

# What's So Dangerous About Jordan Peterson?

Chronicle of Higher Education (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/whats-so-dangerous-about-jordan-peterson/>) · by Carlos Osorio, Toronto Star via Getty Images (photo illustration)



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They're waiting in the cold for Jordan Peterson, hands shoved in jacket pockets, serious books like *The Gulag Archipelago* and *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* tucked under arms. The crowd outside the University of Toronto's Isabel Bader Theatre on a Tuesday evening in November is mostly male and mostly in their 20s. They've spent hours watching Peterson on YouTube, where he rails against the enervating evils of postmodernism, dissects the Bible at length, and offers fatherly advice about how to "change the world properly." They recite his dictums on personal responsibility, like "Clean your room," "Sort yourself out," and "Don't do things that you hate." They devour the classics he deems must-reads — Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, Orwell. When asked to describe him, they

reach for superlatives: brilliant, breathtaking, wise. When asked to compare him, they turn to historical figures: Plato, Diogenes, Gandhi. They insist he's changed their lives.

Soon the man himself will arrive and deliver an often dazzling, sometimes puzzling, rarely dull two-hour lecture on the symbolic and psychological underpinnings of the book of Genesis. Afterward he will field knotty questions from the audience on whether originality is really possible, the tension between honor and happiness, and the evolutionary upside of solitude. These questions seem designed to be difficult, as if the audience were engaged in a giant game of Stump the Guru. It's during such sessions that Peterson is at his improvisational best, sprinkling in ideas from philosophy, fiction, religion, neuroscience, and a disturbing dream his 5-year-old nephew had one time. It's a hearty intellectual stew ladled up by an intense 55-year-old psychology professor who gives the impression that he's on the cusp of unraveling the deep secrets of human behavior — and maybe the mystery of God, too, while he's at it.

You'd never guess from the reverential atmosphere in the 500-seat theater just how polarizing Peterson has become over the past year. Days before, fliers were tacked up around his neighborhood warning the community about the dangerous scholar in their midst, accusing him of “campaigning against the human rights” of minorities and associating with the alt-right. There have been several calls for his ouster from the University of Toronto — where he's tenured — including a recent open letter to the dean of the faculty of arts and science signed by hundreds, including many of his fellow professors. Friends refuse to comment on him lest they be associated with his image. Critics hesitate, too, for fear that his supporters will unleash their online wrath. A graduate student at another Canadian university was reprimanded (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/She-Showed-a-Video-in-Class/241976>) for showing a short video clip of Peterson to a group of undergraduates. One of the professors taking her to task likened Peterson to Hitler.

He has more than a half-million YouTube subscribers, nearly 300,000 Twitter followers, and several thousand fans who send him some \$60,000 per month.

It can be tough to parse the Peterson phenomenon. For one thing, it seems as if there are multiple Petersons, each appealing to, or in some cases alienating, separate audiences. There is the pugnacious Peterson, a clenched-jawed crusader against what he sees as an authoritarian movement masquerading as social-justice activism. That Peterson appears on TV, including on *Fox & Friends*, President Trump's preferred morning show, arguing that the left is primarily responsible for increased polarization. That Peterson contends that ideologically corrupt humanities and social-science programs should be starved of students and replaced by something like a Great Books curriculum.

(<https://c950.chronicle.com/s/ayH?profileid=0e1ac526-df03-4ad0-b3af-fd35c055092f>)

There's also the avuncular Peterson, the one who dispenses self-help lessons aimed at aimless young people, and to that end has written a new book of encouragement and admonition, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (Random House Canada). The book isn't political, at least not overtly, and it grew out of his hobby of answering personal questions posted by strangers on the internet. That Peterson runs a website on "self-authoring" (<https://selfauthoring.com/>) that promises to help those with a few spare hours and \$14.95 discover their true selves.

