

A Jordan Peterson Primer for Law Students

*a primer on existential reality for students who recognize
the need to acknowledge the reality of a law school experience
that helps make sense of the law-school-makes-you-neurotic syndrome*

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And who is Jordan Peterson? Jordan B. Peterson is first and foremost a clinical psychologist. He is widely published in the field of social psychology and has been engaged in the clinical practice of psychotherapy. He is an acknowledged student of Sigmund Freud, C.G. Jung, Carl Rogers, and Jean Piaget, and speaks often with admiration and affect for Jung's work. Peterson is also an avowed student of Friedrich Nietzsche, and he points to Nietzsche as being a significant influence on Jung's thinking.

Peterson is a professor of psychology, first at Harvard University, and now at the University of Toronto. He taught for eight years at Harvard, and has been a professor at the University of Toronto since 1998. Peterson is the author of two books, *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief* (Routledge, 1999) and *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (Random House Canada, 2018).

Peterson's university lectures on psychology in his "Personality and Its Transformations" course taught in the years 2014-2017 are available as YouTube videos. A second series of university lectures, more philosophical in nature, for Peterson's course, "Maps of Meaning" given in the years 2015-2017 at the University of Toronto, and in 1996 at Harvard University, are also available as YouTube videos.

In 2017, Peterson presented a series of widely attended lectures on the "Psychological Significance of the Biblical Stories" that drew extensively on his previous lectures on personality and maps of meaning. The Bible stories lectures were recorded and are now available on YouTube.

After the publication of *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* by Random House Canada, in 2018, Peterson undertook a massive book tour that had him lecture on *12 Rules for Life* all over the Western world. Peterson reports that he is now working on a new book that follows up on the best-selling *12 Rules for Life* that will follow the same format and offer still more rules for life. Some readers have uncharitably categorized Peterson's *12 Rules for Life* as a self-help book and one suspects that Peterson might not quarrel with the proposition that psychology and philosophy can (and should) be packaged in the form of self-help instruction. It requires nothing like a charitable disposition to find in *12 Rules*

**Jordan Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*
(Toronto: Random House Canada, 2018)**

[“Overture,” xxv-xxxv, at xxxiv]

“It took a long time to settle on a title: *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*. Why did that one rise up above all others? First and foremost, because of its simplicity. It indicates clearly that people need ordering principles, and that chaos otherwise beckons. We require rules, standards, values—alone and together. We’re pack animals, beasts of burden. We must bear a load, to justify our miserable existence. We require routine and tradition. That’s order. Order can become excessive, and that’s not good, but chaos can swamp us, so we drown—and that is also not good. . . . [There is a] dividing line between order and chaos. That’s where we are simultaneously stable enough, exploring enough, transforming enough, repairing enough, and cooperating enough. It’s there we find the meaning that justifies life and its inevitable suffering.”

■ 1 ■

“Life is suffering. That’s clear. There is no more basic, irrefutable truth.”

■ 2 ■

**“Life is not a place to attain happiness or even to aim for happiness . . .
[Life is] a call for something like adventure.”**

■ 3 ■

“What should you be aiming for in your life?”

■ 4 ■

**“[M]any problems in life . . . are ill-defined and require
restructuring before they can be solved”**

■ 5 ■

“The world is a complex . . . place.”

■ 6 ■

“[Seek out] strategies for dealing with emergent complexity.”

■ 7 ■

**“The stories that we tell—and that we live in—are fundamentally
ways that we deal with the complexity of the world.”**

■ 8 ■

**“We differ in how we perceive the world, how we filter our facts,
and how we arrange our goals and actions.”**

■ 9 ■

“Bargain with reality.”

