beings have the inherent potential to commit great evil (willfully harming others just for suffering's sake). The fact of terrible human suffering, throughout history but especially poignantly in living memory, was undeniable.

While this is a dark starting point, for Peterson it was also a first step toward accepting that if evil exists, then good must exist, too. And if human beings have the capacity to do evil, then, Peterson believed, they must also have the capacity to choose good instead. In time, Peterson came to organize his whole moral vision around these twin precepts. If stopping evil from happening is the best thing a person can do, then a person's efforts in life should all ultimately be directed toward that goal.

You may find that if you attend to these moral obligations, once you have placed "make the world better" at the top of your value hierarchy, you experience ever-deepening meaning. It's not bliss. It's not happiness. It is something more like atonement for the criminal fact of your fractured and damaged Being. [...] It's adoption of the responsibility for being a potential denizen of Hell. It is willingness to serve as an angel of Paradise.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

Earlier in this chapter, Peterson has been talking about goodness—essentially, countering the world's evil—as the ultimate goal of human life. The "moral obligations" Peterson speaks of here refer to essentially anything a person can do to make existence slightly better, from

tackling undone paperwork or a messy room to serving your family a delicious meal. Notably, these aren't huge things! They're small actions that are attainable in most people's everyday lives. This is intentional: Peterson wants readers to realize that improving the world, or Being, starts small and close to home, and it's only from there that one can build up to bigger, more far-reaching actions. The bigger actions are always made up of smaller, seemingly insignificant ones.

Peterson also reiterates the point he introduced at the beginning of the book—that the pursuit of meaning isn't necessarily the same thing as happiness. It doesn't *preclude* happiness, but it doesn't guarantee it, either. That's because pursuing meaning is difficult and often includes uncertainty, difficult truths, and even suffering. But in the long run, meaning is the result of a mature character, and it's something that benefits you individually, your community, and even the world as a whole.

When Peterson talks about "atonement for [...] damaged Being," it's worth noting here that this chapter probably best illustrates the disjunction between Peterson's moral outlook and that of Christianity. While Peterson believes that humans can meaningfully overcome the world's evil by doing good, Christians would generally say that human sin runs deep enough that no person, except Christ, could ever do this perfectly or completely—indeed, that's why Christ's atonement was necessary. This again points to how, for Peterson, Christ's life and death provide a model for a meaningful life, while for traditional Christians, Christ's life and death alone can atone for human evil, and humans will only know perfection and freedom from suffering in heaven.

Rule 8 Quotes

❝ If you say no to your boss, or your spouse, or your mother, when it needs to be said, then you transform yourself into someone who can say no when it needs to be said. If you say yes when no needs to be said, however, you transform yourself into someone who can only say yes, even when it is clearly time to say no. If you ever wonder how perfectly ordinary, decent people could find themselves doing the terrible things the gulag camp guards did, you now have your answer. By the time *no* seriously needed to be said, there was no one left capable of saying it.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker), Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

In this quote, Peterson demonstrates the vital importance of telling the truth by showing the catastrophic effects that lying can have. So far in his discussion of Rule 8, he has shown that people can use words for good or ill—sometimes horrific ill. While people often associate lying with an attitude of brash arrogance, Peterson suggests that avoiding conflict is another form of lying that can be just as disastrous. Sometimes this kind of lying means refusing to say no (or "yes," as the case may be) when it should be said. And the more one refuses to say no, the more they lose the ability to say it when it's critically important.

Peterson argues that it's just this kind of avoidant mindset that allows gulags (Soviet work camps) to run. While this might seem like a stretch at first, it supports Peterson's claim that personal, seemingly small lies aren't harmless, and that the more a person tells such lies, the more they'll accept, defend, and ultimately even support horrific lies on a large, societal scale. Peterson draws on the experiences of his hero, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, author of the autobiographical *Gulag Archipelago*, to support his argument that ordinary people can easily get sucked into horrific lies if they don't make a daily habit of telling the truth.

Rule 9 Quotes

❝ Consider the following situation: A client in my practice recounts a long, meandering, emotion-laden account of a difficult period in his or her life. We summarize, back and forth [...] It is now a different memory, in many ways—with luck, a better memory [...] We have extracted the moral of the story [...] That's the purpose of memory. You remember the past not so that it is "accurately recorded" [...] but so that you are prepared for the future.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 246-7

Explanation and Analysis

In his discussion of Rule 9, Peterson considers the nature of useful conversation. Unsurprisingly (given his background), he draws examples from his psychological practice, illustrating here that one of the benefits of conversation is that a conversation partner can help you sift through your

past in order to be better equipped for the future. In other words, talking with a sympathetic listener can help you sort chaos into order. Here, Peterson describes how he often summarizes stories back to his clients. This not only helps him confirm that he understands them correctly, but helps the client distill his or her memory into a more useful form. In other words, by reflecting back what he hears, Peterson helps the client pull "the moral of the story" out of a complicated memory. Having done so, the client then has a more effective tool to help them not only understand the significance of the past, but how to move on to a better future. Peterson even suggests that this is what memories are really for—not to preserve an accurate rendering of what happened years ago, but to help us make sense of how we are and how we should live.

❝ To have this kind of conversation, it is necessary to respect the personal experience of your conversational partners. You must assume that they have reached careful, thoughtful, genuine conclusions [...] You must meditate, too, instead of strategizing towards victory. If you fail, or refuse, to do so, then you merely and automatically repeat what you already believe, seeking its validation and insisting on its rightness.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 254-5

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout this chapter, Peterson discusses different kinds of conversation, some of them useful, some of them quite the opposite. Here, near the end of the chapter, he discusses what he views as the best and truest type of conversation—the philosophical discussion. By this he doesn't mean an abstract, academic debate, but any kind of conversation in which people are setting aside their desire to dominate the discussion in order to seek truth together and ideally solve a problem. Peterson identifies the prerequisites for such a conversation. In particular, he restates the importance of—as the Rule puts it—assuming "that the person you are listening to might know something you don't." Among other things, this means assuming that your conversation partner has come by their views honestly—that is, they've given serious thought to what they believe and have good reason for believing as they do, even if you disagree with their conclusions. It also means setting aside your desire to be right and to win a debate in order to really think about what you're hearing. If you're thinking about how to prove your partner wrong, after all, you're really not listening—and that means you aren't learning anything new. In a conversation that's really seeking the truth, Peterson argues, it's necessary for everyone to set aside the need to be right and to really hear each other, working together to pursue the truth.

Rule 10 Quotes

❝ Chaos emerges in a household, bit by bit. Mutual unhappiness and resentment pile up. Everything untidy is swept under the rug, where the dragon feasts on the crumbs. But no one says anything [...] Communication would require admission of terrible emotions [...] But in the background [...] the dragon grows. One day it bursts forth, in a form that no one can ignore. [...] Every one of the three hundred thousand unrevealed issues, which have been lied about, avoided, rationalized away, hidden like an army of skeletons in some great horrific closet, bursts forth like Noah's flood, drowning everything.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 271

Explanation and Analysis

In Rule 10, Peterson explores the danger of avoiding potential chaos in one's life, especially the way such avoidance can damage relationships. When he talks about being precise in your speech, he means that it's critical to name problems as they pop up instead of sweeping them under the rug. If you fail to do that, then—as he describes here—bad feelings pile up out of sight, feeding the "dragon" of chaos that's hidden in the shadows of a couple's or family's life. In the short term, this can seem like a healthier way of keeping the peace, since airing difficult emotions is so painful. But Peterson insists that doing this accomplishes nothing but "feeding the dragon" and making the eruption of chaos all the more disastrous when it inevitably happens. He describes this eventual eruption like "Noah's flood," alluding to the biblical event when the primordial world seemed once again enveloped in chaos. By now, readers know that Peterson argues that problems should be confronted early on if there's to be a realistic hope of wrestling order out of chaos—and he maintains that naming the specific problems is one of the safeguards against the dragon getting unmanageably big.

If you shirk the responsibility of confronting the unexpected, even when it appears in manageable doses, reality itself will become unsustainably disorganized and chaotic. [...] Ignored reality transforms itself (reverts back) int the great Goddess of Chaos, the great reptilian Monster of the Unknown—the great predatory beast against which mankind has struggled since the dawn of time. [...] Ignored reality manifests itself in an abyss of confusion and suffering.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 281

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage Peterson expands on the importance of being precise in one's speech so as not to become overwhelmed by chaos. By "precise in your speech," Peterson just means communicating—whether with oneself or with others in one's life—about the true nature of various problems. If such problems are ignored or dismissed, they become part of a vague, unaddressed mass of problems. If they're vague, they cannot be fixed—they just continue to sit there, potentially growing and becoming harder to confront and resolve. An important point here is that the reality we're ignoring might not be as terrible as we imagine. It might be quite benign. But unless we take the risk of examining it and precisely naming it, it might as well be a terrifying monster because it continues to lurk in the shadows of one's life.

This quote connects to a number of other rules and concepts from the book. For example, when he mentions shirking responsibility, Peterson alludes to the importance of being willing to shoulder the reality of Being that he discusses in Rule 1. Though he doesn't directly name it, this rule is also clearly related to Rule 8 with its emphasis on not tolerating even the smallest lies, lest they become life-consuming lies. Obviously, too, order and chaos manifest clearly here: while chaos isn't inherently bad or dangerous, it does threaten to overwhelmingly engulf lives and relationships when it isn't dealt with head-on.

Rule 11 Quotes

If the consequences of placing skatestoppers on plant-boxes and sculpture bases [...] is unhappy adolescent males and brutalist aesthetic disregard of beauty then, perhaps, that was the aim. When someone claims to be acting from the highest principles, for the good of others, there is no reason to assume that the person's motives are genuine [...] I see the operation of an insidious and profoundly anti-human spirit.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 290

Explanation and Analysis

Rule 11 is one of the more meanderingly complex chapters in the book, but it's worth trying to follow Peterson's entire train of thought in order to understand some of his more controversial arguments about gender and society. As the chapter opens, Peterson reflects on watching kids, mostly teenage boys, doing daring skateboarding tricks on university property. Later, authorities put up barriers to prevent the kids from skating there.

Just before this, Peterson cited Carl Jung's insight that you shouldn't necessarily take someone at their word when they explain why they acted in a certain way, but instead look at the outcome of their actions. Here, Peterson implies that we shouldn't trust authorities who claim they were acting in the interest of the skateboarders' safety. If you look at the consequences of the "skatestoppers," you can conclude that, actually, they intended to break the young men's spirits—what Peterson calls "an insidious and profoundly anti-human spirit"—whether they admit it or not.

While this is a bold claim to make, it should be kept in mind while reading the rest of the chapter. Peterson is arguing that we should be very suspicious when people—especially authority figures—claim to be acting in humanity's best interest, especially when they try to modify people's behavior. When we hear such claims, we should examine the actual consequences of their demands and ask hard questions about what they're really aiming to do.

Boys are suffering, in the modern world. They are more disobedient—negatively—or more independent—positively—than girls, and they suffer for this, throughout their pre-university educational career. [...] Schools, which were set up in the late 1800s precisely to inculcate obedience, do not take kindly to provocative and daring behaviour, no matter how tough-minded and competent it might show a boy (or a girl) to be.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 298

Explanation and Analysis

In this section of Rule 11, Peterson has been discussing how girls and women have made a lot of gains in society over the past century. However, even generally positive things have negative effects, often as unintended consequences, as Peterson is at pains to illustrate in this chapter. He argues that even as girls have advanced in many subject areas once dominated by boys, setting themselves up for excellent careers as adults, boys have begun to lag. He thinks this is because schools, generally speaking, are set up in a way that favors most girls' more agreeable, less boundary-pushing behavior. Boys, on the other hand, tend to be more naturally aggressive, adventurous, and challenging of authority—according to Peterson, at least. While Peterson doesn't claim that these traits are universal, they're a consistent pattern. And in his view, schools' inability to handle boys' behavior patterns create problems for both boys *and* girls down the road. That's because, essentially, boys and girls—and men and women—depend on each other to make society run smoothly. As Peterson goes on to argue, when that interdependence gets disrupted, society as a whole falters.

❝ Of course, culture *is* an oppressive structure. *It's always been that way*. It's a fundamental, universal existential reality [...] Culture takes with one hand, but in some fortunate places it gives more with the other. To think about culture only as oppressive is ignorant and ungrateful, as well as dangerous. This is not to say (as I am hoping the content of this book has made abundantly clear, so far) that culture should not be subject to criticism.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 302-3

Explanation and Analysis

In this part of the chapter, Peterson has been addressing the criticism that culture has been predominantly patriarchal through most of human history. He doesn't dispute this or maintain that inequality and oppression of women is negative for society as a whole. What he *does* dispute, however, is that because of patriarchal and other oppressive cultural structures we should jettison culture as uniformly bad. Throughout *12 Rules*, he has maintained that hierarchies are natural and hardwired into human beings from deep in our evolutionary history. Most of the time, this has meant that men (a small subset of the strongest men, at that) have tended to rule and lead society. While this has led to inequalities, it is more a fact of nature than anything else and not inherently corrupt. So, Peterson argues that we should critique and even potentially dismantle parts of our history that are damaging or limiting for groups that haven't dominated in that past. But we have to be mindful of collateral damage we might commit in the process, and overall, we need to be willing to embrace the good in our cultural past even as we seek to change the bad.

❝ It is almost impossible to over-estimate the nihilistic and destructive nature of this philosophy. It puts the act of categorization itself in doubt. It negates the idea that distinctions might be drawn between things for any reasons other than that of raw power. [...] There is sufficient truth to Derrida's claims to account, in part, for their insidious nature [...] [T]*he fact that power plays a role in human motivation does not mean that it plays the only role, or even the primary role.*

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker), Jacques Derrida

Related Themes:

Page Number: 311

Explanation and Analysis

Just before this passage, Peterson has been talking about the downfall of utopian Marxist thought, specifically communism, after many communist societies experienced notorious corruption and bloodshed. He says that after communism lost its luster in the eyes of most intellectuals, French philosopher Jacques Derrida developed an outwardly more benign yet still dangerous form of Marxism that persists to the present day: postmodernism. Peterson especially takes issue with Derrida's assertion that "there is nothing outside the text" (a statement Peterson says Derrida later repudiated). Though postmodernists argue about how this should be interpreted, Peterson maintains that it boils down to "everything is interpretation," a statement he considers "nihilistic and destructive." Peterson argues that because Derrida's statement reduces meaning to mere interpretation (suggesting that there are no stable, inherent meanings to things), it ends up saying that everything is meaningless.

Furthermore, Derrida sees the act of interpretation as a way of asserting and maintaining power over someone else.

While Peterson agrees that power is a strong force in human beings and therefore in human cultures, he rejects the idea that it's the primary relevant force. It's easy to see how Peterson would regard Derrida, and by extension postmodernism, as dangerous when his book has emphasized precise speaking, the search for truth, and even the value of hierarchies. If language is mainly a tool of power, then it's hard to see how people can trust each other's speech and pursue meaning under such a philosophical system.

> It might be objected [...] that a woman does not need a man to rescue her. That may be true, and it may not [...] In any case, it is certain that a woman needs consciousness to be rescued, and, as noted above, consciousness is symbolically masculine and has been since the beginning of time [...] The Prince could be a lover, but could also be a woman's own attentive wakefulness, clarity of vision, and tough-minded independence.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 324

Explanation and Analysis

Peterson has been talking about how too much dependence isn't a healthy trait for either men or women. To truly bear responsibility for Being, a person must embrace consciousness, or awareness of the way the world is, including its pain and suffering. Throughout history and across cultures, consciousness has typically been symbolized as masculine. In myths and literature and even Disney adaptations of fairy tales, this archetype persists; Peterson uses Sleeping Beauty as an example of a heroine who must embrace consciousness (the Prince) in order to "wake up" and become conscious, or mature.

Today, the masculine and feminine archetypes don't always go over well. But Peterson suggests that we don't have to take them very literally, and they're still useful regardless. We don't have to think of a woman being rescued by a prince, as many fairy tales have it, but the archetype still holds—a woman, like a man for that matter, must embrace consciousness in order to live as best she can and contribute to Being. So, Peterson makes a case that seemingly outdated archetypes are still applicable, and that every person has a responsibility to face reality and grow up, for their own sake and society's.

> When softness and harmlessness become the only consciously acceptable virtues, then hardness and dominance will start to exert an unconscious fascination. Partly what this means for the future is that if men are pushed too hard to feminize, they will become more and more interested in harsh, fascist political ideology.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 330

Explanation and Analysis

Rule 11 could be summed up as "Let boys be boys." Even though Peterson's advice in this chapter applies to men and women, he is especially concerned about the fact that, in his view, boys are increasingly encouraged to adopt more traditionally feminine traits like agreeableness, cooperation, and submissiveness. There's nothing wrong with these traits, but Peterson sees them being used to drive out traditionally masculine traits like competitiveness and aggression—traits that were useful for humanity's evolution. It's important for little boys to learn to channel aggression in healthy ways, but Peterson thinks trying to stifle it tends to backfire in a number of ways. One of them is that if boys aren't encouraged to develop healthy male virtues, but instead are presented with "feminine" virtues as the only acceptable options, they'll be drawn to caricatures of male virtues, like hardness and dominance (which are basically strength and aggression taken to a troubling extreme). And adopting such caricatures can be harmful for everyone, as men can be drawn to ideologies that impose such harshness on society as a whole. It's far better to let young men develop healthy aggression and other male traits by pushing boundaries while they're young—or as Peterson puts it, don't bother them while they're skateboarding.

Rule 12 Quotes

> Something supersedes thinking, despite its truly awesome power. When existence reveals itself as existentially intolerable, thinking collapses in on itself. In such situations—in the depths—it's *noticing*, not thinking, that does the trick. Perhaps you might start by noticing this: when you love someone, *it's not despite their limitations. It's because of their limitations.*

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker), Mikhaila Peterson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 347

Explanation and Analysis

In his discussion of the final Rule, Peterson becomes franker and more personal than in any of the previous chapters. He describes his daughter Mikhaila's struggle with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, starting in early childhood and lasting until early adulthood, marked by debilitating pain, complex surgeries, and reliance on strong medications. Even though Peterson had helped clients deal with all manner of personal suffering over the years, the question became much more pressing when he had to watch his daughter suffer.

Finally, Peterson concluded that we can't think our way to an answer to the problem of suffering—that maybe there *isn't* an answer we can discover through reasoning. If there were, then it seems difficult to believe that some of the world's great minds wouldn't have figured it out already. Peterson suggests that instead, in the depths of suffering, we have to cultivate a practice of noticing things instead of going around and around with unanswerable questions. One of the most important things we notice is that humanity and suffering are impossible to separate. In other words, the limitations we encounter through suffering make us who we are. Even though we might wish our loved ones never had to suffer, in reality, if our loved ones were impervious to suffering, they would no longer be the same people. Peterson acknowledges that this doesn't make suffering okay or negate the importance of fighting to make things better, but he suggests that this kind of awareness and acceptance is ultimately more meaningful than a fruitless search for answers we can't know—a search that is more likely to lead to bitterness, despair, and a refusal of Being.

> If you pay careful attention, even on a bad day, you may be fortunate enough to be confronted with small opportunities of just that sort [...] And maybe when you are going for a walk and your head is spinning a cat will show up and if you pay attention to it then you will get a reminder for just fifteen seconds that the wonder of Being might make up for the ineradicable suffering that accompanies it.

Related Characters: Jordan Peterson (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 353

Explanation and Analysis

In his final Rule, Peterson suggests that the only way to really cope with human suffering is to cultivate the belief that the goodness of Being, or existence, outweighs the inevitable pain of Being. When a person has suffered deeply and undeservedly, this is a difficult belief to hold on to. Peterson has argued that it's not a belief that a person can be rationally persuaded into. Instead, they have to be willing to notice, acknowledge, and even enjoy the goodness of Being, even in the midst of pain that can't be fixed. For example, if you cross paths with a cat and take the chance to pet it, you might be rewarded with a small respite in an otherwise terrible day. It's not as if petting the cat fixes what's wrong in life. But it's a simple reminder that goodness exists, not just suffering, and that goodness is worth looking for. If a person doesn't notice such goodness, they're likely to succumb to despair, because suffering is all they can see, and suffering isn't a problem that can be solved. But noticing goodness poses another question (one that Peterson would say is more meaningful)—namely, how it is that there is still goodness and beauty in a world that contains so much suffering.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

OVERTURE

Jordan Peterson opens by stating that *12 Rules for Life* has both a short history and a long history, and that he'll start with the short history. In 2012, he began posting on the website Quora for fun, contributing answers to questions about happiness, aging, and the meaning of life. By far his most popular contribution was a list of maxims in response to the question, "What are the most valuable things everyone should know?" His list of sayings, some serious and some tongue-in-cheek, generated a surprising number of upvotes and shares.

Peterson begins by giving readers some background on his book. Quora is a social website where users can submit, edit, and comment on one another's questions and answers. In 2012, Quora would have only been a couple of years old, and Peterson built an early and enthusiastic following there. The response to his Quora list of life advice anticipates the response to his later teaching and writing—a broad, everyday audience seemed to find his ideas accessible, entertaining, and helpful.

A few months earlier, Peterson had been approached by a literary agent who'd heard him speak on a radio program in which he criticized the idea that happiness is the goal of human life. Peterson had spent decades reading about the horrors of Nazi Germany and Soviet labor camps and had concluded that life must hold a deeper meaning than happiness. In reading "great stories of the past," he'd come to believe that life's meaning has more to do with "developing character in the face of suffering" than with happiness.

Long before he developed his "rules for life," Peterson had been thinking about life's meaning—especially in light of the fact that, as history amply demonstrates, life is often difficult, even horrifying. Here, Peterson assumes that many modern people take it for granted that the point of life is to be happy. Yet a great many people, both now and throughout history, have evidently not found happiness. Peterson believes that a lack of happiness, or the presence of suffering, doesn't make a person's life meaningless; therefore, life must have a different, deeper meaning—one that undermines modern assumptions about what makes a life worthwhile.

Peterson spent almost 15 years (1985–1999) working on his book *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*. He also taught this book's contents at both Harvard and the University of Toronto. Eventually, he decided to film his lectures and put them online. These videos became very popular, and some of that popularity was due to a political controversy—but that's a story for another time.

Peterson touches on his previous work, both for academic and popular audiences. The controversy he alludes to is probably a 2016 debate at the University of Toronto over the use of preferred pronouns and compelled speech; video of the debate went viral and raised Peterson's profile significantly. However, he doesn't directly address the controversy in this book.

In *Maps of Meaning*, Peterson argued that history's great mythical and religious stories had primarily moral meanings, not descriptive ones. In other words, they were mainly concerned with teaching how a human being should act. Peterson had come to believe that our ancestors didn't look at the world primarily as a place filled with objects, but as a stage on which human beings enact a drama. The most important elements in that world weren't material things, but order and chaos.