Then there's the actual Peterson, a guy who Ping-Pongs between exuberance and exhaustion, a grandfather who is loathed and loved by a public that, until very recently, had almost entirely ignored him. Now he has more than a half-million YouTube subscribers, ([https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCL\\_f53ZEJxp8TtlOkHwMV9Q](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCL_f53ZEJxp8TtlOkHwMV9Q)) nearly 300,000 Twitter followers, ([https://twitter.com/jordanbpeterson?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor](https://twitter.com/jordanbpeterson?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor)) and several thousand die-hard disciples who send him money, to the tune of

\$60,000 per month. Even the man with all the answers appears stunned by the outpouring, and at the sudden, surreal turn in his life. “When I wake up in the morning, it takes about half an hour for my current reality to sink in,” he says. “I don’t know what to make of it.”

Figuring out what to make of Jordan Peterson’s rise requires first rewinding a few decades. Peterson grew up in the tiny town of Fairview, Alberta, where the high temperature stays well below freezing in the winter months and where the closest city, Edmonton, is a five-hour drive away. It’s a place where a teenage Peterson and his buddies drank too much, built bonfires, and cruised around the endless countryside.

Peterson attended the University of Alberta, earning degrees in psychology and political science before going on to get his doctorate in clinical psychology at McGill University. A fellow graduate student, Peter Finn, now a professor of psychology at Indiana University at Bloomington, remembers Peterson as quick-witted and confident. “He was an enjoyable person who liked to be different and thought highly of himself,” Finn says. “I thought, Who the hell is *he*?”

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Peterson’s early research examined how alcoholism runs in families. When he wasn’t conducting studies on the genetic predisposition for addictive behavior, he was plugging away on a side project that would become his manifesto: *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*. He worked on that manuscript, he says, three hours a day for 15 years, rewriting it scores of times. It was not the sort of book that a psychological researcher following the well-trod path to academic success would take on. It does not zero in on a phenomenon or stake out unclaimed ground in a subfield. Instead the book is a sweeping attempt at making sense of man’s inhumanity to man, the purpose of existence, and the significance of the divine. Peterson leaps from Wittgenstein to Northrop Frye to Grimm’s Fairy Tales, then on to Hannah Arendt, B.F. Skinner, and Dante. The book is shot

through with theories of religion (“God” appears several hundred times in the text) and informed by Carl Jung’s archetypal view of the collective unconscious, an influence that’s still evident in Peterson’s work.

*Maps of Meaning* offers clues to the strongly held political stances that have turned Peterson into a controversial philosopher-pundit. In college, he writes, he espoused socialism almost by default. He tried to emulate the movement’s leaders, dutifully attending meetings, absorbing their slogans and repeating their arguments. Over time, though, he found that he didn’t respect his fellow activists, who struck him as perpetually aggrieved and suspiciously underemployed. “They had no career, frequently, and no family, no completed education — nothing but ideology,” he writes. He also discovered that he often didn’t believe the things he was enthusiastically spouting. “Despite my verbal facility, I was not real,” he writes. “I found this painful to admit.” He also became obsessed with the looming prospect of nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the United States. He fell into a depression, suffered “apocalyptic dreams” several nights a week, and fought against “vaguely suicidal thoughts.”

Carl Jung rode to the rescue. Peterson read a passage from one of Jung’s essays about the importance of understanding “these fantastic images that rise up so strange and threatening before the mind’s eye.” According to Jung, the way you understand them is by framing your personal struggles in terms of ancient stories, embracing the “power of myth,” as Joseph Campbell, another Jung disciple, put it. That epiphany made the bad dreams go away, and Peterson embarked on what has become a lifelong project of grappling with the strange and threatening images in his and other people’s minds.

He continued writing *Maps of Meaning* after he was hired as an assistant professor of psychology at Harvard University, using the book-in-progress (at one point titled “The Gods of War”) as a text for his classes. In 1995, Peterson was profiled (<http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1995/4/26/jordan-peterson-pharvard-students-may-know/?page=single>) in *The Harvard Crimson*, an article that reads like an award introduction. One undergraduate told the newspaper that Peterson was “teaching beyond the level of anyone else,” and

that even “philosophy students go to him for advice.” A graduate student from back then, Shelley Carson, who now teaches at Harvard and writes about creativity, recalled that Peterson had “something akin to a cult following” in his Harvard days. “Taking a course from him was like taking psychedelic drugs without the drugs,” Carson says. “I remember students crying on the last day of class because they wouldn’t get to hear him anymore.”