■ 10 ■

**“You have to put up with a hierarchy
if you’re going to have any values.”**

■ 11 ■

**“There is an unspeakably primordial calculator, deep within you,
at the very foundation of your brain, far below your thoughts and feelings.
It monitors exactly where you are positioned in society”**

■ 12 ■

**“What is the real world made of? Everything you know.
Everything you don’t know.”**

■ 13 ■

**“Everyone understands order and chaos, world and underworld
We all have a palpable sense of the chaos lurking
under everything familiar.”**

■ 14 ■

**“The fundamental constituent elements of reality
are *order* and *chaos*.”**

■ 15 ■

**“How can what has not yet been encountered be comprehended,
understood, embodied, faced or adapted to?”**

■ 1 ■

“Life is suffering. That’s clear. There is no more basic, irrefutable truth.”¹ You can be assured that no life, regardless of how you live it, can spare you from suffering. Becoming a lawyer will not spare you. You may, of course, with good fortune, find that your joy in life far exceeds your suffering. Of this, you can be sure: “The world is difficult; the world is a hard place.”² There will be many obstacles to overcome as you proceed through life. Law school may be one of these obstacles. Law school may be one obstacle after another.

Law school may be turning out to be something other than the paradise you might have wanted it to be. But then, who told you law school would be paradise? Who would traffic in such a notion?

One way to look at law school, and a view that many of your fellow students will share: *Law school is a difficult place*. You may find in law school that you are on an emotional roller-coaster. The negative emotions wash ashore (never so well-timed as the tide). And yes, it may actually be true: Law school can be a place that will drive you crazy. Crazy may be in the cards for you, especially if you happen to be inclined in that direction. Still more likely, if you happen to have a fragile ego. You may, given the matrix of your personality traits, the law school culture, your personal brand of existential concerns, be a candidate for “psychological distress”—a nasty brew of anxiety and depression (sometimes aggravated and all the more threatening to well-being when accompanied by efforts at self-medication with alcohol/drugs).

The question you confront now, given what you know of law school: What will you do in this place? What will you do with the suffering that comes your way? Some obvious advice: “Don’t suffer anymore than you have to.”³ You are not going to suffer less by denying psychological distress when it engulfs you. Denying your emotional suffering, you can be sure the troubles that have descended upon you will be compounded.

¹ Jordan Peterson, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* 161 (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2018).

² Jordan Peterson, “Iceland: 12 Rules for Life—Lecture 1,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2oSQouy>. “You might be able to minimize suffering even if you can’t overcome it or transcend it.” Jordan Peterson, “Find Meaning in Your Life,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2RQW18P>.

³ Jordan Peterson, “Start Small & Work Your Way Up,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2Esqp68>. “If you are in pain, you care about it . . . Get your act together so there isn’t any more pain than necessary around you.” *Id.*

“[Life] is not a place to attain happiness or even to aim for happiness [Life is] a call for something like adventure.”⁴ Getting accepted to law school, may have made you happy. You may have been happy for several weeks after you arrived at law school. There may even, now, be moments of happiness. But you would, wouldn’t you, be hard-pressed to find anyone who claims that law school is a place where you can reasonably expect to exist in a state of happiness? Yes, there are happy people in law school. What you are not told is that law school, by most accounts, is a place where a significant number of you end up profoundly unhappy. The findings of researchers (law teachers and social psychologists) engaged in “happiness studies” (and yes, there is a school of psychology—*positive psychology*—that claims to be a science of happiness and well-being), tell us that law school is a place that so threatens students well-being that unhappiness is rampant.⁵

So, let’s assume that you are not all that surprised to learn that law school is a place where unhappiness abounds (however you happen to describe and define that condition). You protest: *This isn’t what I signed up for. Who in their right mind associates education with unhappiness? I didn’t expect law school to be a stroll in the park, and I certainly never expected law school to be a happiness factory. But . . . a place of suffering? A pervasiveness sense of unhappiness? I didn’t come to law school to make myself profoundly unhappy.*

If suffering is real, and law school is a place where it can happen, and happiness is in short supply, and not the most reliable goal in life, then what?⁶ Happiness, having it or not, may not be the problem: “We focus on the idea of happiness too much. The problem is that it takes our focus away from aims that would be more productive. It

⁴ Jordan Peterson, “What Happens If You Stay in Your House For Too Long,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2Qs4hPG>. [The video clip is from a 2018 lecture in Iceland, Jordan Peterson, “Iceland: 12 Rules for Life—Lecture 1,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2UzLZKO> (*see* video at 30:49 mins.)].