Peterson's earlier writing focused on the ethical meanings found in the world's mythical and religious literature. Based on his research, Peterson had concluded that pre-modern humans were much more concerned with meaning than with tangible things. Across cultures, Peterson finds the relationship between order and chaos to be a recurrent theme in human attempts to grasp life's meaning—a key point of 12 Rules *as a whole.*

For Peterson, "order" means that the people around you act according to predictable social norms. Order includes "social structure, explored territory, and familiarity." It's usually symbolically portrayed as masculine.

Understanding Peterson's view of order and chaos is essential to understanding the "rules" he will expound later. "Order" is predictability, stability, and the familiar. In myths, these qualities are typically portrayed through masculine symbolism of some kind. As Peterson will explain later, this gendered symbolism shouldn't be taken to mean that traits like stability are exclusively masculine; it is, however, a generalized, cross-cultural observation based on his analysis of literature.

"Chaos," on the other hand, is when something unexpected happens—"the new and unpredictable suddenly emerging in the midst of the commonplace familiar." Chaos is both creative and destructive, and as order's antithesis, it's symbolically portrayed as female.

"Chaos" is order's opposite, but that doesn't mean it's universally negative. It can be out of control and threatening, but it can also be something that generates new life. As Peterson will point out later, this might be why chaos often gets associated with the feminine in myths.

The Taoist **yin-yang** symbol portrays order (white) and chaos (black) as two intertwined serpents. The white contains a black dot, and the black contains a white dot, indicating the possibility of one transforming into the other. Taoists believe that walking the border between order and chaos is "the divine Way," and Peterson believes this way is better than happiness.

Peterson uses the yin-yang symbol as an especially clear example of the interplay between order and chaos, with one always potentially turning into the other. From Taoist teaching, Peterson adapts the idea of traversing the border between order and chaos—a idea that will form the basis of his idea of a meaningful life.

Peterson and the literary agent discussed the idea of him writing a more broadly accessible version of *Maps of Meaning*. The agent suggested a guide to what a person needs "to live well." She felt that Peterson's Quora list could be adapted for this project, so he began developing a book proposal around that list. It turned out that he had much more to say about each rule than he'd expected.

Peterson returns to the short history of his book he began discussing earlier. His Quora list, targeted to a popular audience, ended up coalescing with the more academic presentation he'd spent years developing for the book Maps of Meaning.

This was partly because, in the course of writing his first book, Peterson studied a great deal of history, mythology, psychology, and literature (the Bible, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Goethe's *Faust*, and Dante's *Inferno*), among other subjects. He'd done all this in an effort to understand the nuclear standoff during the Cold War: why were people willing to risk the world's destruction in order to protect their belief systems? He realized that belief systems allow people to understand one another, and that those systems are about more than just belief.

Peterson's earlier research for Maps of Meaning *gave him lots of material to work with in expanding on his 12 rules. The research drew on a wide variety of world literature and other sources of meaning about human life. But he applied this older, often ancient material to a very modern question. The Cold War was an ideological and nuclear standoff between broadly capitalist (U.S. and western) and communist (Soviet) worldviews. The conflict would have been the backdrop for Peterson's youth, so in context, it makes sense that he would have been preoccupied by its ethical implications.*

When people know what to expect from one another, they can live together peacefully. A shared belief system "simplifies" people in their own and others' eyes, allowing them to work together to "tame the world." This simplification is crucial. Peterson says it isn't so much that people will fight for what they believe. Rather, it's that they will fight "to maintain *the match between* what they believe, what they expect, and what they desire"—between expectations and actions. When expectations are violated—like when someone's lover betrays them, for instance—a person experiences chaos and terror, which sometimes leads to open conflict. It's no wonder people fight to avoid that.

Peterson explains what he came to understand about the Cold War. He concluded that beliefs function on more than a surface level—they shape human interaction profoundly. They provide stability, which allows people to "tame the world"—or, to transform chaos into order. When chaos erupts into order, it's deeply destabilizing for people and communities. In Peterson's view, this is why people fight so hard to maintain order—even to the point of standoffs that otherwise make little sense. People will simply go to great lengths to avoid the pain of chaos.

Peterson says that a shared cultural system is also stabilizing in that it helps people prioritize things. Without the ability to prioritize this way, people can't act—they can't even set goals. And without the ability to progress toward something, people's lives lack positive value. They lack anything "to set against the suffering that is intrinsic to Being." Without positive value in life, the pain of existence becomes overwhelming, leading to hopelessness and despair.

Cultural systems aren't simply neutral things, in Peterson's view. Rather, they help organize people's lives by giving them something to strive for—ideally, something to counteract life's unavoidable suffering. In a footnote, Peterson cites his reliance on 20th-century German philosopher Martin Heidegger, who conceived of the idea of "Being" as, in Peterson's summary, "the totality of human experience."

Of course, different value systems conflict. Thus, on one hand, there's the problem of a chaotic life lacking shared beliefs; on the other hand, there's the problem of inevitable conflict between groups with different beliefs. Peterson notes that in the West, identification with group-centered beliefs (like traditions, religions, and nations) has been declining, in part for fear of conflict between groups. But the alternative is meaninglessness.

Though Peterson holds that people need values to organize their lives around, there's the obvious problem that not everyone holds the same values. Perhaps because of the previous century's history of violent conflicts, people in the West often tend to shy from identifying too strongly with value-centered groups. Peterson suggests that conflict is worth the risk, though, since the alternative is aimless, undirected lives.

As he wrote *Maps of Meaning*, Peterson also realized that we can't afford conflict—at least not on the horrifying scale seen throughout the 20th century. But he also believed we couldn't abandon our value systems. While wrestling with this problem, he dreamed of being suspended beneath the dome of a great cathedral. Peterson pays attention to dreams because they shed light on areas that reason can't yet reach. Because of his study of Christianity, he knew that cathedrals are cross-shaped. He understood that the cross is viewed simultaneously as a sign of the greatest suffering, of transformation, and of the world's symbolic center. In his dream, Peterson didn't want to be there. He somehow got down and returned to his bedroom. But, nightmarishly, he kept being blown back toward the cathedral.

Since the 20th century's violent, often ideologically motivated conflicts prompted Peterson's inquiry into the meaning of life in the first place, he's sensitive to the dangers of competing value systems. His experience with this dream suggests that there are other ways to access truth than strictly through rational thought. As a student of symbolism, Peterson sees the cross standing for both suffering and the transformation of suffering—but the dream's nightmarish aspect reflects the fact that this intersection isn't a comfortable place to be.

It took Peterson months to understand this dream. He believes the dream placed him at the center of "Being" itself, and he couldn't escape. As he reflected on this, he realized more completely that the "great stories" constantly place the individual at the center. The center is marked by the cross, which symbolizes suffering and transformation that must be voluntarily accepted. From this, Peterson learned that it's possible to avoid both "slavish adherence to the group" and nihilism—to find "sufficient meaning in individual consciousness and experience."

Peterson's interpretation of the dream suggests that, somehow, suffering—and the possibility that suffering can be transformed—is indeed at the heart of Being, or reality. By "great stories," Peterson refers to the myths, religious writings, and other classical literature he has studied over the years. While these differ widely across times and cultures, Peterson thinks they share an emphasis on the individual—an emphasis that avoids the individual getting swallowed up in either group conformity or in nihilism (the attitude that nothing has meaning).

Peterson had come to believe that the answer to the dilemma between social conflict and social dissolution was "the elevation and development of the individual, and [...] the willingness of everyone to shoulder the burden of Being and to take the heroic path." Each person must assume as much of that responsibility as they can by telling the truth, fixing what's broken, and doing whatever is possible to reduce suffering in the world. While this is asking a lot, it's far better than authoritarianism, chaos, and lack of purpose. And Peterson knows he doesn't have all the answers about Being—he's just offering the best he has.

Peterson argues that by emphasizing the improvement of the individual, he can find balance between conflicting group values and social breakdown. In a sense, he's suggesting that there's no foolproof way to avoid social problems on either end of the spectrum. Instead, they can only be meaningfully addressed on the level of the individual. If everyone does their part by facing up to the hardships of Being, then that effort will benefit humanity as a whole, too.

Each of the 12 rules in this book offers a guide to living on the dividing line between order and chaos. On that line, people find the meaning behind life and suffering. If we learn how to live properly, then we might be able to bear fragility and mortality without turning resentful or seeking shelter in totalitarianism. He believes that if individuals live properly, humanity will collectively flourish.

Peterson sums up the Overture section by returning to the concepts of order and chaos. Traveling the boundary between order and chaos, he suggests, is how to find meaning in life without either surrendering one's individuality or coming to resent the world because of suffering. Finding meaning in life, in turn, helps one face the challenges of life with greater strength and a greater capacity to help others.

RULE 1: STAND UP STRAIGHT WITH YOUR SHOULDERS BACK

Most people don't think about **lobsters** very often, but Peterson thinks they're well worth considering. Because of lobsters' relatively simple nervous systems, scientists understand their brains and behavior very well, and this knowledge can help scientists understand the behavior of more complex animals, too—like human beings.

As Peterson begins to explain his 12 rules, he starts with a surprising illustration—lobsters. This is a good example of how Peterson applies his interest in evolutionary psychology, extrapolating lobsters' primitive biology and behavior to much more advanced humans. Sometimes readers have to take Peterson at his word that he's going somewhere relevant!

Like **lobsters**, wrens are very territorial creatures. As a child, Peterson once recorded a backyard wren's song and played the song back, getting repeatedly dive-bombed by the tiny bird as a result. Birds that occupy prime territory lead a less stressed existence overall and are less likely to die if an avian disease sweeps through. Securing territory is a big deal, then, and often leads to conflict.

With wrens, Peterson gives an example that's probably a bit more accessible to most readers than lobsters. His point is that creatures of all kinds, whether lobsters or tiny backyard birds, have good reason to be territorial—securing prime territory has huge benefits for a creature's long-term thriving and survival, and that's why they're so defensive about it.

Animals who must share territory with other animals have learned tricks to establish dominance while minimizing damage to themselves. **Lobsters** are the same way. When lobsters encounter each other on the ocean floor while they're exploring unknown territory, they start to dance around, mirroring each other, and waving their claws. They also shoot streams of chemicals at one another that reveal information about themselves, like health and mood. Sometimes that's enough to get the weaker lobster to back down. If not, the two lobsters will repeatedly advance at each other and retreat until one of them backs down. If *that* doesn't work, the two lobsters actually start to grapple, until one of them is flipped over. If neither lobster wins, then they advance to the riskiest and potentially fatal level of combat: rushing at each other and trying to tear off a leg, antenna, or other body part. This usually solves the conflict.

Here, Peterson describes lobsters' struggle for dominance in detail, as each level of conflict escalates to the next, deadlier level. The point of this passage is basically to show that lobster fights—and, implicitly, struggles for dominance more generally—are serious business. As he'll soon explain, becoming the victorious, dominant lobster versus the defeated lobster can have life or death consequences and directly shape the way each lobster lives the rest of its life. Readers are meant to keep this in mind later, when Peterson talks about human society.

The loser of a **lobster** conflict has different brain chemistry from a victor. A winning lobster has high levels of the chemical serotonin and low levels of the chemical octopamine. This is reflected in the lobster's strutting posture: serotonin causes the lobster to extend its arms and legs to look more dangerous.

Peterson explains that winning and losing lobsters actually have differing brain chemistry that reflects their respective status in the lobster world. Their brain chemicals govern their behavior after the fight: a winning lobster continues to act like a winning lobster as it struts about threateningly.

The opposite chemical ratio—high octopamine and low serotonin—marks the losing **lobster**, which droops and skulks. These chemicals also regulate a lobster's tail-flick reflex, causing a defeated lobster to retreat backwards more readily. This is sort of like a heightened startle reflex in someone who's suffering from PTSD.

In contrast to the winners, losing lobsters behave in a submissive manner. Octopamine is associated with what's known as the "fight-or-flight" reflex, so it makes sense that high levels of the hormone cause wary lobsters to scuttle backwards more readily. The comparison to someone who's suffering from the effects of a past traumatic event is a good illustration of how insights from the biology of even primitive animals can find parallels in human psychology.

A defeated **lobster** is more likely to lose the next time it attempts to fight, whereas a winning lobster is more likely to win again. This "principle of unequal distribution" applies in the human world, too—it's reflected in wealth distribution, and in the tiny number of people who publish or produce most prolifically. This principle is also known as Price's law, and it applies to every society that has been studied. To return to lobster society, this principle helps create a stable hierarchy, with dominant lobsters at the top and weak ones at the bottom.

The way lobsters react to a past fight affects how they relate to other lobsters in the future. It's not hard to guess how Peterson might be setting up an argument about human behavior. For now, he simply points out that what happens in lobster society happens in human societies, too, with just a small number of people dominating in most areas. He implies that an upside of this structure, while it excludes most people from the top, is that it promotes social stability.

Female **lobsters** are attracted to the dominant male lobster (something that holds true for other species, too). Female lobsters linger around the dominant male's territory until they successfully charm the male into mating with them. Pretty soon, the male will have fertilized multiple female lobsters. This is another reason, besides territory, that it's great to be the dominant male lobster. Peterson says that because the lobster has been around for hundreds of millions of years, we can see that dominance hierarchies have been a more or less permanent feature of the natural world.

In highlighting the reproductive advantages for dominant male lobsters, Peterson is being slightly humorous. But his bigger point with the entire lobster illustration is that social hierarchies are nothing new. By establishing parallels between lobster society and human society, therefore, he suggests that hierarchies in human society aren't inherently bad, either—at least, they're not unnatural.

Peterson notes that biology is conservative—while new elements get added, the basic features stay the same for a very long time. While natural selection is usually cited to account for this, that concept raises certain questions—like what, exactly, is "nature," anyway? People refer to nature and the environment as if they're static, but they're actually dynamic. This brings Peterson back to his point that nature itself is both static and transformative all the time—that chaos and order are simultaneous.

Natural selection is part of Charles Darwin's concept, part of his larger evolutionary theory, which says that nature selects for those traits that allow a species to dominate its rivals. This is why certain biological features, like dominance hierarchies, seem to be pretty set in stone. However, Peterson points out that nature is actually changing all the time, even if we're not aware of it—it, too, is characterized by order and chaos.

Peterson says that people tend to think of evolution as "a never-ending series of linear improvements," of progress in a fixed direction toward a destination. But nature is more like a musical score, so the environment—and what it "selects" for—varies all the time. Thus, natural selection is more like an ongoing dance than a process by which things come to match a template ever more closely. Nature, too, is really different things, nested within one another, that change at varying rates—chaos nested within order.

Peterson expands on the idea that nature is filled with examples of order and chaos, if one only knows where to look. It's a variable process, not a smoothly mechanized one. This suggests that human life, too, isn't a "series of linear improvements," but more akin to an ever-changing "symphony."

It's also a mistake to think of nature as somehow distinct from culture. Things like dominance hierarchies, though they're often dismissed as particular cultural expressions (like the military-industrial complex, or patriarchy, for example), have been around for much longer than human beings: "There is little more natural than culture." That's why a defeated person behaves much like a lobster who's lost a fight. The neurochemistry is similar, too—low serotonin levels mean less confidence and a more stressful existence.

Peterson suggests that another mistake people make is to assume that there's an easily identified dividing line between the natural world and what we call "culture." Peterson isn't necessarily saying that specific cultural expressions of dominance hierarchies are desirable, but that the impulse to form hierarchies is deeply embedded in who humans are and how they live (culture), so their recurrence shouldn't be surprising.

Within each of us, Peterson says, there's a "primordial calculator" that knows our exact societal position. This specialized part of our brain constantly assesses how we're treated by others and assigns us a status based on that. If your status is low, your brain makes less serotonin available, which makes you more reactive to your circumstances—more stressed. Stress—the constant state of emergency preparedness—uses up a lot of energy and resources and wears a person down both psychologically and physically.

Peterson explains how this whole discussion of lobster neurochemistry applies more specifically to human life. Like lobsters, humans are keenly aware of where they stand in society. Like defeated lobsters, low-status humans' brain chemistry is impacted by their status, which in turn puts them in a constant state of anxious alertness that makes life harder in the long run.

A person who feels secure, on the other hand, has the luxury of assuming they're safe and supported, meaning that change doesn't feel like a potential threat all the time. Such a person has plenty of serotonin, so they feel calm instead of constantly on alert, and they can plan for the future because they aren't scrambling for resources. They're even able to be a more engaged citizen.

It's very different when someone has enough serotonin available. Like a lobster that knows it's not going to be threatened by rivals, a high-status human can relax, enjoy life, and look forward to the future. A person in this position can even benefit those around them more than someone who's simply scrambling to survive.

The "counter" can malfunction, though, from poor eating and sleeping habits, or if routines get thrown off. When predictable habits go missing, the body's delicately interrelated systems can get thrown off. This is why Peterson always first asks his patients about the consistency of their wakeup time, since circadian rhythms are closely tied to well-being, and encourages them to eat breakfast. Consistency in these habits alone can go a long way toward reducing anxiety. Positive feedback loops (like drinking to overcome a hangover, which might lead to alcoholism) or trauma (like being bullied in childhood) can cause the status counter to malfunction, too.

Even high-status people aren't guaranteed smooth sailing in life, though, because our brains are obviously impacted by daily physical habits or even by past traumatic events. Even the perception of low status, triggered by things like this, can have similar effects to an accurately calibrated "status counter."

Sometimes people get bullied because they *can't* stand up for themselves, but sometimes, they simply *won't*. Peterson says that, for example, naïve people who believe that people are basically good and reject all use of force will often put up with abuse for far too long. Sometimes such people find it shocking to become aware of their own capacity for anger and even monstrous behavior (like with new soldiers experiencing PTSD). It's only when people come to terms with their own dangerous capacities that they become capable of resisting these capacities in themselves and others.

Peterson is basically talking about helplessness here. Being an innocent, nonconfrontational person might seem good in a lot of ways, but Peterson suggests that overly trusting, submissive behavior actually enables other people's bad behavior. Peterson suggests a rather surprising thing to counteract it—realizing one's own capacity to inflict harm, even if it's only theoretical. Basically, it's difficult to resist evil if you don't have at least a theoretical understanding of it and the reality that, on some level, most human beings can inflict it, or at least are tempted to.

Even if a person is "a loser," that doesn't mean they have to slump around in a posture signaling low status for the rest of their life. If a person acts like a defeated **lobster**, they'll be treated that way, and they won't produce enough serotonin, with all the negative outcomes an anxious, stressed life can bring. Peterson points out that positive feedback loops don't have to cause a person's life to spiral into chaos. Instead, things like positive body language can impact the way a person feels and is regarded by others.

If a person starts acting like a defeated lobster, it can be very easy to keep behaving that way, producing a positive feedback loop (basically, a positive feedback loop is when the results of an action cause the original action to happen more). But a positive feedback loop doesn't have to be bad: instead, small changes can produce positive results that reinforce the changes.

Peterson acknowledges that standing up straight with your shoulders back isn't enough to transform the circumstances of life at the bottom. But it's also not simply a physical gesture, because people aren't just bodies. Standing up straight also "demands standing up metaphysically" and "accepting the burden of Being." When a person chooses to meet life's demands, the nervous system reacts differently—"you respond to a challenge, instead of bracing for a catastrophe."

Throughout this chapter, Peterson has emphasized the close interrelationship between bodies and minds. That's especially true here, when he recommends adopting a confident physical posture. Choosing to stand confidently can change the way you think about the inevitable burdens of life. And when your nervous system reacts accordingly (like a strutting, victorious lobster instead of a droopy, defeated one), you're encouraged to maintain such posture—a positive feedback loop.

Standing up straight with your shoulders back means taking on the responsibility of transforming chaos into order. This is why it's important to maintain good posture. The more you do this, the more people will take you seriously. This helps you be less anxious, a better communicator, and better equipped to embrace and improve Being—even strengthening those around you when you and they are tempted to despair. In this way, it's possible to find joy even while carrying the "terrible burden of the World."

Peterson ties Rule 1 back to his discussion of order and chaos. It's foundational in that it illustrates the attitude that a person should take toward life in general—one of bearing responsibility instead of shrinking from it. This attitude helps you bear difficult things in a way that benefits others as well as yourself, as you help turn chaos into order. Such a task might not always be fun, but it does, according to Peterson, help a person find meaning.

RULE 2: TREAT YOURSELF LIKE SOMEONE YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR HELPING

Peterson asks the reader to imagine a scenario where 100 people are prescribed a drug: one-third of them will never fill the prescription, and half of the remaining 67 won't take the medicine properly, missing doses or stopping early. Peterson says that doctors tend to blame patients for noncompliance, while psychologists tend to blame doctors for not following up effectively with patients. In general, people are better about filling and administering medications to their pets than to themselves. Peterson looks to the Old Testament's Book of Genesis to figure out why.

When leading up to explaining one of his 12 rules, Peterson often takes a rather meandering journey that demands the reader's patience. Here, with the example of widespread noncompliance in taking medications, Peterson is simply saying that most people don't take very good care of themselves. By turning to the Bible for an explanation, Peterson suggests that the reason behind this neglect is embedded deep in human history.

The Genesis account of creation appears to weave together two different literary sources. The first of these, known as the "Priestly" account, says that God created the world by speaking everything into existence. The second, or "Jahwist" account, focuses on the creation of Adam and Eve. To understand the first account, it's necessary to understand certain ancient assumptions about reality.

Since most readers presumably don't aspire to become biblical scholars, it's not really necessary to grasp the differences between the "Priestly" and "Jahwist" literary strands scholars have identified within Genesis. As a student of ancient literature, Peterson himself is primarily interested in what such writings reveal about human beings' understanding of the meaning of life over time, and in this chapter, he'll apply his interpretation of Genesis's ancient meaning to today.

Since the birth of modern science 500 years ago, it's been difficult for us to understand ways of seeing that aren't primarily scientific and materialistic. But people who lived during the time when many ancient cultural epics were written were more concerned about survival than about what would be regarded as objective truth today. Back then, reality, or Being, "was understood as a place of action, not a place of things." It was concerned with subjective, lived experience. Suffering is one example—it can't be reduced to something merely detached and objective. Our subjective experiences have more in common with novels or movies than with scientific descriptions.

Peterson draws a distinction between the way ancient and modern people have tended to look at the world. Basically, Peterson suggests that ancient people (like those who wrote Genesis) didn't have the luxury of thinking about life as detached observers. They saw themselves as acting within a story and tried to make sense of that story from within, as they experienced it. In contrast, people since the scientific revolution (approximately the 16th century) have tended to examine life as if they're analyzing it from the outside, often to the exclusion of metaphysical questions.

Like scientific descriptions of matter, human experience can also be reduced to its constituent elements. These include chaos, order, and the process that mediates between the two—what's called consciousness today. Peterson says that when people don't deal properly with chaos and order, they despair. The third element, consciousness, is the only way out.

Though Peterson has just suggested that a modern, scientific worldview can be too reductive (that is, it oversimplifies a complex concept like Being), that doesn't mean it's never useful—like here, where Peterson returns to the key components of Being he discussed in the Overture.

Chaos is where "ignorance" reigns; Peterson calls it "unexplored territory." It's where nothing is familiar or predictable, where things fall apart, the underworld found in fairytales and myths. Peterson identifies Chaos with the formless void in Genesis 1, from which God calls forth order. It's also the unformed potential of our lives.