Eventually, in 1999, *Maps of Meaning* was published — his magnum opus, the central preoccupation of his life to that point — and no one cared.

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Or nearly no one. The chairman of the psychology department at Harvard at the time, Sheldon White, was impressed, calling it a “brilliant enlargement of our understanding of human motivation.” A few others chimed in with praise, but the response was mostly crickets. It sold fewer than 500 copies in hardcover. “I don’t think people had any idea what to make of the book, and I still think they don’t,” Peterson says. “No one has attempted to critique it seriously.”

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He had considered using *Maps of Meaning* as the basis for his application for tenure at Harvard. When that moment came, though, he found he wasn’t emotionally up to the task. “My mood at the time wasn’t of sufficient stability to feel that I was in the position to make the strongest case for myself, unfortunately,” he says. He received an offer from the University of Toronto, and he took it. By then he was married with two small kids, and the prospect of steady academic employment was attractive. Peterson moved back to Canada.

In the years since then, he’s become a popular professor at the university. Typical comments on RateMyProfessors.com include “life-changing” and “he blew my mind” and “he is my spirit animal.” He ran a private clinical-psychology

practice, consulted for law firms, and developed his self-authoring website, which is based on ideas from psychologists like James Pennebaker and Gary Latham on the benefits of goal-setting and the therapeutic value of writing about emotion. He also offered occasional commentary on public television in Ontario, sometimes while wearing a fedora.

He continued to research topics like religion, creativity, and the effect of personality on political orientation. But he is not widely known as an expert on any of those topics, nor is he considered the pioneer of a game-changing concept. He hasn't frequently published in top journals. That may be, in part, because he is an old-fashioned generalist, more interested in understanding the connective tissue between seemingly disparate ideas than in tilling a small patch of disciplinary soil. Still, it seemed to some who knew him then that the promising professor who wowed them at Harvard in the 1990s had fallen off the map.

In the video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZP3mSamRbYA&t=626s>) that made Jordan Peterson famous, he can be seen sparring with a handful of transgender students about the use of pronouns. He is nattily attired in a white dress shirt with rolled-up sleeves and dark red suspenders. Several supporters, all of them male, stand behind Peterson, amplifying his points. A transgender student accuses Peterson of being their enemy for refusing to use gender-neutral pronouns. "I don't believe using your pronouns will do you any good in the long run," he says. "I believe it's quite the contrary." When another student asks what gives him the authority to determine which pronouns he uses when referring to someone else, Peterson spins to face that person.

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"Why do I have the authority to determine what I say?" Peterson replies, his voice brimming with outrage, his fingers pressed to his own chest. "What kind of question is that?"

The video has three-million-plus views and more than 45,000 comments. It was filmed in October 2016 after a free-speech rally on the University of Toronto campus, an event that was prompted by a series of videos Peterson posted on YouTube titled “The Politically Incorrect Professor.” In the first video, (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fvPgjg201w0>) he argues against a proposed law in Canada that would make so-called misgendering — that is, using pronouns other than the ones a person prefers — a potential human-rights violation, punishable with a fine (that specific statute, which later passed, does not apply to university employees like Peterson, though a similar provision, passed years earlier in Ontario, does). He also objects in those videos to mandatory bias training for staff members at the university. Peterson considers such laws anathema to free speech and makes the case, as a number of other psychologists have, that measures of implicit bias (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/Can-We-Really-Measure-Implicit/238807>) are based on shaky science.