⁵ There are more than a few adherents of positive psychology to be found in legal education circles. The turn to positive psychology makes it possible to attempt a positive response to the symptoms we associate with student psychological distress. What the adherents of “happiness studies” assume is that drawing on positive psychology one finds “interventions” that purport to make it possible to try in negative emotions for happiness. Count me dubious.

⁶ “Suffering in life without meaning is intolerable.” Jordan Peterson, “Sam Harris, the IDW, and the Left,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2QKn6gE>.

is much better to aim for meaning than for happiness.”⁷

■ 3 ■

“What should you be aiming for in your life?”⁸ If you are not aiming for happiness, if you are not a happiness junky, then what? In law school, you can’t avoid focusing on the present: law school work demands your immediate full attention (and most of your waking hours). Oddly enough, focus on present nature of the work as you do, with the least bit of reflection you can see how all this work you do is future-oriented; your work now is in pursuit of a “desired goal”—*become a lawyer*. Your goal has set you up to be future-oriented. You have a destination in sight.

You arrive in law school. You see that you are moving from point A (the present) to point B (the future). Law school is all about the future. What lies in the future? Potential. “Potential is the future. We believe in the future. We orient ourselves toward the future . . . The future comes at us from every direction. We decide as we encounter the future which parts of it we are going to interact with and how we are going to construct the present and the past as a consequence of doing that.”⁹

Here is the problem: you have this goal—*become a lawyer* goal. The goal has been a sufficient driving force, a motivation, to get you to law school. The goal has committed you to an identifiable future. The labors you undergo now, and the various assaults on your ego and the threats to your sense of well-being—the demand that you learn to “think like a lawyer” (and that can be, as you might imagine, a dodgy affair)—are all taking place in the present. What you need is a new goal that will fortify your resilience to threats to the self. I propose that you already have that goal—to *live a worthwhile life*, and that this goal can be stated with more precision—to *live a worthwhile life that being a competent lawyer makes possible*. What takes place in the present may look different if you have oriented yourself properly toward the competence you seek. What you do now—your work and your life as a student—looks differently from a competence perspective.

Let’s say that law school with your goal focused on the law school culture and the burdensome load of “present” work to be undertaken puts you in a “bind.” The

⁷ Jordan Peterson, “Find Meaning in Your Life,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2RQbdmA>.

⁸ Jordan Peterson, “What Should You Aim for in Life?,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2tt586P>.

⁹ Jordan Peterson, “What Happens If You Stay in Your House For Too Long,” YouTube video, *supra* note 4. “You treat potential as if it were real.” *Id.*

“bind,” existentially-defined, locates you in a position to suffer more than you had anticipated, to experience more of a sense of loss than you would have expected; law school can plunge you into a state of unhappiness, an unhappiness that lingers around you. The unhappiness you experience in law school may feel like a storm front stalled over your life. The present can be a bitter pill to swallow. You take the medicine; expect to get over what ails you and carry on in your progress toward the future.

So, you are in a “bind.” Now what? “If you are in a bind what you look for is potential. Is there another way of conceptualizing [the situation]? . . . Can I make another plan? Is there something I’m not taking into account that would make this situation tolerable.”¹⁰ Here’s the key: “Transfigure the landscape of possibility that lies before you.”¹¹ What else can you possibly do? Give-in. Give-up. Retreat (take flight). Savor your disappointment. Store-up (and try to hide) a growing sense of failed expectations. These responses suggest that one problem with “the problem” may be the way you have conceptualized the situation.¹² The problem looks quite different if you see that the hierarchy that seems to threaten you—the hierarchy held out to you by the law school culture—is of significance only if it turns out to be a reliable marker in different hierarchy—a hierarchy of competence.