Peterson digs deeper into the concepts of chaos and order that he introduced in the Overture. In particular, he connects the concept of chaos to the "void" described at the beginning of Genesis—a primordial chaos, in the sense that it hadn't yet been shaped into anything.

Order, on the other hand, is "explored territory." It's the structure that society, tradition, and biology provide; it's "tribe, religion, hearth, home and country." Within order, the world's behavior matches our expectations, and things turn out as we wish. At the same time, order can become tyrannical and stifling, too.

Order, as Peterson discussed earlier, is the opposite of chaos in that it's everything known, structured, and reliable. It characterizes institutions and other social structures like religions and nations. While these things are indispensable, they also have the potential to crush and silence chaos's life-giving aspects.

Chaos and order aren't objects; they're things perceived as personified. In this regard, modern people are no different from their ancient ancestors—they just don't notice. But we perceive what things *mean* just as quickly, or more quickly, than we perceive what they *are*. Human beings have always been social, which means that the most important things in their environment have always been personalities—and for a billion years, Peterson says, the personalities we perceive have been configured in the predictable forms of male and female. Like the categories of parent and child, the categories of male and female have been "deeply embedded in our perceptual, emotional and motivational structures." Furthermore, the "reality" we contend with in the struggle for survival has much to do with other beings.

It's hard for modern people to apprehend why, for millennia, many cultures have traditionally understood order and chaos to correspond to male and female. Peterson argues that ancient people looked at order and chaos like entities active in the world around them, not as abstract ideas. While modern people might view this as superstitious, Peterson argues that in fact, we do the same thing when we look at the world, even if we don't notice—that is, we respond to the interior meaning *of things more than we respond to them simply as objects. Even if we don't classify phenomena according to a gender binary, then, we should be able to empathize with this ancient, personified worldview to some degree.*

Peterson says that over millennia, human beings became more aware of and curious about what's "outside" of what they currently understand—and not "representing objectively," but "dealing with" that reality. But because humans are so social, they naturally used social categories to understand the unknown. And because our minds predate humanity itself, those categories actually trace back to the pre-human animal social world.

Peterson continues to examine the difference between ancient and modern ways of understanding reality. Again, ancient people were less concerned about categorizing knowledge scientifically than we are; they thought of outside reality in more social terms. He explains this difference in terms of evolutionary psychology

Order is symbolically associated with the masculine. This might be because human and much animal society has been primarily structured according to a masculine hierarchy. Chaos is symbolically associated with the feminine, perhaps because everything is born out of the unknown, or chaos. Women are highly selective about who they mate with, which has helped shape male competitiveness in turn. This male/female, order/chaos duality is reflected in many religious symbols and perhaps even in the structure of the brain itself.

The origins of the male/female correspondence with order and chaos are unavoidably fuzzy, but evolutionary psychology suggests that it has a lot to do with broad natural categories—males have tended to top hierarchies in both the human and animal worlds, and women have always been associated with bringing forth new life. These tendencies have worked together to keep humanity going (as in the search for a suitable mate), so it's unsurprising that this duality shows up in many different places and expressions.

Everyone instinctively understands order and chaos, Peterson asserts, even if they don't *know* they understand it. When people begin to understand it consciously, lots of things begin to make sense. Knowing about order and chaos also helps you know how to act. We're meant to "straddle that fundamental duality," to be balanced. Peterson says balance means "to have one foot firmly planted in order and security, and the other in chaos, possibility, growth and adventure." Every experience we live through is made up of both order and chaos—this is true for everyone, no matter where they're from. Either too much order or too much chaos isn't good. It's not good to be too stable, because you won't learn anything new, but it's also not good to be overwhelmed by too much instability and change. The ideal position is "where the terror of existence is under control [...] but where you are also alert and engaged." That's where a person finds meaning.

The whole point of becoming aware of order and chaos, according to Peterson, is that it helps you understand how the world works and how to react to it. As he discussed using the imagery of the yin-yang symbol in the Overture, we're supposed to maintain a balance between order and chaos, which are everywhere, present in all our experiences if we look for them. If we get stuck in inflexible order or lean too far into unpredictable chaos, life as a whole gets thrown off balance. Both order and chaos are needed to keep life steady and manageable yet also marked by healthy growth and change. If a person isn't aware of order and chaos at work in the world, then they'll be less equipped to seek balance and find meaning in life.

Peterson turns to Genesis and reminds readers that the book contains two creation stories. The "Jahwist" account details the creation of Adam and Eve more fully. According to this account, God placed Adam in a place called Eden, or Paradise, where he was forbidden to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. God also created Eve as Adam's partner. The two are naked and unashamed of that fact.

After giving a more general discussion of how order and chaos have been understood in human history, Peterson returns to the Bible, particularly the second, more detailed strand of the creation account in Genesis. He starts by recounting the foundational Jewish and Christian creation story, which affirms the goodness of God's creation.

Suddenly, a serpent appears in the garden. Peterson thinks the serpent represents chaos, which even God can't entirely prevent from entering the enclosed garden. And even if all such "snakes" could have been banished, they still would have remained in the form of "primordial human rivals" and intertribal conflict. And even if all of *these* could have been defeated, then the "snake" within the human soul—"the eternal human proclivity for evil"—would have remained. No wall or boundary can keep out this evil. If someone, like a parent, tries to keep all outside threats from children's lives, then this only leads to another danger—infantilizing children and preventing them from growing into their full potential.

Peterson interprets the Genesis account through the lens of order and chaos and evolutionary history. Recall that for Peterson, chaos is the unexpected breaking into the predictable. Whether the "serpent" (traditionally regarded as Satan) is regarded as a literal being, as human conflict in general, or as inner human evil, Peterson suggests, humans would inevitably encounter chaos sometime, in some way. Anticipating one of his later rules (Rule 11), he points out that even trying to completely eliminate chaos from our lives isn't effective, because it would stunt our growth even if it were possible to pull off.

The serpent plays a trick on Eve, claiming that if she eats the forbidden fruit, she won't die, contrary to what God has said. Instead, she'll become God-like, in that she'll have the ability to distinguish between good and evil. Eve does so, and she becomes "conscious." Unwilling to tolerate a husband who doesn't share consciousness, she shares the fruit with Adam, too. But as they "wake up," Adam and Eve also notice that they're naked. Peterson says that nakedness implies vulnerability and being subject to judgment. When Adam and Eve realized this, they felt exposed and afraid to stand before God, so they covered themselves and hid. Peterson says that anyone is afraid to stand before someone stronger, more beautiful, more "Ideal" than themselves.

Here Peterson summarizes the story of humanity's fall into sin as found in Genesis 3. However, he puts a different spin on the story. Whereas the traditional religious interpretation emphasizes Eve and Adam's choice to mistrust and disobey God by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Peterson looks at the couple's eating from the tree as a kind of moral awakening—a new awareness of evil, suffering, and mortality. To Peterson, that awakening, in itself, isn't a bad thing. However, in response to this new consciousness, Adam and Eve shrank from God in fear and shame instead of facing Him honestly—a response Peterson views as understandable but ultimately irresponsible.

That evening, when God is walking in the garden, He calls for Adam, who fearfully admits that he hid because of his nakedness. Adam also blames Eve and God, in turn, for putting him in this position. In response, God curses the snake, the woman, and the man, ultimately banishing them from the garden's safety and "into the horrors of history itself," where they will be required to work and struggle for survival. Peterson returns to the question with which he opened this chapter: why do people care for their pets and neglect themselves? The story of Genesis suggests that people know how flawed and contemptible they are and see an innocent, unselfconscious creature like a dog as more deserving them themselves.

Again, Peterson isn't primarily interested in reading the Genesis narrative along traditional theological lines, but for insight into human behavior and the history of human reflection on that behavior. Rather than reading the story as an account of sin's consequences, per se, Peterson sees the "curse," on one level, as the natural consequence of becoming conscious of life's hardship and "horrors." Life is a huge struggle, and Peterson suggests that in general, people would prefer to "hide from God" like Adam and Eve did than to face that struggle squarely. Ashamed of their failure, people find it easier to take pity on innocent animals than on themselves and their fellow humans.

There's another layer to the Genesis story. Adam and Eve don't just become aware of their nakedness and the necessity of work—they also come to know good and evil. Peterson says it took him a long time to figure this out, but eventually he understood what this meant. Unlike animal predators, human beings can be intentionally cruel. Because they know their own vulnerability to suffering, they know how to make other people suffer. This conscious desire to inflict pain is much worse than being a predator, since animals don't inflict suffering for the sake of suffering. Peterson says this is the best definition of evil he's come up with. Though it's unpopular today, Peterson thinks this capacity to inflict suffering legitimizes the idea of "Original Sin."

Though Peterson mostly avoids a religious idea of sin (i.e., of human defiance of a God to whom they're accountable), he draws a bit closer to it here as he dives into the concept of evil. Adam and Eve—and humanity as a whole—aren't just susceptible to life's hardships, but capable of inflicting *them, too. It would make more sense for humans, who've experienced suffering firsthand, to* not *wish to inflict it—but, unlike animals that kill to survive, humans sometimes inflict suffering on each other gratuitously. For Peterson, this gratuitous wickedness is evil and evidence of what moderns might regard as the outdated Christian theological idea of Original Sin, or an inborn human capacity to do wrong.*

Given this capacity to do wrong, Peterson thinks it's no wonder that people struggle to take care of themselves or others. If we look honestly at this darkness at the root of humanity, it's easy to doubt whether human beings should even exist.

Peterson thinks his interpretation of Genesis helps answer the question with which he opened the chapter—that is, why people generally don't take good care of themselves. In his view, people aren't just weak and flawed, but capable of doing truly terrible things, and he thinks people know this on an instinctive level—and are deeply ashamed of it, affecting the way they treat themselves and others.

In Genesis 1, God creates an orderly paradise out of chaos by His divine Word. When He creates man and woman, He gives them the ability to do the same thing. Genesis 1 teaches that this Being God has created is good—humanity is good, even when that goodness is disrupted by humanity's terrible actions. Even then, human beings retain a memory of paradise and long for it, whether they realize this or not.

Peterson suggests that God's nature is to make order out of chaos, and so when God created humanity to reflect Himself, He gave them that same ability. Genesis states that Being, or existence, is good, despite frequent appearances to the contrary. As well as possessing the capacity to do evil, then, human beings instinctively recognize and desire the goodness God intends for Being, as symbolized by paradise. To some degree, they share God's ability to desire and to create order out of chaos.

When the original Man and Woman lived in harmony with God, they weren't really conscious. In a way, then, they were less than they'd be *after* the Fall, because their goodness wasn't earned; it was just given. They weren't making choices. Peterson suggests that maybe it's not our self-consciousness and awareness of our evil capacities that make us ashamed, but our unwillingness "to walk with God," as symbolized by Adam's hiding.

Here, Peterson more clearly articulates his understanding of humanity's Fall. In a way, it echoes the Catholic concept of felix culpa, *or the "happy fault"—the idea that if the Fall hadn't taken place, the far greater blessing of Christ's redemption of humanity would never have been necessary, making the tragedy of the Fall a paradoxically blessed thing. Peterson's spin on the concept is that the Fall forced humanity to learn, grow, and develop actual virtues instead of existing in a passive, unearned goodness. He sees Adam's hiding as a way of avoiding that very responsibility—and this refusal to bear the responsibility of Being really is, for Peterson, a kind of "Original Sin."*

Peterson says that in the Bible, everything after the Fall is presented as part of a remedy for the Fall. But the meaning of that remedy is already found within Genesis 1: "to embody the Image of God—to speak out of chaos the Being that is Good," out of free choice. He adds that if we want to take care of ourselves, we have to have self-respect. But since we see ourselves as fallen creatures, we don't.

Peterson sees humanity's purpose as living in a way that echoes God's character and creative work, like God summoning Being out of unformed chaos. But people shirk that responsibility because they see themselves as unworthy of this divine purpose.

While Peterson says that society is no longer as brutally violent as it was in ancient times, we do cynically believe that people are egotistical and only look out for themselves. Peterson suggests that, actually, many people suffer from the opposite problems of self-loathing and self-neglect. They might work to prevent other people's and creatures' suffering, but they believe they themselves should suffer. Peterson says that in Western society, people misinterpret the Golden Rule and Christ's self-sacrifice "as a directive to victimize ourselves" for others. On the contrary, Christian teachings don't actually mean accepting tyranny or letting ourselves be bullied, even by ourselves.

Peterson is basically saying that, while most people believe that society is self-serving, the bigger problem is actually that people don't care about themselves enough. *Instead, they think they deserve the worst. The Golden Rule refers to Christ's teaching that "whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them," as a summary of the Bible's ethical commands. According to Peterson, this teaching, along with Christ's death on the cross, has been twisted to mean that people should simply put up with abuse—but that's not what it was ever intended to mean.*

Peterson says he learned from Swiss psychologist Carl Jung that the Golden Rule and loving one's neighbor aren't actually about "being nice." He also learned from Jung that these two things are "equations"—that is, they mean that a person should care *as much for* themselves as for others, or else one just ends up being enslaved, and other people end up being tyrants. Furthermore, Peterson says, people don't simply belong to themselves: this is because our "Being" is connected to others' being, so mistreatment of ourselves hurts others, too. Plus, the fact that we are made in God's image, in some sense, means that we have inherent value.

People tend to water down these ethical commands to a passive, inoffensive niceness. Here, Peterson shows how he draws on many different sources—from ancient religion to modern psychology—to better understand how any single source can apply to people today. In this case, the key point is that neglecting ourselves, and putting up with others' cruelties, doesn't do anyone any good. It disregards our inherent worth as human beings, as well as the value we have to offer others.

Peterson finds it "miraculous" that people in crisis so often pull together to keep life going. In his own practice, Peterson encourages people to give themselves and others credit for their thoughtfulness toward their fellow human beings. He finds that people are so weighed down by the burden of Being that it's remarkable they ever look beyond their own troubles. People deserve sympathy for living with vulnerability and suffering. This sympathy should balance out the contempt people feel for themselves and one another.

Peterson suggests that the more remarkable thing than human cruelty is the human capacity to care for others and persevere through hardship. People endure much suffering in their own lives, yet more often than not, they're willing to help others even in the midst of their own struggles. Given how difficult life is in general, people should be kinder to themselves instead of neglecting themselves, extending the same generosity to themselves that they often show others.

Everyone has something to contribute to the world. Therefore, everyone deserves some respect, and everyone has a moral obligation to take care of themselves—the same way they would take care of someone they loved. Everyone is deeply flawed, too, but an attitude of constant self-hatred isn't helpful for anyone. Instead, everyone should "treat yourself as if you were someone you are responsible for helping"—not necessarily "what would make you happy" (after all, a child might be happy every time you give them a piece of candy). Rather, you should think about what's truly good for you.

If everyone has inherent value and a role to play in the world, then it's actually selfish to denigrate and neglect oneself. It's easier for people to acknowledge this duty when it comes to other people, but implicitly, the more you neglect yourself, the less you're actually capable of showing up for those you're responsible to care for. Peterson also draws an important distinction here between pursuing shallow happiness and seeking enduring goodness.

To do this, it's important to know where you're going and what your principles are, and what's necessary for you to become a better person—and to help make the world a better place. You must start with yourself. It's important to understand "your own individual Hell" before you can help the world at large to move toward Heaven and away from Hell. Doing this goes a long way toward making up for one's misery and "sinful nature," replacing shame with pride and confidence, like "someone who has learned once again to walk with God in the Garden."

It's not easy to figure out what's truly good for yourself and for the world, and Peterson will devote much of the rest of the book to advising readers on how to do so. For now, the key point to understand is that you'll never get there if you keep treating yourself like garbage. If you keep refusing to step up—or, to use this chapter's biblical example, hiding from God the way Adam did in the Garden of Eden—then you'll never shoulder the responsibility to help yourself, much less anyone else.

RULE 3: MAKE FRIENDS WITH PEOPLE WHO WANT THE BEST FOR YOU

Peterson grew up in a small town on the Alberta prairie. Winter lasted for five long, dark months. Growing up, Peterson had a friend whom he'll call Chris. For reasons that weren't clear to Peterson, Chris was angry and resentful, and his relationship with his father was broken. Chris hung out with his younger cousin Ed a lot, and they smoked marijuana. Peterson spent a lot of time driving the countryside and partying with Chris, Ed, and their friends. Peterson never enjoyed these parties—they were dark, loud, and dreary, and nobody knew what they were doing there. Everyone who grew up in Fairview, Alberta, knew they would leave eventually.

Though it's not yet clear why Peterson is telling this story from his youth, given the chapter's title, it's reasonable to guess that Chris was not *a friend who "want[ed] the best for" Peterson, and that the story will serve as an example of the kinds of relationships Peterson doesn't encourage. His description of life growing up in Fairview also contrasts with the kind of purposeful existence Peterson has been commending so far in the book.*

In high school, Peterson befriended two college-bound newcomers. Their ambition helped persuade Peterson, too, to attend college. Peterson was very happy in college, and he felt he'd left his past behind. But he'd already found that not everyone is able to embrace the possibilities of a new place. At 15, he'd visited the city of Edmonton with his friends Chris and Carl. They spent the whole weekend drinking and smoking marijuana, as if they'd never left Fairview at all. Years later, while living in Edmonton, his old friend Ed visited. Ed clearly wasn't doing well and was mowing lawns for a living. Ed brought along a friend, who was so high that Peterson eventually asked the two of them to leave. Peterson wondered what made it impossible for his friends to improve their lives.

By making better friends and being encouraged to attend college, Peterson found a way to leave Fairview behind and lead a more productive life. But Chris's and Ed's experiences suggest that just leaving a place physically isn't a foolproof ticket to a better life. Chris, Ed, and their friends basically replicate their dead-end lifestyle no matter where they happen to be. Their lifestyles contrasted jarringly with the new life Peterson was establishing beyond Fairview. Again, Peterson hints that there's something about the company one keeps that shapes one's ability to change their life.

Eventually, Chris had a psychotic break and committed suicide. Peterson wondered why Chris continually sought out people and places that weren't good for him. Sometimes this happens when a person has a low opinion of themselves. They may not believe they deserve any better. People use whatever tools they have at hand to build their lives. Often, these tools are faulty, so they produce faulty results. While some of this is fate or inability, it also seems to be a refusal to learn.

Peterson doesn't claim that there's a clear explanation for Chris's horrible fate or that he deserved such unhappiness. Nevertheless, that also doesn't mean that a person never bears any responsibility for the outcomes in their lives. Chris seems to be someone who only had "faulty tools" available to him, and yet his struggles might have prompted him to make different choices at some point—but he didn't.

There are other reasons for choosing friends that aren't good for you, like wanting to rescue someone. While there are often good motives behind this impulse, it's often naïve, because plenty of downtrodden people don't desire change, or are themselves exploitative or oppressors. It's difficult to tell the difference between someone who wants help and someone who will take advantage of help.

Peterson points out that it's not always a question of low self-esteem or lack of resources, but that well-meaning people sometimes choose friends who are bad for them, too. Sometimes people naively assume that there's no downside to helping someone else; but just because someone needs help doesn't mean they're not in a position to hurt others, potentially even dragging others down with them.

Plus, the desire to help someone can be narcissistic. Peterson quotes Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* as an example, where the protagonist doesn't have the strength of character to see through his promises to the downtrodden Liza. Problematic, low-achieving people also tend to bring down the groups or teams around them instead of being influenced by their more stable peers. When it comes to helping other people, Peterson suggests assuming that you're doing the easiest thing, not the most difficult. It's easy to assume that you're making progress with a troubled person, but it's likely you're just enabling their bad behavior.

Peterson cites Dostoevsky's novels a number of times in 12 Rules, *turning to them as examples of literary works that capture core truths about human nature. Here,* Notes from Underground *gives an example of a helping instinct gone wrong. Overall, Peterson's perspective on helping others sounds pretty pessimistic, but his point is that effectively helping a troubled person—really helping them change their life—is very difficult, and that no matter how pure you believe your intentions are, that doesn't mean you're actually helping them; in fact, you might be hurting them.*

Before helping someone, it's important to know what's really going on with them. It's unlikely that they're a purely innocent victim of their circumstances. Further, it's not really kind to assume that a person has no agency. Peterson says it's wiser to assume that a person has rejected the available path out of their situation. Often, a person asking for help is just trying to temporarily stave off disaster, not fix their life. Or, in their resentment of others' success, they're trying to drag you down to their level.

Peterson continues to sound pessimistic about the likelihood of actually helping people. His point here, though, is that part of seeking to help someone is being realistic; being naïve isn't actually kind or helpful. Realism means recognizing that you probably don't know someone's full story, just the angle they've told you. According to Peterson, it also means that, in the majority of cases, the person you're seeking to help isn't a purely innocent victim of their circumstances, regardless of what they claim, and probably could have taken some *positive steps on their own. In such cases, then, there's a good chance the intended helper will be dragged into a difficult situation more than the other person will be helped.*

In short, Peterson believes it's impossible to help someone unless they truly *want* this help. And it's pointless to suffer for someone else in this situation, because it's probably just a way of helping yourself feel good without actually addressing difficult problems. It might be more effective to live your own life and lead by example.

Peterson suggests that unless someone is prepared to change their life and welcomes your help in doing so, then whatever "help" you offer them is really more about your own ego; your sacrifices for them aren't actually accomplishing anything. To get back to the chapter's title, such people don't really "want the best for you," and it's better for them and *yourself if you step away and live your own life as best you can.*

Finally, it's not selfish to seek out friends who will be good for you—it's appropriate to be friends with people whose own lives will be improved if they see *your* life improve. Such friends will encourage you to do well and won't put up with any self-destructive behavior on your part. They won't pull away from you if your achievements put their life in a negative light. Good examples are disturbing because they remind us that we could be more than we are. It's not actually easier to surround oneself with such examples. It requires courage and humility. So, "make friends with people who want the best for you."

Peterson anticipates the objection that seeking out friends who are good for you is selfish. Rather, Peterson suggests that friendship is a two-way street, and that true friends invest in one another's wellbeing. Often, that means choosing to be around people who challenge you, even when that means facing parts of your life that need improvement. Such friends, he suggests, are the kind of people who won't be threatened by your own success. Ultimately, then, seeking such friends isn't just good for you, but for those around you.

RULE 4: COMPARE YOURSELF TO WHO YOU WERE YESTERDAY, NOT TO WHO SOMEONE ELSE IS TODAY

Peterson says that when more people lived in small towns, it used to be easier for individuals to stand out. But now that more people live in cities and are digitally connected to so many others, it's much rarer to stand out. What's more, we all have a critical internal voice that knows just how pathetic we are compared to our friends and doesn't shut up about it. Of course, high standards are important, sometimes having life-or-death consequences. And it's true that only a very small number of people achieve great things.

Peterson opens this chapter by suggesting that today, it's especially easy to feel down on oneself. In effect, the world has gotten much bigger, so it's much easier for even talented individuals to feel lost in the shuffle. Things like social media make it easier to compare ourselves to others and feel lacking. High achievement is worth celebrating precisely because it's so rare.