The university’s student newspaper noticed the videos. That tipped off the rest of the news media, which prompted a pro-Peterson rally where Peterson attempted to speak while activists tried to drown him out with chanting and white noise. There was a second rally, followed by a debate between Peterson and two professors defending the proposed law and the use of gender-neutral pronouns. Transgender students protested that event using the hashtag #NotUpForDebate. On a Canadian news show called *The Agenda*, Nicholas Matte, a historian who teaches in the Sexual Diversity Studies program at the University of Toronto, accused Peterson of abuse, violence, and hate speech for his refusal to use gender-neutral pronouns. Peterson insisted that he would not waver in his opposition to the law, even if it meant going to jail. “I’m not using the words that other people require me to use, especially if they’re made up by radical left-wing ideologues,” he informed Matte and the television audience. “And that’s that.”

Peterson started appearing on podcasts and YouTube shows like *The Rubin Report* and *Waking Up*, hosted by Sam Harris, where the two wrangled fruitlessly (<https://www.samharris.org/podcast/item/what-is-true>) over the definition of



truth for two hours. Perhaps most important, Peterson appeared on a podcast (<http://podcasts.joerogan.net/podcasts/jordan-peterson>) hosted by Joe Rogan, a comedian and Ultimate Fighting Championship commentator, whose show is often among the top 10 most-downloaded on iTunes. Rogan spoke with Peterson for nearly three hours and declared him one of his favorite guests. He's had him back twice since, and those podcasts have each been listened to by millions.

After the Rogan endorsement, Peterson's online following swelled. He had been posting videos on YouTube for years, often of his classroom lectures, which had gained a modest following. But that audience expanded exponentially in the wake of the pronoun controversy. Last spring he started an account on Patreon, (<https://www.patreon.com/jordanbpeterson>) which allows users to donate money to support a person, often a musician, cartoonist, or other artist, though it's become a fund-raising vehicle for activists, too. The first month he received \$600, which was enough to help purchase better equipment to film his lectures. But the amount kept growing and, at last count, topped \$60,000 per month (Peterson now keeps the amount he's raising private). Those who give \$50 or more get to ask questions in a monthly online Q&A session. Those who give \$200 per month get a one-time personal Skype chat with Peterson for 45 minutes. The income from Patreon, along with the new demands on his time, caused him to put his clinical practice on hold indefinitely.

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Other YouTubers edit and repackage his clips with titles like “Those 7 Times Jordan Peterson Went Beast Mode” and “Jordan Peterson to Student: You Can’t Force Me to Respect You.” There is an active forum on Reddit devoted to all things Peterson. (<https://www.reddit.com/r/JordanPeterson/>) There is another forum devoted solely to Peterson memes, ([https://www.reddit.com/r/Jordan\\_Peterson\\_Memes/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Jordan_Peterson_Memes/)) of which there are many. There is Peterson-inspired fan art, including a painting of him arguing with transgender students and an old-fashioned medicine label for “Dr. Peterson’s Sort Yourself Out Syrup,” which purports to cure, among other ailments, “identity politics” and “bloody postmodernism.”

Some of what Peterson says isn't discernibly different from the messages of conservative firebrands like Ben Shapiro or the liberal-baiting troublemaker Milo Yiannopoulos, both former Breitbart pundits. Like Shapiro, Peterson argues that the left is transforming the next generation into victims and whiners. Like Yiannopoulos, Peterson argues that the patriarchy is a boogeyman. But when he's been lumped in with what's come to be called the alt-right, as happens fairly regularly, Peterson has pushed back, calling it "seriously wrong." The erstwhile socialist considers himself a classic British liberal, and he has castigated the far right for engaging in the "pathology of racial pride."

Peterson's route to notoriety mirrors that of other professors like Nicholas Christakis and Bret Weinstein (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/A-Radical-College-s-Public/241577>). In the fall of 2015, Christakis, a sociologist at Yale University, was encircled by students ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IEFD\\_JVYd0&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IEFD_JVYd0&feature=youtu.be)) upset about an email his wife had sent questioning the need for Halloween-costume guidelines. Last spring Weinstein, then a biologist at Evergreen State College (he has since resigned), confronted a group of students furious that he had objected to a planned Day of Absence in which white professors and students were encouraged to leave campus. In both cases, those clashes were captured on video and widely shared online. In both cases, the professors were largely lauded as voices of reason, while the students were mostly mocked as overly sensitive and out of control.