But Peterson offers a different solution than deluding oneself about one's potential. Maybe the internal critic's chatter, even if it has an element of truth to it, just isn't that important. Maybe it's okay to stop listening to it. If it's true that there will always be people better than you, then a wise response isn't to decide that nothing matters and give up, but to realize that it's *always* possible to choose a framing within which nothing matters and to choose a better framing instead.

Many people respond to this landscape either by convincing themselves they're better than they are, or else by harshly criticizing themselves. The latter, especially, can lead to apathy. But Peterson suggests it's better—and more realistic—to accept that even though we probably won't be the best at something, we should adjust our perspective instead of giving up.

Peterson says a good start is thinking about what "success" or "failure" mean. It sounds like there's no middle ground between these two things. Actually, though, there are many degrees of success or failure. And there are many different things at which to succeed or fail. If one thing doesn't work, you can always try something different. And everyone has multiple things going on in their lives, from family life to work to hobbies. If you're middling or bad at some things, you're probably good at others. And if you're winning at everything, it might mean you're not trying anything very challenging.

Peterson suggests that success and failure aren't a zero-sum game, even though that's how people customarily think of it. It's actually rare to attain either perfect success or complete failure. Furthermore, people's lives are multi-faceted. Nobody is good at everything—and, Peterson suggests, if someone thinks *they're good at everything, it probably means they just haven't pushed themselves enough yet. Success and failure are always relative to some degree.*

Finally, each person's individual circumstances are so unique that it doesn't make sense to compare oneself to others. We tend to place too much value on what we don't have and too little on what we do have. And we don't always know the full stories of people we admire.

Even though it's a very human instinct to compare ourselves to others, it's good to recognize that when we do this, we're always working with incomplete information. We make assumptions about what we can see, but there's much that we don't *see. We also tend to have a mindset that "the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence," instead of appreciating what's good about our own circumstances.*

The internal critic picks an arbitrary point of comparison, as if it's the only thing relevant. Then it contrasts you with someone who truly stands out in that area. It can also undermine your motivation by fixating on this comparison as evidence for life's injustice. Early in life, it makes sense to rely on comparison, since we haven't yet developed our own standards. But as we get older, our lives become more individual and unique. Before you can express your own standards, you have to develop a mature understanding of who you are and what you value. While there is an element here of obligation and what one "should" do, it's also important to understand what you really want. Otherwise, you make yourself and others into tyrants.

Peterson points out that our inner critics are quite biased and have a very narrow perspective on reality. They tend to focus on what's weakest about us and most exceptional about others. If we're not careful, this can lead to resentment and bitterness. Furthermore, Peterson suggests that comparison does have its uses, especially while we're figuring out who we are and what we value. Others' standards give us something to build off of. But if we follow those standards too closely without establishing our own, we're effectively making others into tyrants over us. Peterson will return later to this idea of tyranny on both an individual and societal level.

Peterson says you should instead "dare [...] to be dangerous" and honest with yourself about what you want. It's especially important to watch for resentment, arrogance, or deceit, which Peterson says are responsible for much of the harm in the world. In the case of resentment, a person either has to summon the maturity to get over it or to speak up against genuine tyranny.

In a way, letting others' standards govern our choices can feel safer than asserting what we really want. But Peterson suggests that the "safe" alternative is more dangerous, because of the damaging ways human beings sometimes react to life under tyranny—resentment being a major one.

As you grow up, to an extent you have to differentiate yourself from your parents and learn how to blend in with everyone else. Once you've done that, you then have to learn how to be "just the right amount different from everyone else." By this time, your life is a unique web of interwoven circumstances. For that reason, you should be careful when comparing yourself to anyone else.

Growing up is difficult for everyone regardless of their circumstances—it's a delicate balance between conforming to parental and social expectations while also figuring out your own uniqueness. Because this looks so different for each individual, Peterson suggests that it's silly to compare yourself too much to anyone else.

Because of humanity's hunting-and-gathering background, we are always aiming at things. We're always both at point "a" and moving toward point "b" (which we believe will be better than point "a"). We're always looking for ways to improve our situation. We even envision hypothetical worlds where present problems can be solved. While this is a positive tendency, it can also mean instability and discomfort—you might face disappointment and discontentment with life.

Peterson introduces the idea of "aiming at things" that will recur throughout the book. In short, because of their evolutionary history (which required hunting and gathering for survival), people are continually pursuing new goals. This process, too, is a delicate balance between establishing a stable situation and moving toward a hypothetically better one. Readers should recognize the pattern of order and chaos here—the balance between the stable and familiar (order) and the changing and unknown (chaos).

Peterson suggests that the first step is to take stock of your life. While your internal critic might be good at this, listening to it can be demoralizing. Peterson suggests that you negotiate with yourself as if you are someone who is difficult to get along with. Instead of denigrating yourself, be humble and focus on your desire to reduce unnecessary suffering in your life. Sometimes you can negotiate with yourself by promising yourself something nice as a reward (and really following through on that reward). It's best to focus on small decisions and actions that, by your own standards, will set you up for a better day tomorrow: "compare your specific personal tomorrow with your specific personal yesterday." Start small, and your baseline of comparison will gradually get higher. After a few years of this, you'll aim higher, and "what you aim at determines what you see."

While figuring out what to aim at sounds like a daunting prospect, Peterson suggests that it can be broken down into manageable steps. Assessing one's life can be especially dangerous ground for a self-critical person, but it can be more effective to focus step by step on making life a little better for oneself—even rewarding yourself for small successes. As you identify small, gradual improvements you can make in your own life, you'll focus less on fruitless comparisons with others. This can lead to slow, steady improvements in your life, and as you practice "aiming" at such goals, your overall outlook will become clearer, and you'll focus less on other people.

Peterson points out that "vision is expensive"—human eyes triage all the time. Everything else fades into the background. This is how we deal with the world's complexity in general: we focus on our own narrow concerns and the things that move us toward our goals while ignoring the rest. The price of this specificity is that we're "blind" to most of the world. That's okay when things are going well, but when we're in crisis, and nothing is turning out as we wish, the world we've ignored can be overwhelming. The upside is that the world includes a lot of possibility.

It makes sense that, most of the time, people's vision is pretty narrowly focused. Otherwise, life is so complicated that it would become difficult to survive. But Peterson suggests that when life falls apart, the things we've necessarily filtered out for survival's sake come rushing back into our field of vision and threaten to overwhelm us. But recall that such "chaos" isn't just a threat, but a possibility for positive change.

Sometimes, what we need is right in front of us, but because we're so narrowly focused, we miss it. This leads to a difficult price that has to be paid before we get what we want. We each have deep-seated, habitual ways of looking at the world that have served us well, but sometimes, to keep moving forward, we have to let these go. At such times, you might have to come to terms with the truth that "life doesn't have the problem. You do." This being the case, maybe it's your values that need to be retooled, not life itself. Maybe you're holding onto your desires so tightly that you're blind to what you really need—what will really make life better.

When a crisis occurs, this sometimes requires us to adjust our finely-honed vision. This can be painful, because it might require us to give up ways of looking at the world that were effective in the past but no longer serve our present circumstances. At such times, we might be tempted to blame the outside world. Peterson suggests that this is when we need to be especially thoughtful about what's truly best for us—to look inward instead of outward.

When you're able to realize this and accept it, you can move forward on a different trajectory. Your preconceptions were blinding you to what "better" really means for you, but once you gradually began to see what "better" *could* be, you could choose to want it. Choosing to retool and take stock of your life in this way means taking on a lot of responsibility. The more you aim at "better," the more information your mind is able to gather—the more you'll "see"—and your idea of "better" will become elevated accordingly.

When you adjust your aim at a different possibility of what could be "better," your vision broadens, and you're better equipped to move forward on a different path (even when this entails embracing chaos). It's much easier to keep moving forward in familiar grooves; but this can lead to getting stuck (too much order). Peterson suggests that taking responsibility for this kind of growth is a key marker of maturity.

Because human beings have many and often conflicting desires, we have to be able to articulate and prioritize them. As we organize desires into hierarchies, they become values, and values form a moral structure. The study of morality is called ethics. Even older than ethics is religion, which isn't just concerned with right and wrong but with good and evil themselves.

Peterson extrapolates from prioritizing among our desires to figuring out what we most value, and how those values make up our moral outlook. He sees religion as a step beyond, or behind, this ethical framework; in other words, ethics is how you behave, and religion reflects on why you should behave in some ways and not in others.

Religious adherents are concerned about behaving properly and being "a good person." The western Enlightenment objection to religion has traditionally been that just obeying religious rules isn't enough to be a good person. While that may be true, Peterson says we've forgotten that at least obedience is a start: "You cannot aim yourself at anything if you are completely undisciplined and untutored." Eventually, if you can't aim at anything, you'll conclude that there's nothing to aim *for*.

Broadly speaking, the Enlightenment (and much subsequent modern thought) tended to downplay religious rules as an insufficient framework for leading an ethical life. Peterson counters this perspective by suggesting that rules provide a useful framework for people's lives, and a basis from which they can begin to aim at other worthwhile goals.

For this reason, Peterson concludes that it's necessary for religions to have a "dogmatic" structure—at least as a starting point. If you've learned through obedience to be a disciplined person, you're at least "a well-forged tool." When there's vision in addition to obedience, then that "tool" can be used for a purpose. This all means that one's religious beliefs determine what one sees—and that's true even if someone claims to be an atheist. That's because nobody is an atheist in their actions, and it's a person's actions that reveal what they most deeply believe.

Peterson's view of religion's value is essentially utilitarian. That is, it's basically a means to becoming the most effective version of oneself. Obviously, plenty of religious believers would not agree with this perspective! However, most would agree with Peterson that their religious beliefs can and should determine what they see and aim at. And when Peterson says that nobody acts like an atheist, he means that nobody lives as though their existence is totally meaningless (which would basically mean not living at all).

Everything we want and everything we see has been shaped over billions of years. Human beings have been "watching themselves act" and telling stories about it for many thousands of years, in an effort to understand what we believe. Part of this knowledge is gathered into religious writings, and in the Western world, the Bible is foundational. Therefore, careful study of the Bible can tell us a lot about what we believe, how we act, and how we *should* act.

Peterson draws on his interest in evolutionary psychology here. He sees religious writings as an attempt to interpret human actions through storytelling. Though he's not religiously observant in a traditional sense, Peterson simply upholds the Bible as the foremost and foundational work of religious literature in the Western world—and for that reason, it's worth reckoning with.

When people read the Old Testament today, they often say they could never believe in a God as "harsh" and "judgmental" as the God depicted there. But God has never cared much what people think about Him, then or now—and there were always serious consequences for disobeying Him. Peterson says that the Old Testament authors were "realists." When they suffered, they figured that God must have His reasons for what He was doing. He was not to be trifled with. Peterson says that survivors of the 20th century's horrors shouldn't be shocked that ancient people thought God was justified in sending people to Hell.

When Peterson says that God has never cared much what people think of Him, he means that the Old Testament simply doesn't conform to modern expectations for what God should be like. But the Old Testament's authors had a different perspective. They suffered greatly, and attributing their suffering to God's doing was how they made sense of it. Peterson suggests that this way of thinking isn't really so foreign to us, or shouldn't be—recent history is horrific in ways that challenge modern pretenses of being more enlightened.

Peterson says that the New Testament portrayal of God seems more loving and gentler, but also *less* believable "in a post-Auschwitz world." Yet, while such a God seems totally implausible to someone who can't see, someone with opened eyes can understand Him perfectly.

Peterson basically means here that after the Holocaust, people should actually be more shocked by God's loving and gracious attributes as portrayed in the New Testament than by His seeming harshness in the Old. But someone who's aimed at a higher goal for Being will be able to understand this portrayal.

If your aim is fixed on something petty, such as resentment, then the world itself will seem petty. On the other hand, if you decide to assume at least some responsibility for your own unhappiness, then you can start to see—to change your perspective and look for something different. And that's not all: as you start to aim for a better life, you also want a better life for the people around you. As your aim gets higher, you are able to see and work toward better possibilities—and to see how these improvements can benefit the lives of those who live long after you.

Earlier, Peterson said that what you aim at determines what you see; here, he builds on that idea. As long as someone is stuck in resentment, they won't take responsibility to make the world any better. But if someone chooses to aim for a better life, their outlook will gradually change to encompass bigger and broader changes. The higher people aim, the more effective they can be.

At this point, maybe you start to aim at the "Improvement of Being" more generally. In that light, maybe you rethink your reaction to the Old Testament God—even to decide that, perhaps, He isn't altogether different from the New Testament God—"to act as if existence might be justified by its goodness." This is what allows you to overcome petty attitudes like nihilism and resentment. Such "faith" isn't the same thing as believing in magic. It's not closing your eyes to evil, but believing that evil must be counterbalanced by essential goodness. Peterson says a person can only do this by refusing to make faith subservient to rationality. It doesn't mean denying reality, but "paying attention" as you never have before.

Peterson is a little confusing here. Basically, he is saying that it's possible that there's enough goodness in the world to outweigh the world's undeniable horrors. He suggests that embracing this belief is really the only way to cope with life's suffering. And it's not mere denial, because it doesn't pretend that there's no such thing as evil or ignore the necessity of using one's reason. Rather than stubborn blindness, such a mindset requires the courage to look at the world honestly.

Peterson says that paying attention means noticing your surroundings, both physical and psychological. When you notice something that bothers you, you should ask yourself if it's fixable, and if it's something you're willing to fix. If you answer "no" to these questions, then you should aim lower for now. Keep searching until you find something that *is* fixable today. Sometimes, this can be as little as deciding to spend a few minutes working through a stack of paperwork you've been neglecting, instead of tackling the whole thing at once. As you break such problems down into parts, they become less daunting. It's also key to reward yourself for whatever you achieve.

For Peterson, "paying attention" means noticing when something is wrong, not ignoring it. But when you notice something that needs fixing, you need to be realistic about it. There's not much point in focusing on something that you can't or won't change right now. It's better to adjust your aim until you're able to settle on a goal that's actually feasible for you to tackle. That way, you can actually start a process of gradual, steady change instead of getting discouraged and giving up.

Establish the habit of asking yourself daily, "What could I do, that I would do, to make Life a little better?" Then, you can keep that habit for the rest of your life. Importantly, you aren't insisting on a specific definition of "better"—you aren't "being a totalitarian, or a utopian" to yourself.

Realism is key to this rule. Setting unrealistic goals is a sure way to backfire; modestly aiming at "better" actually helps you make sustainable changes. Perfectionism is both oppressive and ultimately unattainable.

Peterson says he thinks this is the culmination of the Western ethical canon. It's how to transform rules (like the Ten Commandments' "Thou Shalt Not") into a "positive vision." Paying attention in this way is much different from acting like a tyrant or a martyr; you're negotiating with yourself and the world instead of trying to manipulate. It teaches you to be patient instead of getting frustrated, to figure out what you really want, and not to worry so much about other people. So, "compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not to who someone else is today."

This rule is basically Peterson's answer to the Enlightenment critique of religion. That is, he shares the critique that religious rules can become wooden and limiting; but, instead of rejecting them, he thinks they provide a framework for taking gradual, realistic steps to change one's world. When you have an ethical framework like this, you don't have to worry about other people's standards or their progress in reaching them—you can set your own goals for improving Being and get there little by little.

RULE 5: DO NOT LET YOUR CHILDREN DO ANYTHING THAT MAKES YOU DISLIKE THEM

Peterson describes watching a three-year-old boy follow his parents through an airport, repeatedly screaming for attention. Thirty seconds of problem-solving could have fixed the situation. He also describes parents choosing to micromanage their toddler's every movement instead of teaching him the meaning of "No." Many mothers make themselves the enemies of their future daughters-in-law by obeying their sons' every whim. Preferential treatment for sons makes sense from an evolutionary perspective, since men are more prolific biologically. But it can also create tyrants.

In this chapter, Peterson switches his focus to parenting. He starts by describing scenarios where parents refuse to confront their children's misbehavior head-on. With the reference to future daughters-in-law, Peterson implies that the way parents treat their children while they're small has major implications for the way those children will treat others when they're grown up.

Peterson says people take a dangerously naïve and romantic view of children, as if they can do no wrong. They also fear their children, having been influenced too much by the 1960s "adolescent ethos" and rejection of authority figures. This influence makes parents worry too much about causing their children short-term suffering out of an exaggerated fear of doing long-term damage.

Peterson critiques modern perspectives on childrearing. Parents tend to see their children as too perfect, and at the same time, they see their children as fragile—avoiding asserting authority because they think it will hurt them in the long run.

The belief that children are pure and innocent and corrupted by society derives from the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. (Of course, he abandoned his own five children to orphanages.) Rousseau believed in an ideal, or an archetype—not reality. Human beings contain evil, too, and this starts in childhood. And it's not clear that evil can be neatly attributed to society: even chimpanzees conduct brutal intertribal warfare, as primatologist Jane Goodall discovered. And statistically, the imposition of modern social structures has actually tended to reduce murder rates across many cultures.

There are historical precedents for some modern parenting hang-ups. Peterson argues that the view that children are innocent goes back to Rousseau's ideas in the 18th century, but that this view has no compelling basis in reality: it's been demonstrated that decidedly non-innocent behavior can be observed in nature. So Peterson rejects the idea that society—that is, structures and rules—somehow corrupts children's innocence.

Children, like other humans, can't just be left alone and be expected to thrive. Like animals, human beings require socialization, not isolation, in order to develop properly. So, children *must* be guided and shaped, as neglect can be as harmful as abuse. Children who aren't well-socialized almost universally become too dependent and consequently demand more time and resources from adults.

Children require very engaged guidance in order for them to grow up in a way that benefits not just them individually, but also society at large. Failing this, children end up needing too much from others, which is a drain on other people and society as a whole. This is another part of life that calls for a careful balance between order (excessive strictness) and chaos (too much freedom).

Usually, modern parents fail to discipline kids because they're afraid their kids will no longer love them if they do. They would rather be their child's friend than be respected by them. Parents have to be willing to incur kids' anger and even temporary hatred, for the sake of a child's long-term well-being. Discipline is, after all, not supposed to be anger or revenge, but "a careful combination of mercy and long-term judgment." This is hard, so plenty of parents shirk the responsibility.

Peterson suggests that parents don't take a long enough view when they consider their children's wellbeing. They are also too concerned about what their children think and feel about them in the moment. Parents can think more wisely about this by adjusting their perspective on what discipline is. It's supposed to be a way of looking out for kids' long-term best interests without being cruel or overly harsh. But this takes a lot of wisdom, and it's easier to focus on what's happening in the moment.

Parents assume that rules are inhibiting. Scientific literature suggests, however, that limitations encourage creativity. And there's no evidence that children, left to themselves, will make healthy choices about things like eating and sleeping. Limits can be frustrating, but they also provide security. A big reason that two-year-olds hit, kick, and bite is because they're testing boundaries. They don't have to be taught how to be aggressive—it's innate. Rather, they have to be taught how to observe limits and, from there, to better regulate their impulses.

Parents also tend to look at rules in too short-sighted a way. Kids can't thrive in the long run if they don't have reliable boundaries within which to learn and grow. If kids are given free rein to do anything they want, they'll end up being unhappy, not to mention being a menace to those around them.

Modern parents tend to conflate "discipline" with "tyrant" and "punish" with "torture." It's true that these concepts must be handled carefully. They can be misused, but they can't be ignored. Positive discipline certainly exists: when you see someone behaving in a way you like, reward them. Positive reinforcement is very effective at shaping behavior, but the downside is that you have to wait around to observe the behavior you like.

Another problem with modern parents, according to Peterson, is that they have no positive understanding of discipline. While the concept can easily be distorted, that's not an excuse for not trying to use it the right way. There are certainly ways of using discipline in a purely positive way, like in shaping behavior. However, Peterson hints that this isn't enough.

People learn from negative emotions, too. Satisfaction and hope reinforce good behavior, while pain discourages repeat negative behavior. It's doing children a disservice to not use all the tools at a parent's disposal, including negative emotions. When parents fail to do this, children grow up unprepared to face failure and danger in the world.

Peterson rejects the idea that discipline can be only positive, if only because that's not what the world is like. Children have to learn how to cope with the suffering in life, too, or they'll reach adulthood poorly equipped to face the burdens of Being.

Childrearing entails conflict, Peterson says, but parents too often think they can opt out of this. But it doesn't work—it just turns the job of disciplining your child over to a world that doesn't care about them, which is the opposite of loving.

When parents refrain from disciplining children, Peterson argues, they're really just making their children's later life much harder for them and offloading the work of discipline onto society.

Readers might ask why a child should be subject to parents in the first place. Peterson says that since children are dependent on their parents, it's best for them to act in a way that invites the optimal amount of positive attention from their parents. They also need to be taught to comply with social expectations—not to mindlessly conform, but to adopt behaviors that tend to bring success and to avoid behaviors that bring failure.

Peterson's perspective on children's subjection to parents is rooted in evolutionary psychology more than any clear moral foundation. Basically, children should be taught behaviors that lead to the greatest amount of success and social harmony in the long run.

How to discipline children effectively depends on many factors, such as a child's temperament. Peterson starts with the idea that excessive rules just tend to make children frustrated. He offers some general guidelines for appropriate rules, like those limiting violence and bullying and those promoting sociable behavior (such as politeness and sharing). Second, he suggests using the minimum necessary force when a rule is broken. This requires some experimentation and will vary by child: for some, a glare or command is sufficient, and for a small child, especially one who's misbehaving in public, a light flick on the hand might work. Being realistic about how much time they can handle in public is also good for everyone.

Peterson rejects a one-size-fits-all approach to discipline. Parents should set rules that are actually meaningful and beneficial for children, both now and as they grow up and learn to get along with others. And discipline depends on the individual child and should also never be too harsh or arbitrary.

Peterson holds that while it's an easy cliché to say that there's never an excuse for physical punishment, it's not nuanced enough. After all, society punishes people with jail. And there are dangerous situations where the most effective punishment is the one that will stop the risky behavior fast enough (like in a crowded parking lot). This also applies to the social realm, Peterson says. Those who aren't punished effectively by age four will face worse punishments by society later in life, especially when it comes to aggressive behaviors. In addition, the word "no" means little if it isn't backed up by the threat of physical punishment.

Peterson suggests that there's a wide spectrum of what constitutes physical punishment, and that it's irresponsible to reject the entire spectrum as unacceptably cruel. Again, it depends on the context—and it also depends on a long-term view of what a child will face if they grow up without having faced any negative consequences.

It's likewise the case, Peterson argues, that the magnitude and context of hitting makes a big difference. A two-year-old is unsophisticated, not stupid, and a flick on the hand will convey that he shouldn't bully his baby sister. If a conflict-avoidant parent lets the bullying continue, the more vulnerable sibling might suffer for years. Time-out can also be very effective because, when used well, it teaches a child that they are welcome in company when they can control their anger.

Peterson makes the point that the misbehaving child isn't the only one to consider. Bullying is serious behavior with painful repercussions for others; as such, it should be treated with discipline that actually communicates the seriousness of the offense (though never to an excessive, harmful degree).