Peterson has used his unexpected notoriety to express dissatisfaction with the state of the university in Canada and the United States. He believes that the humanities and the social sciences in particular have become corrupted — a term he employs with relish — by left-wing ideology, and that they are failing to adequately educate students. He lays much of the blame at the feet of the late Jacques Derrida and his disciples for replacing, as he sees it, a search for truth and meaning with grousing about identity and power structures.

His critique is broadly consistent with that of Jonathan Haidt, (<https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Gadfly/240311>) the New York University psychology professor and founder of Heterodox Academy, an

organization whose goal is to increase ideological diversity at universities. Peterson and Haidt met in 1994, when Haidt interviewed for a position at Harvard and Peterson was an assistant professor there. Haidt remembers Peterson as “one of the most memorable professors” he spoke with that day. They didn’t keep in touch, but they met again recently when Haidt appeared on Peterson’s podcast. “Socrates would be aghast at how few of us are willing to stand up for academic freedom if it risks arousing an angry mob,” Haidt wrote via email. “Jordan Peterson is one of the few fearless professors.”

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He also has a booster in Camille Paglia. Paglia, a professor of humanities and media at the University of the Arts, and a prominent cultural critic whose views don’t fit neatly in political categories, identifies as transgender, though she has also been skeptical of what she calls the current “transgender wave.” Like Peterson, Paglia condemns postmodernism as a malevolent movement. While she hadn’t heard of him until recently, Paglia regards Peterson as a long-lost scholarly brother and sees a link between *Maps of Meaning* and the provocative 1990 book that made her reputation, *Sexual Personae*. “It is truly stunning to me how Prof. Peterson pursued his own totally independent path of scholarship in another discipline and yet how our intellectual paths would eventually converge!” she wrote in an email. Paglia blurbed Peterson’s new book, calling him the most important Canadian intellectual since Marshall McLuhan.

After Peterson’s Biblical lectures, devotees like to meet at a bar called Hemingway’s, an appropriately named venue given his emphasis on the value of masculinity. (Peterson argues for the societal importance of the “masculine spirit” and contends that feminists unjustly stigmatize qualities like competitiveness.) My unscientific sampling of the crowd found that the men over 30 saw Peterson as standing up against a tide of anti-male bias. One mentioned that he became interested in Peterson after hearing him speak with James Damore, the former Google software engineer who wrote a memo complaining about the company’s “ideological echo chamber” and asserting that biological differences between men and women explain, at least in part, the

gender gap in the tech industry. Peterson seems to be making a passionate case for what they already felt. A software engineer told me he respected Peterson because he “drew a line in the sand.”

The men in their 20s more often mentioned Peterson’s call to personal responsibility and self-improvement, what Peterson has called the “metaphysical fortification” of the individual. “I watched one of his videos and I realized he wasn’t full of shit,” a graduate student in early-childhood development said. A religious-studies student, who is also a practicing Sikh and wears a turban, confessed that he and his girlfriend broke up over his support for Peterson. A Bitcoin entrepreneur named Tom who was wearing a T-shirt covered with images of Donald Trump’s face (he said he liked the shirt because it “triggered SJWs” — that is, social-justice warriors) told me, “In my opinion, he’s our generation’s philosopher.”

There were female fans, too, though they were clearly outnumbered. One recent Toronto journalism graduate whispered that she had a crush on Peterson. Another woman, Kristen, didn’t want her last name printed because she’s already suffered blowback from online friends over her fondness for him. “I think people misconstrue what he’s about,” she says. His overall message, according to Kristen, is “pick yourself up, bucko” — quoting one of Peterson’s taglines.

Each morning, ‘it takes about half an hour for my current reality to sink in.’

His influence, though, runs deeper than cross-stitch-ready phrases. Gad Saad sees Peterson’s appeal in religious terms. Saad, a professor of marketing at Concordia University, has likewise sparked the ire of some on the left with his critiques of feminism and Islam. “Jordan has an apostolic flair,” Saad says. “He represents the irreverent academic who isn’t willing to toe the line, who stands on principle. Most academics are too tepid in trying to tackle these issues.” A former student of Peterson’s at Harvard, Gregg Hurwitz, now a writer of best-selling thrillers, has long drawn inspiration from him. Hurwitz slipped some of Peterson’s self-help quotes into his novel *Orphan X*, which is slated to become a

movie starring Bradley Cooper. Hurwitz thinks Peterson's knack for extracting life lessons from lofty concepts helps account for his appeal. "It's this ability to take the evolutionary, archetypal narrative and apply it to cleaning up your room," he says. "And he's actually authentic." Hurwitz remembers how, at Harvard, Peterson was quick to shut down students who used "facile ideological arguments" from either end of the political spectrum. "He would dispatch them readily and was unafraid to do so," Hurwitz says.

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There are plenty of others who see Peterson as a malignant force and argue that he provides intellectual-sounding cover for bigotry and misogyny. But persuading them to state those views on the record is a challenge. One cited "personal and community safety threats" as a reason for not commenting. Another asked that even her refusal to comment be kept off the record. They worry about their names' merely appearing alongside his — and perhaps with some reason. David Cameron, dean of the faculty of arts and science at Toronto, said he was inundated with hostile emails after he sent two letters to Peterson warning him that failure to use a student's preferred pronoun "can constitute discrimination" under Ontario law, and also reminding him to engage in "civil, nonviolent interactions at all times." (Peterson made both letters public and called them "inexcusable.")

Even friends and former co-authors turned down requests for interviews or simply didn't respond. A former student and admirer, who asked to speak on background, has mixed feelings about the version of Peterson now on display. "His core psychological ideas really are that good," he writes in an email. "However, I'm afraid that the more time he spends publicly revealing his ignorance of the history of race- and gender-relations, the less eager I am to be on record saying anything good about him."

What you can't help noticing when you walk into Jordan Peterson's unassuming row house in central Toronto are the paintings. There is Soviet propaganda everywhere, including on the ceiling. He has more than 200 such paintings:

Lenin addressing a crowd, a portrait of a Soviet agronomist, Russian soldiers during World War II. In the early 2000s, Peterson began buying these paintings on eBay because the irony of bidding for communist agitprop on the most capitalist marketplace ever devised was too delicious to resist. But he also bought them to remind himself of how glorious utopian visions often descend into unspeakable horror.

To understand Peterson's worldview, you have to see the connection between his opposition to gender-neutral pronouns and his obsession with the Soviet Union. He believes that the insistence on the use of gender-neutral pronouns is rooted in postmodernism, which he sees as thinly disguised Marxism. The imposition of Marxism led to the state-sponsored slaughter of millions. For Peterson, then, the mandated use of gender-neutral pronouns isn't just a case of political correctness run amok. It's much more serious than that. When he refers to the "murderous ideology" of postmodernism, he means it literally.

In person, Peterson is wiry, hyperalert, ready to pounce. His dark hair is graying and closely cropped on the sides. He's lost the beard he sported in years past, along with a lot of weight — 50 pounds, he says, since he changed his diet and stopped taking antidepressants. When you watch old videos of Peterson's lectures, you'll hear the same ideas, often the same anecdotes, but the professor delivering them is a more measured, genial figure. These days Peterson seems like a man possessed. His brow furrows, his eyes narrow. He speaks in rapid-fire, *um*-less sentences. He doesn't smile much. Sometimes Peterson seizes his temples with one hand as if squeezing out an especially stubborn thought.

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His lectures are largely improvised. He writes out a bare-bones outline, but he's never sure exactly what he'll say or how long he'll talk (90 minutes? Two hours? More?). His audience likes the no-frills urgency, the sense that he's digging to the heart of impossibly complex conundrums, the feeling that they're observing a bona fide philosopher sweat out the truth under pressure. His frenetic, freewheeling approach is the antithesis of a rehearsed TED talk. He describes

his method as a high-wire act. “It’s always a tossup as to whether I’m going to pull off the lecture, because I’m still wrestling with the material. Because the lecture in the theater is a performance — it’s a theater, for God’s sake,” he says. “What I’m trying to do is to embody the process of thinking deeply on stage.” He pauses for a moment, then amends that last statement: “It’s not that I’m trying to do that. That’s what I’m doing.”