In addition to limiting the rules and using minimum necessary force, Peterson offers a third rule: that "parents should come in pairs" whenever possible, since humans under pressure can lose their edge, make mistakes, and need backup. Along similar lines, parents should be aware of their own capacity to behave cruelly. Much bad parenting happens not out of malice, but willful blindness. A resentful parent becomes a cold, distant parent down the road. On the other hand, a parent who's aware of their own capacities to misbehave will map out a disciplinary strategy in advance. Parents' responsibility to act as "proxies for the real world," albeit merciful ones, is more important than any other parental duty.

Peterson also suggests that parents need restraint. Any parent is fallible and must also face the possibility that they could mistreat a child, and possibly slip into such behavior without intending to. Though he doesn't directly say so, Peterson suggests that parents need to have a long-term aim—one that's oriented toward the improvement of Being not just for their kids, but for society at large—and to order their parenting according to that aim.

If you take responsibility for your kids' behavior, you'll like them better, and they'll get along better with both adults and children in the outside world, too. Clear boundaries help build social maturity, which in turn helps maintain order and resist chaos in the wider world. So, don't let your children do anything that makes you dislike them.

Peterson concludes that good parenting produces more harmonious relationships not just within a given household, but with the larger world. Effective parenting sets up a child to walk the path between order and chaos later in life—which is good for everybody.

RULE 6: SET YOUR HOUSE IN PERFECT ORDER BEFORE YOU CRITICIZE THE WORLD

Peterson says that the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooter and the Columbine killers fundamentally had a "religious" problem. When one of the Columbine shooters said that the human race was only worth killing, he and others like him "appoint themselves supreme adjudicators of reality and find it wanting." Most people don't go to the extreme of a mass shooter, but many people question Being itself when they encounter injustice or tragedy. Life is hard for everyone, and while sometimes it's people's own fault, it isn't always—everyone, for instance, is subject to disease and death. Whose fault is that?

Here, Peterson is fundamentally dealing with the problem of evil. It's shocking to read about mass school shooters at the beginning of this chapter, but Peterson is using these examples to point to a fundamental refusal to embrace Being. This is something many people can identify with, especially if they've suffered in life. Life is full of suffering that seems terribly unjust and demands some sort of response.

Whenever a mass shooting occurs, Peterson says, people react by claiming they don't understand how it could have happened. But when we say this, we're not being honest. Nobody who's conscious of the world can avoid being outraged at it. There's something logical about trying to take revenge on Being itself.

Jarringly, Peterson insists that on some level, everyone does understand why something as apparently meaningless as a school shooting happens. Anyone who pays attention to the pain of Being, he suggests, should be able to grasp why someone would lash out in response.

But it doesn't have to be that way. While some victims of evil pay it forward, others can learn to do good after suffering evil themselves. It's a fact, for instance, that most people who were abused as children *don't* grow up to be abusers themselves.

Peterson also asserts that there's nothing inevitable about people responding to evil by committing evil themselves. More remarkably, in fact, this isn't what happens most of the time.

If anyone had reason to be bitter at God and existence, it would be Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. He suffered terribly in a Soviet labor camp and then from cancer. But instead of dwelling on vengeance, Solzhenitsyn "opened his eyes" and marveled at people's noble behavior under horrifying circumstances. He even asked himself hard questions, like whether he had contributed in some way to his own suffering. He looked for failures in his own past and thought about how to rectify them now. He channeled much of this soul-searching into writing *The Gulag Archipelago*, which ultimately helped undermine communist tyranny in the Soviet Union.

Peterson turns to one of his favorite examples, Solzhenitsyn, by arguing that if anyone had reason to lash out at the world in response to their own suffering, it would have been him—and yet he didn't. Solzhenitsyn chose instead to pay attention to the unaccountable goodness of people under horrific circumstances, and to focus on the wrongs—primarily his own—that he was in a position to change.

We can find similar patterns in the Hebrew Bible, where prophets repeatedly called wayward Israel to repent for failing to obey God's word when they suffered. They "acted as if God's goodness [...] was axiomatic" and took responsibility for their suffering. The alternative is resentment and revenge.

Peterson draws a parallel between Solzhenitsyn's experience in a Soviet labor camp and the suffering of the Israelites in the Bible. Instead of cursing or rejecting God, the suffering people of Israel took God's goodness for granted and heeded God's call to change their behavior instead.

If you're suffering and starting to become corrupted by the experience, Peterson offers something to think about: Have you cleaned up your own life? If not, then "start to stop doing what you know to be wrong," and start today. Don't blame external forces until you've grappled with your own experience. The more you start to think, speak, and act authentically, you will find life becoming simpler. That doesn't mean it will be free from hardship and tragedy, but those things will no longer be clouded by your own bitterness. They might even become easier to bear, letting you focus more on becoming a force for good. So, "set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world."

Peterson addresses those who are dealing with painful experiences in their own lives. By asking sufferers if they've "[cleaned] up" their own life, he isn't necessarily saying that their problems are their own fault. He's saying that they should first deal with the problems they can fix—namely, their own wrongdoing. Starting this way is, in his opinion, the main safeguard against becoming bitter and consequently worsening one's own sufferings. "Setting your house in order" is no guarantee you won't suffer, but it is, in Peterson's view, the starting point for being able to counter evil with good.

RULE 7: PURSUE WHAT IS MEANINGFUL (NOT WHAT IS EXPEDIENT)

The most fundamental truth is that life is suffering. God tells Adam and Eve this before barring them from the Garden of Eden. The easiest, most obvious response to this is to "do what's expedient"—to live a life of self-gratification. After all, if life is meaningless, then it just doesn't matter what you do.

Peterson delves into the problem of suffering more deeply in this chapter. He acknowledges first of all that when people encounter pain, the most natural response is to do whatever makes you happy in the moment. Of course, readers are already primed to expect that Peterson will reject this approach.

Or perhaps there's an alternative. Peterson says that our ancestors have thought about this question for a long time, but to this day, we still don't understand the answers. This is because we still understand them more or less symbolically—in myth and ritual—and can't articulate them explicitly. Humans are a lot like pack animals, who go along with the routines and behavior patterns we've followed for millennia without really understanding them. Eventually, at a relatively recent point in human history, we started noticing and telling stories about the way we act; but we still don't really understand it all.

Peterson says here that we still don't really understand suffering, even though humanity has thought about the problem for millennia. For nearly as long as humans have experienced suffering, they've tried to interpret its meaning, and many of those interpretations (like myths and religious rituals) have endured to this day. But the persistence of these interpretations still doesn't really get to the underlying meaning of it all.

One such story is the Genesis narrative of Paradise and the Fall. In the Garden of Eden, human beings were sinless, and they weren't yet conscious. After eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, learning about death and vulnerability, and turning away from God, humans faced a laborious mortal existence. Over time, people learned that they could gain God's favor through sacrifice, averting his wrath.

Peterson turns again to one of the stories most familiar to western readers—the opening narratives of the Old Testament's book of Genesis. By "conscious" Peterson means that initially, human beings weren't yet aware of suffering and mortality; he reads the "fall" of humanity as a story of how humans gained that awareness. Once they did, humans looked for ways to avoid suffering. Religious sacrifices became one method.

Peterson says that ancient religious sacrifice was a way of enacting a proposition: "that something better might be attained in the future by giving up something of value in the present." Sacrifice is closely related to work. Like sacrifice, work is a form of delaying gratification. When human beings figured this out, they were discovering time and causality at the same time. In other words, they were realizing that "reality [...] could be bargained with." Behaving well now can bring future rewards—something that encourages people to control their impulses (collectively, to organize society) in hopes of better things tomorrow.

Peterson looks at religious practice as a psychologist, not a theologian. So he looks for evolutionary or cultural reasons why a practice, like sacrifice, might have taken hold and endured. In this view, sacrifice is basically a tradeoff that gives something up now in hopes of better things in the future. People were figuring out how to manage time and circumstances in more advantageous ways. Notably, this view of sacrifice doesn't need God in the picture.

So, Peterson continues, our human ancestors personified fate as a being that can be bargained with. And this worked! It was like seeing the future as a "judgmental father." People first had to figure out what and how much to sacrifice in order to bring about the best possible future. This is reflected in the story of Cain and Abel, which comes right after the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden. Unlike their parents, Cain and Abel live their whole lives having to work and sacrifice. God accepts Abel's sacrifices, but He is displeased with Cain's (though the Bible doesn't say exactly why).

In Peterson's view, once people figured out the mechanism of sacrifice, then they personified the force they were bargaining with, and that's how the idea of God came about. He reads the Cain and Abel story in Genesis in this light—as Cain and Able trying to figure out how best to sacrifice to God in order to get the response they want from Him.

Peterson says it's difficult to understand how two major human achievements—delayed gratification and building a stable society—emerged around the same time. However, he suggests a theory. Early on, kills produced lots of excess meat, which led to forming the idea of "saving for later." "Saving for later" eventually led to the idea of storing and sharing excess food to benefit neighbors and build one's reputation—the social contract. Thus, sharing isn't simply giving up something you want, but initiating a trade. Establishing the idea of generosity, in turn, helped lay the groundwork for morality.

Peterson also looks at the idea of sacrifice and the emergence of society from an evolutionary historical perspective. He suggests that early people discovered that saving up wasn't just personally prudent, but a way of building beneficial relationships with neighbors, which in turn led to the emergence of ethics. (Recall how Peterson views religion as sort of an overlay that explains the "why" of ethical behavior.)

Putting all this in evolutionary terms, Peterson suggests that maybe the newly discovered ideas of delay and exchange were conveyed metaphorically through myths and rituals, *"as if"* there were a divine figure in the sky. It was understood that if you sacrificed and shared, life would tend to go well for you—or God would be pleased with you. This was basically a way of noticing, and articulating more clearly over time, that those who delay gratification tend to be successful.

Peterson connects these emerging social behaviors to emerging religious practices. Basically, he claims, the idea of God was invented as a way of explaining why humans should behave ethically, thus helping motivate people to do so.

Over time, people noticed that sometimes life seems to demand huge sacrifices—even what human beings love most. This reflects the truism that sometimes life doesn't go well. And sometimes life doesn't go well because human values have gotten off kilter and need to be reexamined. To get back on track, sometimes it's even necessary to let go of what you love most. The story of the patriarch Abraham's near-sacrifice of his beloved son, Isaac, illustrates this.

People easily noticed that life doesn't fit neatly into a mechanistic structure of sacrificing and therefore benefiting. Humans needed to come up with an explanation for why life seems to go terribly wrong sometimes. Peterson reads the Genesis story of Abraham being asked to sacrifice Isaac (and being reprieved at the last moment) as a way of grappling with this disturbing reality.

We also see it in Christ offering himself on the cross to God and for the world—"the archetypal story of the man who gives his all for the sake of the better." At the same time, God sacrifices His son. Peterson says that because this is a story of both self-sacrifice and sacrifice of a child, it is "a story at the limit"—nothing can be imagined beyond it.

Unsurprisingly, Peterson also reads the story of Christ's self-sacrifice (and God the Father willingly giving up His Son) in the same way—a story of the greatest imaginable sacrifice to fix the way the whole world has gone awry.

Everyone knows that life is filled with suffering, and that sacrifice can alleviate suffering. So, the person who wants to attain the greatest good possible will sacrifice everything—"will forego expediency"—to find it. While the example of Christ is best known, Peterson says there are others—like Socrates. When Socrates was put on trial for crimes against the state, he couldn't stomach defending himself or running away, so he began to think about his trial differently. Accepting his fate helped him to face death with less fear and even see it as a blessing. He "rejected expediency" in favor of pursuing what's meaningful. Peterson suggests that Socrates can teach us to live by our conscience. This allows a person to live nobly and with integrity even when threatened with suffering and death.

Having established the idea that sacrifice can counter suffering, Peterson digs deeper into the idea of giving up what seems easy or desirable in pursuit of something greater. For example, while the Greek philosopher Socrates (470–399 B.C.E.) could have sought an easier out from the trial he was facing, he rejected that path and sought deeper meaning instead (choosing to die with integrity). Socrates models what it looks like to place meaning above ease or pleasure, even when doing so means accepting suffering.

But tragedy isn't the only reason human beings suffer; there's also the problem of evil. Peterson returns to the Genesis narrative. He explains that once humans understood that they were vulnerable—that they could suffer pain—they also came to understand how to cause pain in other people. In the story of Cain and Abel, Cain becomes understandably bitter when God rejects his sacrifice. When God places the blame for Cain's suffering squarely on Cain himself, Cain kills his own brother Abel—to spite God, humanity, and existence as a whole. Life on Earth gets exponentially worse from there.

Peterson acknowledges that it's one thing to grapple with suffering, but another to confront evil that's clearly undeserved. He looks again to the Bible to understand how humans have tried to make sense of this problem over millennia. He reads Cain's murder of his brother Abel as an example of reacting to seemingly arbitrary suffering with bitterness or, worse, with revenge, lashing out at others to make them suffer, too.

Peterson has observed that human beings are generally tough enough to take on all sorts of tragedy, but that human evil compounds the world's misery. Thus, life's central problem isn't just how to sacrifice in order to reduce suffering, but how to reduce evil—"the conscious and voluntary and vengeful source of the worst suffering." In the Cain and Abel story, Abel couldn't overcome evil, leaving him an incomplete hero. It took many more thousands of years for humans to solve the problem of evil.

Peterson defines evil as suffering that's intentionally and vengefully inflicted on others. When he says that Abel couldn't overcome evil (being murdered by his brother Cain), he means that Abel was defeated by his suffering. He implies that while this made Abel an "incomplete hero," a complete hero was still to come who would be capable of defeating suffering.

This happens in the story of Jesus. Peterson sees Jesus's temptation in the wilderness as a restatement of the story of Cain. Cain, in his jealous resentment, "enters the desert wilderness of his own mind." To get what he thinks he deserves, Cain decides to use Evil instead. But Christ does things differently. He, too, journeys to Hell in the wilderness. Peterson suggests that anyone who's lived through the 20th century can do the same. Peterson says it's here that the idea of Christ taking on humanity's sins as His own starts to make sense. When Christ meets Satan in the wilderness, He "determines to take personal responsibility for the full depth of human depravity." He is willing to face the very worst of human nature and evil.

Peterson views Jesus, in the New Testament gospels, as Abel's greater counterpart in that He was a hero capable of overcoming evil. Moreover, he sees Jesus as accomplishing what Cain, in his jealous rage, could not. When Cain suffered, he responded by inflicting suffering on someone else. But when Jesus suffered at Satan's hands in the desert, he responded not only by resisting evil, but by taking responsibility for all *evil. Reprising a point he's made before, Peterson suggests that nobody who's witnessed the past century's atrocities should have trouble acknowledging the reality of evil.*

Satan refuses to sacrifice; he is all arrogance, cruelty, and hatred, the archetype of Evil. In Christ, he encounters the archetype of Good. He tempts Christ, who is fasting, to turn stones into bread. But Christ refuses to take the expedient path, aiming at a better way of Being instead—one that would ultimately solve the problem of hunger altogether. Through the rest of the gospels, Christ Himself is a source of sustenance. Peterson sees this as a way of suggesting that those who live as Christ does will no longer hunger.

Recall that for Peterson, sacrifice means giving up something good for the sake of better in the future. He sees Satan as the opposite—selfishly demanding everything now. In contrast, Christ gives up what he could rightfully demand. Peterson doesn't really expand on what he means by Christ Himself being the source of sustenance. In the Bible, Jesus calls Himself "the bread of life." Peterson implies this is a metaphor for living the way Christ lived—that is, willing to sacrifice for the sake of Being instead of choosing evil.

Next, Satan tempts Christ by telling him to throw Himself off a cliff, essentially treating God as a safety net or magic trick to rescue him. Jesus responds by saying, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." In this Peterson sees Christ's refusal to cede responsibility for His own life, or to solve the problems of mortal vulnerability for Himself alone.

It's worth noting that Peterson's reading of Christ's temptations by Satan doesn't line up with the way Christians have traditionally interpreted them—he's very much reading them in light of his own ideas about Being and personal responsibility. That is, he ultimately sees Christ as a model for what humanity can do if they try, not as a human and divine Savior accomplishing something humanity cannot do for themselves.

In the third and last temptation, Christ is offered power over all the world's kingdoms. Peterson interprets Christ's refusal as the belief that, to realize the Kingdom of God on Earth, a person must reject all immediate gratification and all temptation to evil.

Again, Peterson reads Christ's resistance of Satan's temptation in fairly human terms—as something human beings can replicate if they make the effort. For him, Christ is an example of rejecting the easy path and embracing suffering as a way of overcoming evil.

Carl Jung believed that Europeans turned to science after deciding that Christianity had failed to account for human suffering. Peterson says this doesn't mean that Christianity was a failure—after all, it elevated and affirmed the dignity of the individual soul. To do this, Jung said, Christianity had to be deeply unworldly—to deny that earthly power is a sign of God's favor, and hence that salvation could not be earned. Peterson sees this dignifying of the soul as a miraculous change within history, one that led to the downfall of slavery-based societies. In fact, it's hard to emphasize just how radical this viewpoint was. It was so radical that, today, we tend to look at the desire to enslave as requiring explanation—the opposite of most of human history.

Peterson's interpretations of Christian beliefs are heavily shaped by Carl Jung, and he makes that influence explicit here. His explanations are sometimes challenging to follow. Peterson traces Jung's critique of Christianity: that it takes a counter-intuitive view of the world, i.e. that earthly success is not proof of God's favor, that in fact nobody can earn God's favor; God freely gives it. Peterson implies that this perspective fails to make sense of why people suffer. But the advantage of this perspective is that it uplifts the value of the individual, to a degree that has transformed societies over time.

Though Peterson says Christianity has its problems, it's undeniable that the society Christianity produced was far less barbaric than its pagan predecessors. Because it was so successful in granting dignity and rights to the lowly and oppressed, however, the problems it solved tended to drop from people's view. Then, Western consciousness began to focus instead on the problems that remained, like the problem of material suffering.

Peterson argues that though Christianity isn't perfect (and recall that he doesn't really identify as a Christian—he sees it more as a shaper of Western society), it had a transformative effect on societies, especially human rights—to an extent that people increasingly had the freedom to focus on other problems, like the difficulty of eradicating poverty.

Nietzsche was one of the most passionate critics of Christianity. His first main criticism was that Christianity's sense of truth undermines itself. That is, Christianity has developed a strong sense of moral and narrative truth, but has not yet figured out how to understand this in terms of objective truth. In other words, now that post-Enlightenment Western Europe understood truth differently, Christianity's main doctrines no longer seemed credible.

Peterson turns to another critic of Christianity. He says that Nietzsche basically argued that Christian beliefs can't withstand post-Enlightenment views of reality. In other words, Christianity hasn't figured out how to interpret its foundational stories in light of modern views of what is true.

Nietzsche's second critique was more devastating, though. He rejected Christianity's teaching that Christ's sacrifice alone redeems humanity. In his mind, this meant that redeemed individuals no longer had a real moral obligation. He especially blamed the Apostle Paul and the later Protestant Reformers for developing this teaching. He believed it watered down the idea of *imitating* Christ and was basically an excuse to not do what Jesus taught. He also believed that these core teachings downgraded the significance of earthly life, inclined people to accept the status quo, and allowed believers to excuse themselves from any real moral burden. Dostoevsky develops this position in the story of the Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Nietzsche's bigger critique was specifically with the Christian doctrine of Christ's atonement. He objected to the atonement because he thought it let people off the hook for their wrongdoing. Protestants especially have emphasized that human beings can't be righteous like Christ was, which is why He had to die for human sin. Nietzsche didn't buy this—in his eyes, it was just an excuse for keeping people weak and dependent and not trying to improve themselves. Peterson sees Dostoevsky taking a similar line is his famous novel.

Both Nietzsche and Dostoevsky believed that Christian dogma served an important purpose: an individual needs to be disciplined and constrained in order to develop the ability to act freely. It's like the way a parent disciplines a child so that the child can mature. Nietzsche believed that the Church's dogma led to the development of a spirit of truth that ended up undermining the Church itself. But that doesn't mean the dogmatic structure, or "unfreedom," is unnecessary. It does mean that—at least to the Western mind—dogma is now dead. Critically, it also means that what remains to Western society is something even more dead: nihilism, "as well as an equally dangerous susceptibility to new, totalizing, utopian ideas," such as Communism and Fascism.

Despite their critiques of traditional Christian teachings, both Nietzsche and Dostoevsky found utility in dogma as a means of training people to live well. Readers might hear an echo of Peterson's own thought here. Ultimately, Nietzsche went so far as to teach that dogma in and of itself is neither truthful nor useful. But Peterson points out that something needs to take Christianity's place in Western society, and nihilism, or meaninglessness, is even worse. In his opinion, people have kept trying to impose totalitarian philosophies in Christianity's place, and as he will discuss later, these have done grave harm.

Nietzsche thought that after God's death, people would need to invent new values. But Peterson says this is a weak spot in Nietzsche's thinking, because people can't just impose new values on their souls—they cannot simply order themselves to act a certain way. We have to struggle with our individual natures before we can act according to any values, because we aren't just bare intellects. We have to figure out who we really are before we figure out who we can become.

"God's death" refers here to the modern belief that religious values no longer work. Peterson doesn't necessarily disagree. But he suggests that the idea of inventing new values doesn't account for human nature. People can't just decide *to believe something, in other words.*

Three centuries before Nietzsche, the French philosopher Descartes sought to take his doubt seriously. He decided that "I" (as in "I think, therefore I am") was the one thing he could be sure about. But Peterson says that people had been thinking about "I" long before—all the way back to the ancient Mesopotamians and Egyptians. Descartes just "secularized" the idea into the modern self. This concept is still difficult to define today. It's actually easier to understand the self as the entity that brought about Nazi concentration camps and the Soviet gulags. But in looking for the opposite of this evil entity, even rationalists have to conclude, Peterson says, that there's something godlike about the self. Unlike animals, the human self can form and reject ideas, and keep going when those ideas die.

Peterson demonstrates that humans have been thinking about human nature long before there was a field of modern philosophy. It's just that Descartes was the first to try to conceptualize the "self" outside of a religious framework. Peterson suggests that thinkers haven't really progressed too far beyond Descartes, either. Whatever the self is, it's proven itself to be capable of both terrible evil and enduring good.

An idea is different from a fact. Facts aren't alive, but ideas are—they grip people and demand expression in the world. An idea is aiming for something. It's "a personality" that essentially overtakes a person. Sometimes a person would even rather die than let an idea die, though Peterson says this is usually a bad idea. But when something isn't going right, then fundamental convictions have to die, or be sacrificed, in order to make the future better. But what is the best way to do this?

Here Peterson explains that ideas are something that human beings create and therefore a big part of what makes us human. They're not just abstract realities, but somehow an expression of who we are. He further implies that this is why it's so difficult when people have to sacrifice ideas that aren't working for them.

Peterson once went down a similar road as Descartes. He was filled with doubts and thought that Christianity was wishful thinking. He decided that socialism didn't fix the problems it purported to solve. But he was tormented by the Cold War, wondering if both sides were just equally corrupt. And how had fascism and communism proven to be even more destructive than the old beliefs they claimed to replace? But finally, thinking about the torment of prisoners in Auschwitz concentration camp led Peterson to conclude that some actions—especially those that dehumanize others—are objectively wrong. Suffering was the one thing he couldn't doubt. Every human being has the capacity to torment another. If such behavior is not good, then there must be an opposite—and that opposite "good" must be whatever stops evil from happening.

Peterson identifies with Descartes' questions about what we can know for sure about the world. But he returns to the events that were formative for him, like the inexplicable hostilities of the twentieth century. Clearly, he thought, these ideologies, which all purported to be more modern and humane, have done more harm than good over the long run. This led him to believe that the human capacity for evil is indisputable. But he came to the conclusion that if this is the case, then evil must have an opposite.

From this conclusion, Peterson drew his basic moral beliefs: "Aim up. Pay attention. Fix what you can fix." Also be humble, be aware of your own capacity for evil, and never lie. And if "good" is the alleviation of unnecessary pain and suffering, then make that the chief goal of life, the top of one's "moral hierarchy." Put in terms of archetypes, it's the choice between acting out the ideas, or the personality, of either Christ or of Satan.

This long digression provides the background to many of the "rules" Peterson expounds in this book. It basically rests on the belief that both good and evil are real, that human beings are capable of both, and that the point of life is to strive for good as much as one can. Even though he doesn't uphold traditional religious doctrines, he interprets them, especially Christian doctrines, as archetypes of good and evil.

Expedience is focused on short-term gains. Its opposite is meaning. If someone's value structure is aimed at making Being better, then meaning is revealed which will be "the antidote for chaos and suffering," and it will make everything better. The more you act according to such a value structure, the more you pile up meaning in your life. And the more you'll notice ways you can act to make Being better, in small, everyday ways. This isn't the same thing as happiness. It's more like taking responsibility for the evils of history and the potential evil of your own existence. Meaning is the ultimate balance between chaos and order. So, "do what is meaningful, not what is expedient."

Peterson suggests that striving for what makes us happy in the short term (like Satan) is ultimately not meaningful. On the other hand, putting off short-term gain for the sake of long-term good yields meaning, and that's what overcomes evil and improves Being. The more a person does this, the more meaning they'll find. Notice that meaning, then, is different from happiness in Peterson's view. He would say that meaning is more honest about one's own capacity for evil and the world's pain than a more shallow, self-regarding happiness can be. Meaning is what people attain when they navigate between chaos and order.

RULE 8: TELL THE TRUTH—OR, AT LEAST, DON'T LIE

Peterson recalls encountering mentally ill people while training as a clinical psychologist. One day, a vulnerable schizophrenic patient approached him and his fellow students and wanted to join the group. Not wanting to hurt her, the students didn't know what to say. Peterson quickly realized that they had basically two options: lie in a way that would save face, or tell the truth. So, he explained the situation to the patient as straightforwardly as he could. This was harsher than a lie, because it highlighted the status difference between the students and the patient. But he knew a lie could have unintended consequences. When he told the patient the truth, she looked hurt at first. But then she accepted it, and things were okay.

Peterson opens this chapter with another personal story, specifically a scenario in which lying was an appealing option. This particular story is broadly relatable because many people have been in a situation where they fudged the truth out of a desire not to hurt someone. In this story, Peterson's choice to tell the truth to the psychiatric patient might seem cruel. But Peterson implies here that lying to the patient would have been crueler in the long run—an insight he'll build on in the coming chapter.

During his clinical training, Peterson became aware that he often said untrue things. Sometimes this was because he wanted to win arguments or impress people. So, Peterson started to practice "telling the truth—or, at least, not lying." He came to discover that telling the truth often helped him figure out what to do in difficult situations, like with the schizophrenic patient.

Here, Peterson admits that he understands the impulse to tell lies. Although these examples aren't as relatively benign as not wanting to hurt the patient's feelings, they also illustrate that a person can have many motivations for withholding the truth—like simply wanting to be right or to look good. But Peterson discovered that striving to be truthful is not only right, but a helpful path forward in sticky situations.

Peterson has also dealt with paranoid patients. Such patients are challenging because they are hyper-alert, attend to nonverbal cues, and easily misinterpret those cues. Because of this alertness, they also detect falsehood easily—so it's important to tell such patients the truth if you hope to gain their trust. This was true even with a patient who had bloodthirsty fantasies. He grew to trust Peterson because Peterson was honest with him when the patient's fantasies alarmed him. Without Peterson's willingness to listen and respond honestly, the patient would never have trusted him.

Peterson uses the extreme example of paranoid patients to suggest that telling the truth is pivotal if you want to gain anyone's trust. Even if it might seem safer to fib to someone like this, Peterson hints that this is another situation where the pursuit of meaning (building a trusting relationship) is better than expedience (avoiding short-term conflict).

Peterson says you can use words to manipulate the world into getting what you want. When you live like this, you are "possessed by some ill-formed desire," and you say and do everything that appears as though it will bring about that desire. Living life according to such a (mis)perception is based on two premises: the first is that what you currently know is sufficient to determine what will be good in the future. The second is that "reality would be unbearable if left to its own devices." The first premise isn't justified, because the thing you're aiming at might not be worth it. And the second premise is worse, because it assumes that reality is intolerable and that it can be successfully manipulated. Thinking like this is arrogant, because it assumes that what you know is all you *need* to know.

Here, Peterson suggests that the way we use words depends on what our goals are. If you are obsessed with a goal as your ultimate purpose, then you might convince yourself that telling lies is worth it. The problem is that, first, you're assuming your goal is legitimate and, secondly, that it's up to you to manipulate reality to attain that goal. Peterson suggests that these are arrogant and ultimately self-sabotaging ways of thinking about reality. Essentially, they assume that you are the authority on what's real, and that this justifies twisting the truth any way you like.

When someone shapes their life around a naïve goal, that goal eventually gets distorted into what Peterson calls a life-lie. The same thing happens to ideologues. They shape their entire lives around an oversimplified view that's supposed to explain everything, and they view all their experiences in light of that belief.

A "life-lie" is basically a goal that a person has mistakenly organized their life around, determining the rest of their worldview in the process. Peterson argues that on a bigger scale, this is basically what ideologies are—life-distorting (and potentially society-distorting) worldviews.

Peterson says there is another problem with "life-lies" when they are based on avoidance. For example, conflict-avoidant people might go through life trying to be invisible, but this means they're suppressing themselves and their potential. It also means that you not only hide from others, but from yourself, too. When you avoid boldly exploring new situations, you don't gather new information. From a biological perspective, this means that parts of your brain literally don't develop. Thus, as a person, you are incomplete.

A life-lie isn't necessarily a goal to dominate others. Someone who hides from conflict and stifles their own potential is being just as untruthful with themselves—which hurts others, too. Here, Peterson suggests that each individual owes it to themselves to develop as fully as possible for their own and others' benefit.

On the other hand, if you practice saying no to people when it needs to be said, you gradually become someone who *can* say no. The opposite is true when you always say yes—after a certain point, "yes" is the only thing you know how to say. Peterson says this is exactly how ordinary people get transformed into guards in gulags. More broadly, the more you say untrue things, the more you weaken your character. Then, when adversity hits you and there's nowhere left to hide, you'll end up doing terrible things.

Peterson expands on the idea of a conflict-avoidant person who hates saying no. It might seem harmless to tell people what they want to hear in the short term, but in the long term, it's incredibly dangerous. In time, you will be unable to resist things you should say "no" to (or yes, as the case may be). So, telling the truth is an essential skill for training oneself for adversity.

Peterson says this isn't vision—it's actually willful blindness, a refusal to know something you *could* know. While small changes sometimes help a person move forward in life, it's sometimes the case that a person's whole "hierarchy of values is faulty." It's chaotic to change one's values, but sometimes, error is serious enough that it's necessary to embrace such chaos—to sacrifice. Accepting the truth necessarily means sacrificing. So, if you've suppressed the truth for a long time, Peterson warns, "then you've run up a dangerously large sacrificial debt."

When you lie to yourself repeatedly, you are basically refusing to learn. If you do this enough, you might reach a point where you discover that your moral code has been totally corrupted, and you have to embrace the chaos—the pain—of sacrifice in order to change your way of living and speaking. Clearly, then, it's better to learn to tell the truth in both small things and large as you go.

Brilliant people tend to be prideful and disregard error—a "mode of Being" that Peterson follows Søren Kierkegaard in calling "inauthentic." An inauthentic person keeps acting in ways his experience has proved to be ineffective. Instead of changing his ways, he concludes that the world is unfair and it's somebody else's fault. This mindset is "inauthentic," and it can lead to brutality toward others.

Though Peterson has been talking about people who tend to be timid and nonconfrontational, he shows that more aggressive people can also wreak havoc with lies. If someone refuses to face their mistakes, they'll pin the blame for the fallout on anyone else.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote in *The Gulag Archipelago* that there was a direct relationship between the Soviet system of prison camps and the ability of Soviet citizens to deny that they were being oppressed by the Soviet state. Denial ultimately helped Stalin commit his crimes. When Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl wrote *Man's Search for Meaning*, he agreed with Solzhenitsyn that "deceitful, inauthentic individual existence is the precursor to social totalitarianism." In essence, these and other thinkers concluded that "lies warp the structure of Being." Lies corrupt both individuals and the state, and these forms of corruption are mutually reinforcing.

Turning again to Solzhenitsyn, Peterson shows how small, individual lies can help create and sustain large-scale systems of brutality; Viktor Frankl found basically the same thing. While this might appear far-fetched at first, Peterson means that when people accustom themselves to believing and perpetuating lies in small, everyday circumstances, they'll train themselves to accept and excuse lies on a much more catastrophic scale.

Even lives lived well can become warped by things beyond a person's control, like catastrophic illness. But such things become unbearable and tragic when a sufferer's family adds fighting and deceit to the situation. Yet with mutual honesty, acceptance, and support, families can come through terrible crises with stronger character and stronger connections.

Peterson returns to a smaller scale here to suggest that while suffering occurs for all sorts of reasons, people have a knack for making it even more painful through refusal to be honest with each other. He suggests that people are especially susceptible to telling lies at such times, which is perhaps why it's so important to develop a habit of telling the truth.

Rationality is subject to the temptation of absolutism. The poet Milton personified the spirit of reason in the character of the angel Lucifer. Peterson says this makes sense because reason "lives" in each of us and is our highest faculty. Yet reason falls in love with and worships the things it creates. So, Lucifer is the spirit of totalitarianism. Such a spirit claims that nothing outside of itself needs to exist, that nothing else needs to be learned, and most of all, that it's not necessary for an individual to confront Being.

It's a bit hard to follow Peterson's thinking here, but he means that even a worldview that prizes rational thinking can become totalitarian, insisting that nobody dare question it. In fact, he suggests that reason has a special susceptibility to this, because it makes people believe they're smart enough to discover the whole truth and to impose that knowledge on everyone else.

Peterson says that what saves a person is their willingness to learn from what they don't know. But the totalitarian says you must have faith in what you already know and rely on that alone. Such a stance envisions no possibility of a person changing, and it doesn't challenge a person to take responsibility for Being.

Here, Peterson is talking about humility, which he sees as key to maturity. A totalitarian point of view is, by its nature, incapable of humility. It tells people what they need to know and doesn't encourage them to seek truth on their own.

Peterson says that refusal of redemption out of pride is Hell. And those who've lied enough already live in Hell. Deceit fills people with resentment and the desire for vengeance. From there, deceit leads to terrible suffering like that caused by Hitler, Stalin, and Mao, and it ultimately threatens civilization itself.

Peterson speaks of Hell metaphorically, as the result of stubborn pride that drives people to terrible actions. Totalitarians like Hitler, Stalin, and Mao are examples of such pride, because their twisted goals governed everything they did and imposed on others, causing horrendous suffering.

What happens, Peterson asks, if we decide to stop lying? And what would it mean to do that? Peterson reminds readers that human beings are limited in their knowledge and have to set a direction for the future somehow. So, how should people do that without becoming totalitarian in their thinking? Peterson suggests that a degree of reliance on tradition can help. In many cases, it makes sense to do what people have always done, like go to school, work, and have a family. But no matter how traditional your target is, you should aim at it with open eyes, knowing that you might be wrong and that there's much you don't know.

Peterson returns to the practical. He suggests that lies are connected with our natural desire to know what's going to happen in the future. Because of that uncertainty, it's easy to latch onto falsehood and try to organize one's life around it. This is easier than admitting to ourselves that we can't control the future. Yet admitting this doesn't mean leaving ourselves helpless. Peterson suggests that's what tradition is for: giving us a solid starting-place. And using tradition as a guide isn't the same thing as never critiquing tradition.

Peterson says it's our responsibility to see what's before our eyes and learn from that, even when it's terrible. That's how individuals and societies grow: "you should never sacrifice what you could be for what you are." It's difficult, though—learning is like a death. But if you can accept that death, there's the possibility of rebirth.

Telling the truth means keeping one's eyes open. This is the key to learning and moving forward in life, both individually and collectively. It isn't easy because it means being willing to give things up and face chaos.

So, Peterson says, set an ambition—preferably one that has to do with character rather than status or power—and start moving toward it, even if you're uncertain. Be watchful and truthful. If you pay attention to how you speak, you will develop a discomfort with yourself when you don't speak truthfully. As you move forward in this way, you'll learn and grow, even if that means changing your goal as you go.

The way to navigate chaos, Peterson upholds, is to set a goal while keeping your eyes open—and practicing telling the truth as you go. If you form this habit, you'll become uncomfortable with lies. Telling the truth this way will help you know when you have to adjust course, instead of sticking to a goal that comes to dominate your life, requiring you to adjust around it.

Peterson asks the reader to imagine going to engineering school, because that was what your parents wanted. But because you're working against what you really want, you're not motivated or successful, no matter how hard you try to stay disciplined: "Your soul will reject the tyranny of your will." You might not have the courage to face the necessary conflict to free yourself from the situation. There's an element here of not wanting to give up a childish view of the world, trusting that someone knows you better than you know yourself. But, eventually, you drop out and learn to live with your own mistakes. Free of your parents' vision, you start developing your own. And that maturity means that, someday, you'll be able to support your parents, too. But you couldn't get there without being willing to face conflict.

Peterson gives an example of someone who lies to themselves for the sake of not offending their parents. But in the long run, this backfires because you're trying to force yourself to be something that isn't honest. In a situation like this, it's necessary to face conflict, even though it's very painful and requires telling truths that might temporarily hurt you and your relationships. But it's only by doing this that you can start figuring out a new goal—one that reflects the truth about yourself—and start progressing toward it.

Living according to the truth means accepting and dealing with conflict—that is part of Being. As you do that, you'll gradually mature and become more responsible and wiser in your decisions. You'll better understand what's important and walk steadily toward "the good." If you'd blindly insisted from the beginning that you were absolutely right, you could never have realized that good.

So, Peterson argues, conflict is a key part of truth-telling; it can't be avoided in a life devoted to telling the truth. And such conflict helps you refine your understanding of what's good and how to pursue it. You can't do that, he suggests, if you lie to yourself and refuse to admit mistakes.

Every person needs a goal, a purpose, Peterson explains. It "limit[s] chaos" and helps make sense of a person's life. But all such goals must also be aimed at a larger "meta-goal," which Peterson sums up as "live in truth." Such a meta-goal is both pragmatic and deeply courageous. Though "life is suffering," as all major religions contend, no form of vulnerability—no social or bodily suffering—is hellish in the way that totalitarianism is. And totalitarianism isn't possible without lies. And big lies start with small, seemingly harmless deceptions.

Peterson sees totalitarianism—which admits no truth outside of itself—as the worst form of suffering. Since totalitarianism is created and upheld by lies, and people become accustomed to lies in the most everyday, small-scale ways, it's vital for people to tell the truth as they move through daily life. All the goals of a person's life must be oriented toward this goal of telling the truth no matter what.

But it's necessary to truthfully face reality. That's because "things fall apart," and it's necessary to make changes rather than pretending things are all right. Inaction and deceit just hasten the falling apart. We can't see the broader consequences of a lie, but it's connected to everything else. And the biggest lies are actually made up of countless small ones. The apparent harmlessness of lies conceals how dangerous they are. Eventually, you'll believe your own lies, and when you crash into stubborn reality, you'll blame Being for it instead of yourself. You'll become bitter and vengeful. On the other hand, the truth keeps your soul from becoming bitter and makes you strong enough to weather life's hardships. So, "tell the truth. Or, at least, don't lie."

Part of telling the truth, Peterson insists, means recognizing when things aren't okay. It might seem harmless to lie to yourself at first, but that's because you're unable to see the broader consequences; and when you can no longer avoid those consequences, you'll become bitter. Telling the truth on a day-to-day basis is much harder in the short term because it doesn't shield you from conflict and suffering. Yet it's only by telling the truth that you build a strong enough character to cope with suffering. So telling the truth, or at least refusing to lie, is an indispensable part of building character.

RULE 9: ASSUME THAT THE PERSON YOU ARE LISTENING TO MIGHT KNOW SOMETHING YOU DON'T

Psychotherapy is a conversation. If you listen, you'll learn surprising things. In his clinical practice, Peterson sometimes spends more time talking or more time listening, depending on the patient. Some of these people have nobody else in the world to talk to. Peterson says it is remarkable how many people really know nothing about themselves and are "desperately waiting for a story about" themselves so that life will make sense.

Peterson returns to his expertise (psychology), describing his work as a sort of dialogue. For Peterson, this dialogue is a key to self-knowledge, which means that lonely people often lack a way to grow in their self-knowledge. Constructing a "story" about themselves helps them gain control of life.

Peterson says this is why many forms of psychotherapy are helpful. Some people's psyches are so chaotic that when they adopt "any reasonably orderly system of interpretation," their lives get better. Whether the structure is Freudian, Jungian, or something else, at least there is *something* to help pull someone's life together.

With this overarching goal for psychology in mind, Peterson can see value in many different approaches—the key is establishing order in one's life, and the method for getting there is secondary.

Peterson points out that our memory of the past is highly selective. It depends on how much attention we're paying at a given moment, and how we categorize our experiences. But our picture of the past is never comprehensive, because we simply do not know enough, and we are not objective. These realities cause problems in therapy, when inexpert therapists give hints and make inferences about a patient's past, forcing facts to fit a theory. This can cause collateral damage. But ultimately, memory isn't about describing the objective past. It's a tool "to stop the same damn thing from happening over and over."

Part of therapy is making sense of one's past. This isn't a simple process, because nobody sees their past objectively—and Peterson points out that therapists sometimes make things worse by imposing an ill-fitting framework on a patient's experiences. In the end, Peterson suggests, therapy isn't about finding an objective answer, but about figuring out how to make sense of someone's past in such a way that they can move forward.

This is why, when Peterson is dealing with a difficult client whose memories seem ambiguous, he often decides to simply listen. Often, this means that a patient leaves without all their questions answered. But it also means that they leave without Peterson imposing an ideology on them.

Peterson suggests that it's better to leave questions unanswered than to squeeze someone's story into a framework that might not be appropriate or true to someone's experience.

People need to talk through their problems, because that's how they think: they imagine little fictional versions of themselves and watch what happens to them. True thinking is actually very difficult, because most of what we regard as "thinking" is actually just self-criticism. Real thinking must be a dialogue. You have to both talk and listen to yourself at the same time—which is conflict. That means you have to learn to compromise with yourself, and even to let certain imagined versions of yourself die. Because all of this is so difficult, it's sometimes easier to collaborate with another person who can help you challenge internal voices.

Peterson expands on the idea that understanding one's past, indeed one's whole existence, isn't a straightforward matter: it's an imaginative process involving lots of trial and error. This is a form of conflict, which is very difficult to navigate alone and sometimes best handled in the company of someone who can help you separate what's useful from what isn't.

Freud thought that analysts shouldn't even look at their patients—that they should simply serve as an impassive crowd, so that a patient could freely speak. But Peterson prefers a more personal approach. He tries to clear his mind and aim his motivations at what's best for his patient, while being aware that he might need to adjust his understanding. Then he listens and lets his patients see his expression and the effects of their words on him, which lets them respond in turn. Having even one person truly listen and then tell you the truth about what they think (which isn't the same as that person telling you what they think the truth *is*) can be very powerful.

Peterson sees give and take as vital for a productive patient-therapist relationship. Unsurprisingly, being truthful is key to this process—if you withhold your thoughts from a patient (or other conversation partner), he suggests, you risk destroying the trust between you. Asserting your interpretation of the truth on someone else can be similarly harmful. But being willing to listen and honestly respond to what you hear can go a long way to helping a troubled person sort through their experiences.

When Peterson talks with clients, he tries to summarize what they've said to him and ask them if he's understood them properly. One of the advantages of this is, obviously, genuinely understanding what the other person has said. But, secondly, it benefits the other person, too: it helps them condense what they've said into a useful memory. It then becomes a different memory, but a helpfully distilled one—"the moral of the story." That, Peterson says, is the whole purpose of memory.

When Peterson says that arriving at a "moral of the story" is memory's whole purpose, he doesn't mean that the truth of a memory isn't important, but that its precise accuracy is less important than the function it ultimately serves—to help someone make sense of their life's story, moving from chaos to order.

There are types of conversation that aren't nearly as useful, however. Sometimes, the speaker is just trying to assert their dominance and place in the group hierarchy. Similarly, sometimes one person is just trying to win a debate, often by denigrating others' viewpoints and asserting their own (often oversimplified) ideology. Neither of these is a true listening conversation.

Just because conversation can be valuable, however, doesn't mean that all forms of it are helpful. Here, Peterson gives some familiar examples of ways that people fail to listen to others and thereby ruin the opportunity for a real conversation.

Peterson repeats that conversation is how people organize their minds. If they can't do this, "they lose their minds." What's more, when others sympathetically listen, the speaker knows that they are worthwhile and valued. Peterson suggests that, generally speaking, this poses a problem in conversations between men and women. Men often want to solve problems quickly and efficiently, and so they don't listen patiently enough when women try to articulate a problem through conversation.

Peterson presents conversation as vital to mental health, not only because it helps people organize their chaotic thoughts, but because it helps them know where they stand with others. He also suggests that, generally speaking, men and women process conversation differently, and that failing to understand that is a key instigator of conflict.

Peterson identifies a couple other types of conversation, like lecturing (which, when done well, actually involves careful attention to an audience's nonverbal cues) and demonstrations of wit (which occur less readily the higher one climbs up the educational and social ladder). But the final type Peterson wants to discuss—itself akin to listening—is "a form of mutual exploration." This type of conversation demands "true reciprocity" among all parties, a chance for everyone to speak, and a desire to solve a problem together, instead of individuals insisting on their views. Peterson calls such conversation "philosophy, the highest form of thought."

From his years of experience as a psychologist, Peterson is used to observing social dynamics. For example, he notes that higher on the social ladder, people are often less inclined to engage in humorous battles of wit than their working-class counterparts might enjoy doing. But perhaps the rarest form of conversation is the type that's a shared search for truth, or philosophical discussion. This doesn't necessarily mean a rarefied, academic discussion, but any conversation in which people put their egos second to solving a matter of shared concern.