Not long ago, Peterson had his picture taken with a couple of fans who were holding a Pepe banner. One of them was also forming the “OK” sign with his fingers, probably a reference to the “It’s OK to Be White” meme created on 4Chan, one of the more offensive and irreverent corners of the internet. Pepe is a smirking cartoon frog that was originally conceived as an innocent illustration but has been appropriated as a tongue-in-cheek icon by aggressively pro-Trump types.

Peterson thinks pointing to that photo as evidence of his sympathy for white supremacy is silly. “I’ve had my picture taken with twenty-five hundred people in the last year, maybe more,” he says. Peterson, who has written a lot about religious iconography, finds the mythos around Pepe fascinating, noting how Pepe is worshiped by the fictional cult of Kek in the made-up country of Kekistan. “It’s satire,” he says. “A lot of these things are weird jokes.” They’re poking fun, he contends, at the oversensitivity of those who would condemn images of frogs or benign statements about the OK-ness of white people. And Peterson has put his own spin on the joke: In a recent video, he held up a Kermit the Frog puppet with a Hitler mustache as a way of acknowledging the criticism, and also, perhaps, of showing his younger followers he’s down with the latest memes.

Asked whether he worries that his association with these symbols and slogans, which have been employed by a number of avowed white supremacists, could be misunderstood, Peterson waves off the concern. “I know for a fact that I’ve moved far more people into the center,” he says. “People write and say, ‘Look



I've been really attracted by these far-right ideas, and your lectures helped me figure out why that was a bad idea.' That also happens with people on the far left."

He's also heard the criticism, including from some longtime colleagues, that he fails to couch his language carefully and as a result naïvely wades into fraught conversations about gender and race. "They say, 'I kind of agree with Jordan, but he could have been a lot nicer about it,'" he says. "It's an attitude that brought out a rather cynical reaction in me: 'Oh, yeah, you could have done what I did, but you would have done it better?' It's like, go ahead, man! Have at it!"

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Peterson did recently back down after proposing a website that would use an algorithm to determine which university course descriptions contained postmodern and Marxist language. His plan, which he announced on a television news show, was to create a list of those courses so that students could avoid them. He reiterated his claim that the humanities and the social sciences have become ruined by postmodernism, and he hoped that this list would help bring down those departments. He saw this as a first step toward starting his own online university founded with the mission of developing character, though the plans for such a grand enterprise remain sketchy. The reaction to his website proposal was not positive. Peterson, after talking with a number of friends who told him that it was a bad idea, decided to scrap the website, at least for now. "The question was, 'Would it do more harm than good?'" he says. "I thought it might add to the polarization."

On the table in his den is a copy of his new book, *12 Rules for Life*. It is, in a sense, a more accessible version of *Maps of Meaning*. In it you won't find flowcharts featuring dragons or the full text of a letter he wrote to his father in 1986. Instead it's an anecdote-driven advice book that encourages readers to "treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping" and "pursue what

is meaningful (not what is expedient).” It would be hard to ferret out anything to protest in these pages. The preorders of *12 Rules* already dwarf the total sales to date of *Maps of Meaning*.

Peterson seems more than a little overwhelmed by what’s happened to him over the past year. He estimates that he’s received 25,000 emails in recent months from fans who want to express what he means to them. At the same time, health problems that have long plagued him, including bouts of debilitating fatigue, have resurfaced. Plus there’s the ever-present anxiety: He is speaking so often now, and what he says is so closely scrutinized by supporters and detractors alike, that he fears one inartfully phrased remark could be used to pull him down from his new perch. “Surfing is the right metaphor,” he says. “It’s like I’m on a very large wave, and that’s, you know, really something, but mostly you drown.”

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