Every other type of conversation supports "some existing order." By contrast, a conversation of mutual exploration is willing to take a step into the unknown. It requires each participant to respect each other participant's experience. You need to assume that they've come by their positions honestly, and that they have something to teach you. Participants share the desire for truth, balancing together on the boundary between order and chaos. So, listen to those you're talking to, because wisdom consists in the ongoing search for knowledge. That means assuming that the person you're listening to knows something you don't.

Philosophical discussion ventures from the security of order into the potential disruption of chaos. It demands a lot from every participant—especially the willingness to really listen, to take others at their word, and be willing to learn something new. This is important because it places truth above short-term comfort and expedience (going back to both Rule 7 and Rule 8).

RULE 10: BE PRECISE IN YOUR SPEECH

When humans look at the world, we only perceive enough to allow us to get by. We live within the boundaries of this "enough." We unconsciously simplify the world in order to survive, and we mistake that simplified version for the world itself. But when we look at things, we don't actually see objects, but their "functional utility." That's why it's so important for us to be "precise in our aim." If we don't do that, we'll be overwhelmed by the world's complexity.

Earlier in the book, when discussing Rule 4 ("Compare yourself to who you were yesterday..."), Peterson touched on the human necessity of staying narrowly focused, lest the world get too overwhelming. We look at things in terms of their value to us, he believes, and —most of the time—this works well.

Our illusion that we perceive the world sufficiently only works as long as life goes according to plan. When things are going okay, we see accurately enough, and it's not worth it to examine things in greater detail. For instance, to be a good driver, you don't have to understand a car's inner mechanisms. But if the car quits working, the resulting uncertainty becomes a source of anxiety. When any kind of crisis occurs, that's when we realize "the staggeringly low-resolution quality of our vision."

Peterson continues to expand on the idea that most of the time, an illusory, limited view of the world works well enough. It's not worth the effort to understand the inner workings of things most of the time, unless something goes wrong. But when that happens, we're often shocked to recognize how little we really know and understand.

When life breaks down, you suddenly become aware of what you've safely ignored before. Chaos rushes in, and you realize what precise aim normally protects you from. For example, when there's been spousal infidelity, even the past is no longer what you once assumed it to be. When our vision proves insufficient, where can we look?

When life suddenly becomes chaotic, Peterson believes, your vision necessarily widens, and this throws a lot of uncertainty into life. In the example of spousal infidelity, for example, memories you took for granted might suddenly look different, throwing much into doubt.

When the world falls apart, we see chaos, like the biblical abyss out of which God originally created everything. It's "emergency," the sudden manifestation of something unknown. Our bodies react faster than our minds do, thanks to instincts honed over millions of years. First, you freeze, and then your body floods with adrenaline, and you draw on physical and mental resources that—if you're lucky—you've been saving up for just such an emergency. Before the known and familiar can reappear, you have to piece together the chaos.

In the Bible, Genesis describes the earth as "without form and void," or shapeless and empty, which is what life feels like when we're thrust into chaos. Peterson's discussion of the physical reaction to an emergency echoes his discussion of lobsters all the way back in Rule 1: humans who are secure in life are able to store up the bodily and mental resources to weather emergencies. If someone isn't lucky enough to do that, then they're likely to be plunged deeper into chaos instead of reasserting order.

Peterson says that, often, chaos wants to be noticed. It happens, for instance, when resentments pile up over a long time, but they're ignored, because talking about them would bring up painful emotions. And from moment to moment, that's easier, but meanwhile, the "dragon" keeps on getting bigger in the background. But one day, it shows up in a form that nobody can ignore and shakes the foundations of your life. Peterson says we should never "underestimate the destructive power of sins of omission." In reality, there are many things, especially in a marriage, that are worth short periods of miserable conflict for the sake of truth in the long run.

Peterson portrays chaos as a sentient force, like a dragon, that is trying to gain our attention. It's easier to keep pushing potentially chaotic elements into the background with the excuse that we'll deal with them later—but like he has argued many times throughout the book, Peterson suggests that long-term peace is threatened when we don't deal with problems as we go. This is what he means by "sins of omission"—things we push out of sight that ultimately come back to bite us later.

Peterson says that all a couple has to do to ensure that their marriage fails is "nothing"—just passively avoid confronting chaos. People avoid conflict because they don't want to face the "monster" lurking beneath it. It's more comfortable to refuse to think about things. But that doesn't mean they go away. You're just trading knowledge of your specific flaws for a longer, unspecific list of your potential flaws. But this isn't worth it, because when you know reality, you can master reality. Of course, facing reality might mean getting hurt—but that doesn't mean it'll be fatal.

Peterson explains that passivity is lethal to relationships, especially marriages. It's natural to not want to know about our problems—but vagueness, while maybe more comfortable in the short term, is much more dangerous than specific knowledge of our problems. In other words, you can't fix what you refuse to know about.

Specifying what a problem is makes the problem solvable. But to specify a problem, you have to admit that it exists. It opens you up to pain, but you'll learn from the pain, instead of drifting through life with a vague sense of failure. People also refuse to specify because if they don't define success, they won't have to define failure, either, and face the pain of it. But that doesn't work, because you'll still feel disappointed in Being. Sorting through the mess of the past, present, and future might nearly kill you, but it's necessary if you hope for rebirth. You have to "separate the particular details of [...] specific catastrophe from the intolerable general condition of Being." After all, everything didn't fall apart—specific beliefs and actions failed. How can these be fixed? Unless you look at them specifically, you'll never figure it out.

Here, Peterson further breaks down the problem of lack of specificity. Problems are obviously painful to deal with, so people avoid them. But avoiding your problems does nothing to make you happier. Short-term pain for the sake of improving Being in the long run, in Peterson's opinion, is far preferable to the vague, uneasy comfort of postponing conflict indefinitely. When you postpone conflict, it's also easier to fall back on an unspecified excuse like "everything fell apart"—but this keeps you from diagnosing the specific things that actually failed. And if you don't identify those, there's no hope of fixing them.

When things do fall apart, it's possible to reestablish order through our speech, if we speak precisely. Once you've sorted things into their proper places, you can set a new goal and figure out how to get there. If you don't, the fog never lifts.

Peterson returns to the idea of precise speech here. Speaking precisely is about sifting through your problems so you can identify them and figure out how to go about solving them—reestablishing order, in other words.

Both the soul and the world are organized through communication. Even when things collapse, the possibility of new order exists, but "courageous clarity of thought [...] is necessary to call it forth." You do this by admitting the problem as early as possible. It's only by sorting through the chaos that we and the world can be transformed. Precision is powerful because it separates what's *actually* happened from what *might* happen. For example, if you hear something in the forest but can't see it, it might be a tiger. But if you turn and look, you might discover it's only a squirrel. As long as you refuse to look, it might as well be a dragon. Actual fears can be faced, even when they're terrible, but fears in the imagination can't.

Sorting order out of chaos is difficult work that demands courage. Here, again, Peterson points out that the earlier you face a problem, rather than postponing it, the easier it is to transform chaos into order. Precision is a powerful tool in this process, because it distinguishes the scary "tiger" from the harmless "squirrel." The longer you keep your fears nonspecific, though, the scarier they have the chance to become.

If you avoid the responsibility of confronting chaos, even small doses of chaos, then reality will become more and more chaotic. Therefore, Peterson says, it's important to search for the correct words about yourself. When you speak clearly about present realities, the future can be better. If you don't, you rob yourself of your future. But if you choose to identify things carefully, you can make those things "viable, obedient objects"—you simplify them, making them useful things that you can live with. If you don't do this, then everything remains vague and undistinguished, and your world will remain unmanageably complex.

Again, precision is powerful because it makes chaos manageable, more fixable, and therefore less scary. By postponing this, you only make the future scarier and more chaotic. Therefore taming chaos is one of the best things you can do, not just for the present, but for the sake of a happier, more effective future.

Peterson says that one reason couples stop communicating is because they don't define the topic of a conversation. Thus conversations become about everything, and that's just too much. Every argument becomes about everything that's ever been wrong between them or might be wrong in the future. But if you can identify precisely what you're unhappy about and what you want—using precise speech to do so—the chaos can resolve into order.

Turning to a very practical application of this rule, Peterson points out that precision is especially vital for communication between couples, as a single argument potentially spirals out of control when issues aren't carefully defined. But by speaking precisely, there's hope of taming chaos and finding order, even if it's painful.

RULE 11: DO NOT BOTHER CHILDREN WHEN THEY ARE SKATEBOARDING

Peterson recalls watching kids skateboarding on the steps of a University of Toronto building and admiring their bravery. The kids' main priority wasn't safety; it was competence, which "makes people as safe as they can truly be." One day brackets were placed along the edges of the concrete plant boxes the kids liked to skate on. It reminds Peterson of the time Toronto hastily removed playground equipment from its elementary schools out of fears over insurability. Instead, the more daring kids started playing on the roof of the local school. If things become too "safe," then kids start looking for ways to make play dangerous again. Though risk tolerance varies among people, in general, people like living on the edge, because chaos helps them grow.

With these two stories—of the skateboarding kids losing their obstacle course and the playground getting shut down—Peterson sets the stage for this chapter. Though it's not yet clear what this Rule means ("Do not bother children when they are skateboarding"), Peterson's following remarks suggest that it will be concerned with the benefits of chaos for learning and growth and the dangers of denying kids the opportunity to push themselves, even to experiment with danger, in order to grow.

Depth psychologists like Freud and Jung believed that everything has a shadow side, even actions that appear selfless. If you stand *for* something, that means you must also stand *against* something. Peterson cites Jung as saying that if you don't understand why somebody did something, then look at the consequences and infer their motivation from that. It doesn't always work, but it's often revealing. Even if people claim to have good motives, that doesn't mean you should take them at their word—especially if they're out to change other people, without first focusing on changing themselves.

By "shadow side," Peterson simply refers to the negative (not necessarily bad or harmful) side of an action. His next remarks, about inferring someone's motivations from their actions, are confusing at first, but this is another chapter where Peterson takes a meandering path to his point, so readers have to stick with it. At this point, it's enough to notice that Peterson will be talking about the downsides of people setting out to change others.

Peterson brings up his friend Chris, whom he mentioned earlier. Chris was plagued by guilt. Growing up, he moved around Canada a lot, and he often got into fights with Native kids. But he wouldn't fight back. He believed the Native kids' anger was justified, since white people had taken their land. Gradually, Chris's guilt drove him to withdraw from the world. He hated his own masculinity, which he saw as being linked with the evils of colonization and nuclear war. Influenced by Buddhism, he came to believe that he—and others—were ethically obligated to negate their own Being.

Peterson introduced his friend Chris when discussing Rule 3, "Make friends with people who want the best for you." In describing Chris's struggles, Peterson hints that by withdrawing from the world due to guilt, Chris took a flawed attitude towards Being. Peterson holds that human beings should shoulder the responsibility of making Being better, so even if Chris was right about some of the wrongs he decried, that doesn't mean he reacted to them in a truly helpful way.

Peterson recalls Chris drifting in and out of his life in adulthood, sometimes coming to stay, sometimes temporarily patching his life together, but always deeply troubled, bitter, and "anti-human" in his spirit. The night before Chris's 40th birthday, he called Peterson with good news about getting some of his short stories published. The next day, he took his own life.

Peterson hints that Chris's tragic death followed from a lifetime of nursing guilt and despair instead of engaging with Being in a positive way. He's an example of the attitude—which Peterson describes in Rule 6 ("Set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world")—of responding to evil by bitterly turning one's back on Being and deciding that humanity is worthless.

Peterson points out that we're only starting to develop the tools and technologies to help us understand human life. So, it's understandable that humans are destructive sometimes. Life is hard, and hard to understand. It's only in recent centuries, after all, that human beings have increasingly gained wealth and education, overcome deadly diseases, and begun to live longer.

Peterson shifts to talking about the pain of existence in general. He's sympathetic to attitudes like Chris's—until fairly recently, human life was characterized by limitation and suffering, and even with improvements in standards of living, it's still incredibly difficult.

In light of these difficulties, we can understand why some people will conclude that human beings are "a failed and corrupt species"—a logic that proceeds to the point that anyone who rids the planet of this "plague" or "cancer" is a savior. Such resentment-filled people will even kill themselves to demonstrate the "purity" of their belief. In the modern world, it's unacceptable to declare that we'd all be better off without a certain race, ethnicity, or religious group. So why is it acceptable to denounce humanity as a whole and say that we'd be better off with fewer human beings?

As Peterson touched on earlier in the book, some people will respond to deep suffering with understandable resentment and determine that humanity itself is the problem. But Peterson suggests this is a problematic attitude in itself. It's wrong to denounce specific people groups, so by extension, it should also be unacceptable to hate and denounce humanity as a species.

Peterson thinks that today, young men are especially pressured by this mindset. Their patriarchal privilege makes them suspect, and they're beginning to fall behind girls academically. Boys also tend to be more interested in things than people, and more inclined to competition and disinclined to obedience, and the modern schooling system doesn't accommodate this well. In addition, girls can gain status both within the terms of the girls' hierarchy and the boys', whereas boys can only gain status within the boys' hierarchy. They lose status, both among boys and girls, for valuing what girls value. And even higher education, especially the humanities, is increasingly becoming a "girls' game." The same holds for the fields of healthcare, psychology, and education.

Peterson suggests that boys face distinctive challenges in modern, Western societies. It's important to note that he's speaking in generalities here and doesn't claim that these observations apply to boys and girls universally. Overall, he suggests that Western societies face a delicate moment when it comes to gender relations. Generally speaking, girls enjoy greater freedoms than they used to and are starting to challenge boys' dominance in key areas. Meanwhile, modern school systems don't really know how to help boys succeed on their own terms, especially when boys' interests and behavior tend to differ markedly from girls'.

This actually isn't great news for women, either. Stable, long-term relationships have become more and more elusive for women in higher education, even as statistics show it's what most women (and fewer men) desire most. Peterson wonders who decided that high-powered careers—and the sacrifices they demand— are worth more than love and family. If it *is* worth it, why? While a minority of men are hyper-competitive and will be driven to succeed in such work, most people won't, and most people aren't made happier by lots of money, at least once they're able to pay their bills.

Even though it's good that girls have made gains in certain areas, Peterson contends that the societal impact is more complicated. Statistically, most women still desire long-term relationships, but as women climb the professional ladder, such relationships prove harder to find. Peterson also suggests that most people—not just women—don't really find their greatest satisfaction in their careers.

Over the past 15 years, statistics suggest that once women have established themselves in high-pressure careers, such as law, they tend to drop out in their thirties. This is because women develop other interests and want room for those things in their lives.

Peterson implies that his earlier point is illustrated here by the fact that even when women enjoy professional gains that were rare for older generations, after a certain point, they often decide to prioritize other parts of life.

Meanwhile, the shortage of university-educated men poses a problem for women because, across cultures, women generally seek to marry "up," or seek a partner of greater or equal status. (Men are generally more content to marry "down.") This, along with the loss of high-paying blue-collar jobs, means that marriage is increasingly becoming a "luxury" that only rich people can afford.

Since men are starting to lag professionally in many fields, Peterson believes, this is a challenge for high-achieving women who still desire long-term relationships—usually with men of comparable status. But with fewer desirable men out there, marriage is starting to feel unattainable.

One of the reasons women tend to seek high-status partners is because, when women have children, they naturally (even biologically) desire a partner who can help support those children. They don't want to have to look after children *and* an unemployed partner. When there isn't a father present in the home at all, children are far more statistically likely to be poor, to abuse drugs and alcohol, and to be depressed or suicidal. Peterson says that the universities' turn toward "political correctness" has only made these problems worse—at the same time that whole academic disciplines have turned increasingly hostile to men.

Since most women will still desire children at some point and want an equal partner to help raise them, the shortage of desirable men is a far-reaching problem—for children, Peterson suggests, as well as for women. In Peterson's opinion, the environment in academia has compounded this problem, as men's value to families and society is systematically downplayed.

Peterson says that culture has *always* been "an oppressive structure." That's because culture is a "universal existential reality." All that we inherit from the past is out of date and must be thoughtfully reshaped. At the same time, culture is also filled with gifts from our ancestors. To focus *only* on the oppressive aspects of culture is ungrateful. And that's not to say that culture should never be subject to criticism.

Peterson delves into controversial matters behind the "political correctness" debate. He argues that it isn't surprising to discover oppressive aspects of culture; it's always been this way. He suggests that while those aspects should be carefully critiqued, it's counterproductive to take a blanket critical stance toward culture, as much good comes from the past as well.


Peterson also says it's worth considering that any hierarchy creates winners and losers. In any given collective pursuit, some people will be better at it and some worse. And it's the pursuit of goals that gives life so much of its meaning. The formation of hierarchies is the price. If we instead sacrificed the pursuit of goals in favor of pursuing perfect equality instead, life would lose much that makes it valuable.

All cultures naturally contain hierarchies, in Peterson's view. In fact, anywhere that people pursue goals, there will be some degree of inequality present. And since pursuing goals is a big part of finding meaning (and doing one's part to improve Being), Peterson thinks we should be careful about critiquing hierarchy in and of itself.


Peterson says it's also "perverse" to think of culture as having been created by men. Culture is "archetypally" male, which is what makes the idea of patriarchy plausible. But culture has always been the creation of humankind more broadly. Even if women's contributions were negligible prior to the feminist movement in the 1960s (which Peterson doesn't believe), then their contribution in terms of raising boys and freeing up a very small number of men to sustain and lead humanity is incalculable.

Peterson argues here that women have had an indispensable role in creating culture throughout history, even where patriarchal structures have existed (as they have in most places). He implies that even if men have occupied more visible leadership roles throughout history, and even if that's unjust, we still shouldn't conclude that women have therefore played little role in building culture.

Peterson offers an alternative theory: throughout history, both men and women struggled, but women struggled more because of the additional burdens of reproduction and having less physical strength. When considering the different ways men and women were treated up until the technological revolutions of recent centuries (including the birth control pill), it's important to keep these different experiences in mind rather than simply accepting as fact that men tyrannized women.

Peterson suggests that women's biology has often set them at a disadvantage in terms of attaining social prominence. Quite recently, medical and technological advances have made it more possible to for women to break out of these limitations. But Peterson suggests that things are more complex than a straightforward narrative of women's oppression suggests.

Peterson says we might instead look at what's been characterized as sexist oppression as "an imperfect collective attempt by men and women [...] to free each other from privation, disease and drudgery." He names the doctor who introduced the use of ether during childbirth, the inventor of Tampax, and the inventor of the birth control pill (all of whom are men) and questions whether they should be considered part of a "constricting patriarchy." But increasingly, Peterson says, academic disciplines regard men as inherent oppressors and fail to distinguish political activism (of a specific stripe) from education.

Though he doesn't deny a history of sexism and inequality, Peterson suggests that until recently in history, both men and women have had things pretty hard. In light of this, he also suggests that we shouldn't view human history as a constant state of conflict between men and women. But, if you simply look at contemporary academic debates, he argues that you'd never know matters were more complicated: academia upholds a specific narrative of oppression as inarguable.

Peterson points out that all these academic disciplines ultimately draw from Marxist humanists like Max Horkheimer and other thinkers in the Frankfurt School whose development of critical theory in the 1930s aimed at social change instead of just intellectual understanding. More recently, French philosopher Jacques Derrida was the most prominent of the 1970s postmodernists. Derrida characterized his views as a radicalized form of Marxism. Peterson argues that while Marxist ideas tend to be attractive to utopians, when put into actual practice, they've yielded terrible corruption, suffering, and death, as in the killing fields of Cambodia.

Peterson unpacks some of the history of modern academic schools of thought such as critical theory and postmodernism that have shaped contemporary narratives about oppression. While the precise details of this history aren't necessary to follow his point, Peterson basically argues that Marxism and its offshoots are destructive when put into practice.

It made sense that when the Soviet Union was established after World War I, people were hopeful about utopian collectivism. There was a huge gap between rich and poor, labor conditions were horrific, and the war had been traumatic. The rest of the world was often confused about the Soviets, especially because they opposed fascists. Furthermore, the Spanish Civil War distracted the world from what was happening in Russia, as the Soviets brutalized and exiled two million kulaks (wealthy peasants) and murdered tens of thousands, simply because this class of people was deemed "parasitical" and "enemies of the people." Because the kulaks were generally among the country's most productive farmers, mass starvation resulted, with six million dying in Ukraine. Yet, in spite of all this, communism still enjoyed respectability among some Western intellectuals (though there were exceptions like Malcolm Muggeridge, George Orwell, and of course Solzhenitsyn).

Peterson argues here that it makes sense that utopian Marxism was appealing at a certain point in history. When societies have endured horrific catastrophes, they look for solutions in order to avoid such things in the future. And when the world is in turmoil (like in the period between the First and Second World Wars), it can be difficult to see the bigger picture—especially when a mass movement like Soviet communism purports to be solving problems like social inequality, while actually causing other horrors. Peterson suggests that at times like this, it takes perceptive dissidents to notice and sound the alarm when societies are going down deadly paths.

In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn argued that the Soviet system was sustained only by tyranny and slave labor, as well as by individual and public lies. In other words, it wasn't simply a personality cult, but an expression of communist philosophy. While intellectuals generally declined to stand up for communism after this, Peterson suggests that some simply changed tactics slightly—for example, Derrida stopped focusing so much on the repression of the poor by the rich and instead focused on the "oppression of everyone by the powerful"—basically exchanging money for power.

Solzhenitsyn's critique of communism was based on the belief that when entire societies accept lies, they help sustain terrible atrocities. Even though Solzhenitsyn's work made defense of communist tyranny no longer tenable, Peterson implies that, in Derrida's critique of power structures, dangerous Marxist beliefs were quietly rehabilitated in a different form.

Derrida saw hierarchical structures as means of including some and excluding (and oppressing) others. Such structures, he claimed, are even built into language—the word "women" benefits men by excluding women, and the terms "males and females" benefit the majority by excluding a small minority of biologically androgynous people. Derrida went so far as to argue that "there is no outside-text," which Peterson glosses as "everything is interpretation."

Instead of focusing on primarily economic inequalities, Derrida attacked hierarchies (which, remember, Peterson has defended as natural and inevitable). His criticisms extended to the way language can be used to sustain power structures between people, even arguing that, essentially, there's no such thing as objective, neutral language.

Peterson deems that this is a "nihilistic and destructive" philosophy because it "puts the act of categorization itself in doubt." It only views distinctions, even biological ones like sex differences, in terms of power. Things like science and competence-based hierarchies then become just examples of games of power, benefiting those who make them up.

Peterson strongly rejects Derrida's version of postmodernism because, in essence, it makes it difficult for people to communicate truthfully with one another. If language is basically a tool of power, then it's hard to see how people can pursue meaning, which is the whole point of life for Peterson.

Peterson notes that there's some truth to Derrida's account. Power *does* motivate people, but it's one among many motivations. In other words, just because it plays a motivating role "does not mean that it plays the only role, or even the primary role." It's also true, as Peterson discussed earlier, that when we observe the world, we necessarily take some details into account and leave out others. But that doesn't mean that everything is just interpretation. "Beware of single cause interpretations—and beware the people who purvey them."

While power has certainly been a motivation for people throughout history and even today, Peterson sees it as dishonest and harmful to reduce so much of human history and culture to this single cause. Indeed, he argues that "single cause interpretations" can be a gateway to tyranny, because they naturally stifle the search for truth.

Not all interpretations are equally valid: some hurt others and put you at odds with society. Others simply aren't effective. Some are built into us due to evolution, and others emerge due to a lifetime of socialization and learning. There are endless interpretations but a very limited number of viable solutions. As an example, Peterson believes that wealth inequality is a threat to society. However, there's no obvious solution, because we haven't figured out how to redistribute wealth without causing new problems. Western countries have tried many different approaches, and because of differences in history, population, and other areas, it's difficult to compare results. But a utopian approach of forced redistribution is, according to Peterson, "a cure to shame the disease."

Peterson lists many ways that interpretation does play into human life; naturally, not everyone has the same experiences or looks at things in the same way. But that isn't the same thing as saying that all interpretations are useful or valid. He uses wealth inequality as an example of a clear problem to which there's no clear-cut solution. While a redistribution of wealth might look like an appealing solution, Peterson argues that such an approach is not only impossible to implement but will have devastating side-effects.

Peterson holds that there simply isn't evidence for many of the claims being asserted in "radical" academic disciplines. For example, in well-functioning societies, it's competence, not power, that primarily determines status, and the main personality traits predicting success are intelligence and conscientiousness. These statistics are well-supported in studies. So, it's not appropriate to teach "ideologically-predicated" theories about gender or hierarchy.

Turning again to modern academia, Peterson argues that a postmodern approach to power is often asserted, but that research suggests it simply doesn't hold up. In his opinion, many radical claims aren't statistically supported, but are presented as fact anyway—when in fact they're just ideologies masquerading as incontestable truth.

It's certainly true that science can be biased or evidence skewed by powerful interests. But that's not the same thing as saying that science is just about power. So why assert it? Peterson suggests it's because "if only power exists, then the use of power becomes fully justifiable." If everything is interpretation, then there's just opinion and force. And postmodernism's moral imperative is that "society must be altered, or bias eliminated, until all outcomes are equitable." Since equitable outcomes are the foundation of this viewpoint, then differences between genders must be regarded as socially constructed, or else the whole view would seem too radical. It's just "camouflaged" ideology, not logic. Peterson uses the "equal pay for equal work" argument to give examples of the difficulty of determining what constitutes "equal work." Besides, bureaucratic racial and ability categories don't adequately capture people's uniqueness—no group identity does.

Here, Peterson contends that the postmodern focus on power really has a hunger for power as its driving motivation. If equality is postmodernism's goal, and there are no valid hierarchies, then it's not only acceptable but morally incumbent upon postmodernist thinkers to eliminate hierarchies, since they only serve to uphold oppressive structures. But Peterson insists that there's really no logic underlying such assertions.

Yet, Peterson says, postmodern and Marxist thinkers don't address such complexity. Instead, their systems rotate around a fixed ideological point—an unprovable point, like the idea that all gender differences are socially constructed. An argument like this is neither provable nor disprovable because, after all, it's true that cultural pressure can bring about stark differences between people (for instance, studies of separately adopted twins have shown that differences in family income can make a huge difference in IQ points). Peterson notes this in order to suggest that we could perhaps minimize differences between boys and girls, if we were willing to exert the right kind of cultural pressure. But doing this would in no way ensure that either boys or girls were becoming freer to make their own choices.

Ultimately, Peterson says, postmodernism just doesn't account for the world's complexity, and its ideological points can't be proven. He doesn't dispute that its claims contain some truth—for example, there are socially constructed aspects of gender differences, and cultures can try to bring about greater equality between the genders and in between other groups or categories of people. But such efforts might cause more harm than good, Peterson implies—especially if they're imposed for people's "own good." In effect, he thinks they end up minimizing and flattening individual difference.

Peterson says that one of the outcomes of a social constructionist outlook is the theory that boys should be socialized like girls. This theory is based on the assumption that aggression is learned, and that teaching boys to follow traditionally feminine standards of behavior (like sensitivity, nurturing, and cooperation) will reduce aggression. But this is all wrong, Peterson insists, because aggression is present from the beginning—"ancient biological circuits [...] underlie defensive and predatory aggression," operating in the most primitive parts of the brain. It also appears that about 5 percent of little boys are temperamentally aggressive, and that this is typically dealt with by teaching them to channel those tendencies in "virtuous" directions, like competition. Kids who don't succeed in doing so tend to become social outcasts. But this doesn't mean that aggression can have no positive social value.

After this long digression on Marxism and postmodernism, Peterson returns to where he started—what he sees as the problems faced by boys in the modern Western educational system. Because postmodern thought largely assumes that gender differences are socially constructed, practitioners feel free to try to mold boys so as to rid them of undesirable qualities like aggression. Peterson argues that this will backfire, because aggression is generally hardwired, and that channeling it is much more effective than just trying to squelch it. In addition, he believes that trying to get rid of aggression assumes there's nothing good about aggression, but he thinks it has actually benefited humanity for much of our history.

Peterson says that many of the female patients he sees struggle because they are not aggressive *enough*. They are highly agreeable, do too much for others, are naïve, and are conflict-avoidant. While such self-sacrificing behavior might sound admirable (and can be), it can also be self-defeating. Such people don't stand up for themselves enough. When this goes on for a long time, such people become resentful.

Peterson thinks aggression is actually good for girls, too, in limited doses. In order to take responsibility for their lives, girls, like boys, have to learn how to stand up for themselves and face necessary conflict (recalling the timid vs. confident lobsters in Rule 1).

Peterson says he teaches such patients to look for the reasons behind their resentment: are they simply immaturely refusing to accept responsibility, or are they being taken advantage of by someone? If it's the latter, then they need to prepare to confront the person at fault. While unpleasant, such conflict is the only way to get the attention (and hopefully respect) of the person you're confronting. In a scenario like this, it's also critical to know what you're wanting out of the situation and be prepared to articulate that—and be specific. The key is to give them a reasonable request whose fulfillment would satisfy you, so you're offering a feasible solution and not just voicing a problem.

When working with someone who's not aggressive enough, Peterson coaches them to take responsibility for their situation. This sometimes means unpleasant confrontation, but as Peterson has made clear earlier in the book, being able to specifically identify a problem and pursue a solution is a key part of maturity, maintaining healthy relationships, and living truthfully.

"The Oedipal mother" is the epitome of the agreeable, conflict-averse, embittered person Peterson describes. She silently makes a pact to do everything for her children so that they'll never grow up and leave her. An example is the witch in the Hansel and Gretel fairy tale. A naïve and too-cooperative person might ask if the witch's gingerbread house was too good to be true, but the desperate children fall for the kindly old woman who gives them whatever they want.

Peterson refers to an archetype identified by Carl Jung—the "devouring mother" who wants to consume her children's lives. Such an archetype appears in various myths and stories, like the Hansel and Gretel fairy tale. A mother like this only finds security in her children's dependence on her.

The witch is the archetypal "Terrible Mother, the dark half of the symbolically feminine." In the late 1800s, a Swiss anthropologist named Johann Jakob Bachofen looked at human history in terms of feminine archetypes. Although he offered no historical evidence, he envisioned a primordial matriarchy that gradually gave way to a dominating patriarchy (the present stage). But Jung and his colleague Erich Neumann saw this as a psychological reality, not a historical one. In every person, consciousness (always symbolically masculine) struggles painfully toward maturity, while being constantly tempted to sink back into excessively sheltered dependence. Such is Freud's "Oedipal [...] nightmare," which Peterson sees being embodied more and more in social policy.

In this sketch of part of the history of psychology, Peterson's point is that though some people have posited a "matriarchal" history for humanity that only gradually turned patriarchal, there isn't much of a historical basis for this. Rather, there are symbolically masculine and feminine aspects of every person. It's not that masculine is good and feminine bad, he thinks, but that the "masculine" consciousness must mature beyond "feminine" dependence in order to grow. One can see how this maps onto Peterson's favored symbolism of order and chaos—too much of either isn't healthy for personal or societal thriving, he believes.

The "Terrible Mother" archetype shows up in lots of places, like the chaotic, devouring dragon-deity in the ancient Mesopotamian *Enuma Elish*, and Maleficent in the Disney version of *Sleeping Beauty* (where Princess Aurora, sheltered too much from danger, remains unconscious at maturity and must be rescued by the prince, or masculine spirit). It's not really the point whether a woman needs a man to rescue her. It is true, however, that a woman needs *consciousness* (symbolically masculine) to be rescued, even if that takes the form of a woman's own "wakefulness, clarity of vision, and tough-minded independence."

One can look everywhere from ancient religious texts to modern fairytale adaptions to see the masculine/feminine archetypes. Peterson suggests here that the male/female imagery can become too loaded. It's not about women being weaker, but about both men and women needing to grow beyond dependence to take on the responsibility of Being.

Peterson says that the relationship between the masculine and the consciousness also shows up in Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. The tentacled Ursula tricks Ariel into giving up her voice, ensuring that the heroine will be trapped underwater (unconscious, immature) forever. Eventually, Prince Eric shows up and helps Ariel destroy Ursula. This illustrates how a mature woman must form a relationship with a masculine consciousness in order to confront the world.

Peterson's use of The Little Mermaid as an example humorously shows how the masculine/feminine archetype keeps showing up in modern movie adaptations. Again, in Peterson's view, this isn't suggesting that Ariel is a weak girl, but that she needs to embrace consciousness (Being) in order to mature and contribute to the world.

Peterson returns to the point that men traditionally don't put up with much dependency among themselves. This is for good reason, because a man shouldn't be a child who needs to be looked after. Furthermore, when softness and harmlessness become too socially acceptable, then hardness and dominance become attractive. So, if men are pressured to be too feminine, they might in response become too interested in harsh, fascistic ideology. This is why men must toughen up. They do this by pushing themselves and one another, which sometimes manifests in daring, boundary-pushing behavior. That *doesn't* mean that such behavior (like skateboarding) is necessarily criminal.

Here, Peterson is basically saying that mature men don't like excessive dependency, but that this isn't the same thing as a harsh masculinity—that in a healthy society, there's balance. But when society tries to mold men and boys into typically feminine traits, they often react by chasing a caricatured version of masculinity. This is why Peterson thinks it's important for men, especially young boys, to have the chance to explore and push their boundaries. If these behaviors are stifled, the boundary-pushing will erupt in a different, potentially more harmful way.

Healthy women want men who are tough enough for them to contend with and who offer something they can't provide for themselves. But there often aren't enough of such men around for strong women to find as mates. So, anything that interferes with boys growing up into men is unfriendly to women, too. The same mindset will stop little girls from growing up into women. It's "antihuman, desirous of failure, jealous, resentful and destructive." So, "leave children alone when they are skateboarding."

Again, Peterson thinks women benefit from healthy men, too. Even if a culture's expression of gender roles changes over time, Peterson maintains that the basic differences between men and women need to be recognized and accommodated in order for a healthy balance in society. If that fails, then a culture becomes like the "devouring mother" discussed earlier, who stifles all human flourishing. So, for everyone's sake, kids—especially boys, in Peterson's view—should be allowed to be themselves.

RULE 12: PET A CAT WHEN YOU ENCOUNTER ONE ON THE STREET

Peterson opens this chapter by making it clear that he owns a dog, a hypo-allergenic American Eskimo dog named Sikko, to be exact. Peterson talks about his dog first because of a phenomenon known as "minimal group identification," which basically means that people show a strong preference for members of the group with which they identify. In other words, people like members of their own group and dislike members of other groups. So, Peterson didn't want to alienate dog lovers by implying that only cats are worthy of being petted. He also approves of petting dogs!

Peterson is being funny here—making fun of his own style and use of elevated concepts throughout the book while talking about something that's actually very simple (liking dogs more than cats or vice versa). Perhaps he starts off with a lighter tone because the content of this chapter will become heavier and more personal.

As Peterson has discussed in earlier chapters, every major religion expresses in some form the idea that life is suffering. Once Peterson was speaking with a client who was facing devastating news about her husband's cancer prognosis. Peterson has given a lot of thought to the vulnerability of small children. Dealing with a sick child forces a parent to do this. When his sunny daughter Mikhaila was two, his wife noticed that there was something odd about the little girl's gait. A few years later, they both noticed that Mikhaila had grown sluggish and mopey. She moved like an elderly person and complained of pain. Eventually, she was diagnosed with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. Thirty-seven of her joints were affected.

This is the most personal chapter in the book, as Peterson reflects on his daughter Mikhail's suffering. As a psychologist, Peterson has had to confront the question of suffering often. But here, he implies that when the sufferer is one's own child, the question becomes much more pressing and difficult.

Peterson poses the question of what kind of God would make a happy little girl suffer like this. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the character Ivan couldn't accept a world where God allowed such suffering. Yet Peterson also realized that if he could theoretically fortify his children to make them invulnerable to suffering, they wouldn't be his children—"what can be truly loved about a person is inseparable from their limitations." This was easier for Peterson to recognize with his healthy son than his fragile daughter.

Peterson suggests that the question of suffering can't be answered in a satisfactory way. It might be true that we can't love someone apart from the experiences, including suffering, that make them who they are. Yet it's difficult to believe this when looking at a suffering loved one.

Eventually, Mikhaila became the first Canadian child approved to take etanercept, a new drug for autoimmune diseases. It was very effective. Since Mikhaila loved earning money, her parents offered to pay her if she could learn to administer the drug injections herself, so she'd have more independence. It worked, and within a few years, Mikhaila was symptom-free. In high school, however, she started having pain again and learned that she needed an immediate hip replacement.

Peterson continues sharing Mikhaila's story. She faced ups and downs throughout her childhood—a breakthrough treatment worked for a while but couldn't prevent eventual surgeries. Plus, Mikhaila had to deal with administering medications, as few children do. Though it's clear that the Petersons cared about their daughter's growth through all this, that didn't make it easier to watch.

When Peterson sat with his grieving client, the only thing he could share was "the tight interlinking between vulnerability and Being." He also told her an old Jewish story about how an omnipotent Being lacks only one thing: limitation. According to the story, that's why God created human beings—if there was no limitation, there could be no story, and thus no Being. Peterson doesn't want to claim that this makes suffering okay somehow, yet he believes recognizing this link really helps in facing suffering.

Even with so much experience with suffering in his own family's life—or perhaps because of it—Peterson didn't have tidy answers for his client. Basically, suffering and Being are linked in a deep, mysterious way. If human beings were invulnerable to suffering, then they wouldn't grow and learn at all—wouldn't be human.

Given that "being of any reasonable sort appears to require limitation"—that "Being requires Becoming"—what about the suffering that limits cause? It seems unbearable. But if we conclude that such a terrible world *shouldn't* exist, we actually risk making life even worse—and there's no goodness in that. Peterson argues that ultimately, the solution to suffering won't be found by just thinking about it, or else minds like Tolstoy or Nietzsche would have figured it out. Rather, noticing, not thinking, is the key. The first thing to notice is that you don't love someone *despite* their limitations, but *because* of them.

Ultimately, Peterson suggests that there's no good answer to human suffering—and that if there were an answer, surely one of humanity's wisest, most perceptive thinkers would've figured it out by now. Peterson has talked about the importance of "noticing" before in learning to confront Being. It isn't the same thing as discovering answers, but it does help you appreciate those around you—limitations and all.

At a certain point, Mikhaila's rheumatologist couldn't do anything else for her pain, and her medications began to have serious drawbacks. Even after she was able to get a hip replacement, challenges persisted: her right ankle disintegrated, and the pain was so bad that Mikhaila became psychologically stressed. After a desperate search for a faster surgery date, she got an ankle replacement. The recovery was agonizing, and painkiller withdrawal was almost as bad.

Peterson interweaves his reflections on suffering with Mikhaila's story, showing that his thoughts on this subject were formed in the midst of great sorrow and aren't abstract for him.

During this period, Peterson and his wife learned a few things about dealing with suffering in the midst of life's stresses. He suggests setting aside time each day to strategize about managing the illness or other crisis, but *not* thinking about it constantly. Otherwise, life will spiral out of control, and you'll waste your limited energy. He also suggests "shift[ing] the unit of time you use to frame your life." You can't dream about the next decade when you're in agonizing pain. Instead, you can make a courageous choice to "presume the primary goodness of Being" and concentrate on the day at hand.

Peterson did discover some things that helped, like finding a balance between order and chaos—managing a crisis without letting it take over your life. It also helps to choose to believe that Being is good—right now, even if it's too difficult to look beyond the moment.

Peterson returns to dogs and cats. While dogs are social and hierarchical, cats are different. Cats interact with people on their own terms. Peterson sees them as "Being, in an almost pure form." You never know what's going to happen when you encounter a cat. If you offer to pet it, sometimes it will run away. But sometimes it relishes being petted and invites more. When that happens, it makes a good day a little better, or else it gives you a momentary break on a bad day. If you pay attention, you might find other "small opportunities" like this throughout your day. You get a reminder, even if only for a few seconds, that "the wonder of Being might make up for the ineradicable suffering that accompanies it."

Peterson is being lighthearted when he describes cats as "pure Being," but he has a point—you never really know how a cat's going to behave, but taking the chance to pet one might have very pleasant results. Peterson suggests that this is a model for life in general. If you take care to notice opportunities such as petting a cat—or other small, good things—you are better able to affirm the goodness of Being, without denying the suffering that's always present in Being, too.

CODA

In late 2016, Peterson visited a friend in Northern California and admired the friend's LED-illuminated pen. Later, he started thinking metaphorically about this "pen of light." When the friend later gifted him the pen, Peterson asked himself, "What shall I do with my newfound pen of light?" He thought about Christ's promise in the Gospel of Matthew that the one who asks will receive. He doesn't believe this means that God will dispense whatever we want. After all, prayers often go unanswered. Peterson wonders if this is because prayers are often framed wrongly. In a desperate moment, maybe it's better to ask for the strength to persevere in that moment—that is, to see the truth.

The book's Coda basically illustrates how Peterson puts his Rules into practice in his own life. His reflections about prayer here are really just about seeking the wisdom to face Being moment by moment—as he has put it elsewhere, to live in truth.

Peterson and his wife have had many disagreements over the years. Instead of letting a fight escalate, they would go to separate rooms and ask themselves what they'd done to contribute to the argument. To ask yourself a question like that, you must truly want the answer, because you're not going to like it. The answer will require you to figure out how to improve and then follow through, which is hard. But at that point, you have to decide if it's more important to you to be right or to pursue peace. Doing the latter requires you to want the answer more than you want to be right. That's abiding by Rule 2.

Recall that Rule 2 is "Treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping." It's an exercise in figuring out what's good for you rather than settling with what makes you feel comfortable—a Rule that can be especially applicable in a conflict with a loved one.

In that spirit, Peterson asked himself what to do with his pen of light. He tried to be honest with himself, in the spirit of Rule 9. And, in fact, an answer did come to mind: "Write down the words you want inscribed on your soul." Inspired by this, he tried to think of the hardest questions he could, like "What shall I do tomorrow?" and "What shall I do next year?" He culminated with "What shall I do with my life?" And the answer was, "Aim for Paradise, and concentrate on today." This answer lines up with Rule 4, to orient oneself properly and then focus on the day at hand.

Encouraged by his desire to pursue what's good for him, and also to deal with himself like an honest conversation partner, Peterson tried to think of the most meaningful questions he could. By "Paradise," he just refers to the best possible state of living—a state that can only be reached by aiming for it and trying to improve Being a little bit at a time.

Peterson went on to pose questions about his relationships with others. He wrote that he wants to "honour [his] wife as a Mother of God," that is, to respect the sacred aspect of her maternal role—a role that society needs to survive. He also determined to "act to justify the suffering of [his] parents," to honor the sacrifices made by all who've gone before and live with gratitude in response. He went on to pose questions about how to treat strangers (with brotherly hospitality), how to deal with a fallen soul (to offer a helping hand, without getting pulled into the muck, as per Rule 3), and what to do with the world (live as though Being is more valuable than Non-Being)—the essence of Rule 1.

Here, Peterson turns from questions about his own life to questions about his relationships with others, showing how the pursuit of meaning is never done in isolation. Though one of his 12 Rules doesn't apply perfectly to every single situation, readers can see how they do shape the way he thinks about encountering the world, making sense of it, and helping others.

He also considered how to educate people—to share with them what he deems most important (Rule 8). This ties into what to do with a fractured nation—to speak truth to it. The latter has become more critical as people have become more polarized. To avoid further catastrophe, we need to speak truthfully to one another, not just argue for ideologies or try to advance our ambitions.

Peterson especially dwells on the importance of telling the truth. He suggests that today, people have an increasingly difficult time really hearing one another, and that this is dangerous for society. While disagreement isn't wrong, an inability to tolerate and communicate across disagreements is ominous.

The next few question and answers focused on ingratitude, like what to do when you despise what you have (remember those who have nothing and be grateful). Taking stock of what's in front of you, petting a cat, and setting your house in order could all apply here. An unexpected question was "What shall I do when I ruin my rivers?" The answer was, "Seek for the living water and let it cleanse the Earth." It could be, Peterson suggests, that once people have set themselves in order first, they'll become better stewards of the environment.

While Peterson's questions and applications of the 12 Rules can sound rather fanciful, they all revolve around the foundational importance of noticing one's surroundings, appreciating what one has, and taking small steps to improve Being. And this isn't just an individual endeavor, but one that can benefit the world at large.

Peterson then posed a bunch of questions about crisis and exhaustion, like how to deal with an enemy's success ("aim a little higher and be grateful for the lesson"), how to cope with aging, how to deal with a loved one's death (strive to be the person at the funeral that everyone can lean on—it's better than wishing for a trouble-free life). And because "the flood is always coming," you should respond to any dire moment by focusing your attention on "the next right move."

Peterson continues to illustrate how his Rules can apply to a whole range of life experiences, from competition to death to the uncertainly of potential disaster. Again, he focuses on modest, achievable goals, not being arrogant, and being willing to face suffering instead of pretending it's not real.

He also wrote down some questions about character development, like "What shall I say to a faithless brother? The King of the Damned is a poor judge of Being." By this, he refers to Rule 6—that you must first fix yourself before seeking to address the world. After all, your weaknesses keep you from thriving and also limit your benefit to the larger world. To build yourself up, don't tell lies or do what you hate. Don't shirk difficult questions. And, when before a crowd, "stand tall and utter my broken truths."

Peterson implies that nobody ever arrives at perfect wisdom in life. There are always personal weaknesses to deal with, and the wider world is always filled with suffering that must be addressed. So there are always ways one can strive to improve oneself, with an eye toward better serving the world in general—even though one's efforts will always be imperfect.

Peterson hasn't written anything with his Pen of Light since then, but it helped him find a way to close his book. He hopes this book has been helpful to the reader and wishes the reader the best, finally asking, "What will you write with your pen of light?"

Peterson ends the book in the same conversational tone with which he began, simply encouraging readers to take what they can from the Rules and, most importantly, figuring out how to seek out meaning and make Being better in their own way, for the benefit of the world.

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