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Your goal is “an imaginary state . . . a state that only exists in fantasy, as something (potentially) preferable to the present. . . . This imagined future constitutes a *vision of perfection*, so to speak, generated in the light of all current knowledge (at least under optimal conditions), to which specific and general aspects of ongoing experience are continually compared. This vision of perfection is the promised land”¹³ In what sense, one might ask, is your goal—*become a lawyer*—a “vision of perfection” of the “promised land”? Or is your goal, more precisely stated—*to lead a meaningful life? to ground this meaning in your competence as a lawyer?*

You want to keep in mind that your goal—your aim—makes all the difference.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.* You are an agent “confronting a landscape of possibilities.” Jordan Peterson, “An Evening with Matt Dillahunty & Jordan Peterson,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2QJgFui>.

¹² Jordan Peterson, “What Happens If You Stay in Your House For Too Long,” YouTube video, *supra* note 4.

¹³ *Id.* at 13.

“*What [you] aim at determines what you see.*”¹⁴

—“Everyone needs a concrete, specific goal—an ambition, and a purpose—to limit chaos and make intelligence sense of his or her life.”¹⁵

—“We cannot navigate without something to aim at and, while we are in this world, we must always navigate.”¹⁶

—“We have to move forward toward things . . . toward things we value.”

—“To aim at something is the same as valuing it.”¹⁷ We move from Point A to Point B in recognition that at Point A, we are in “a difficult place.” “Point B is a more desirable place.”¹⁸ At Point A, you are a student neophyte. At Point B, you are a competent student of law with the potential to become a

¹⁴ Peterson, *12 Rules for Life*, at 96 (emphasis in the original). “We only see what we aim at. The rest of the world (and that’s most of it) is hidden.” *Id.* at 101.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 226. In Jordan Peterson’s lexicon, our most fundamental orientation to existence can be expressed in our experience of a “known world” bounded by a far more encompassing “unknown world.” Still other terms that Peterson uses to describe this existential reality are “explored” and “unexplored,” “familiar” and “unfamiliar.” The familiar, explored, known world is exemplified in what we know as *order*. Everything beyond *order* is *chaos*. “Chaos is the domain of ignorance itself. It’s *unexplored territory*. Chaos is what extends, eternally and without limit, beyond the boundaries of all states, all ideas, and all disciplines. It’s the foreigner, the stranger, . . . the rustle in the bushes in the night-time, the monster under the bed, the hidden anger of your mother, and the sickness of your child. Chaos is the despair and horror you feel when you have been profoundly betrayed. It’s the place you end up when things fall apart; when your dreams die, your career collapses, or your marriage ends. It’s the underworld of fairytale and myth . . . Chaos is where we are when we don’t know where we are, and what we are doing. It is, in short, all those things, and situations we neither know nor understand.” *Id.* 35-36.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 92.

¹⁷ Jordan Peterson, “Iceland: 12 Rules for Life—Lecture 1,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2Qq3DCr>.

¹⁸ Jordan Peterson, “Peterson Graciously Schools Oxford Students on Hierarchy,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2Qq3wqE>. In this video, Peterson lays out his argument on the reality of hierarchies, including, of relevance to law students, hierarchies of competence.

competent lawyer.

—“The present is eternally flawed. But where you start might not be as important as the direction you are heading. *Perhaps happiness is always to be found in the journey uphill, and not in the fleeting sense of satisfaction awaiting at the next peak.*”¹⁹

—“An aim, an ambition, provides the structure necessary for action. An aim provides a destination, a point of contrast against the present, and a framework, within which all things can be evaluated. An aim defines progress and makes such progress exciting. An aim reduces anxiety, because if you have no aim everything can mean anything or nothing, and neither of those two options makes for a tranquil spirit.”²⁰

—“[I]t is necessary to aim at your target, however traditional, with your eyes wide open. You have a direction, but it might be wrong. You have a plan, but it might be ill-formed. You may have been led astray by your own ignorance—and, worse, by your own unrevealed corruption. You must make friends, therefore, with what you don’t know, instead of what you know. You must remain awake to catch yourself in the act.”²¹

—“We can only see what we aim at. The rest of the world (and that’s most of it) is hidden. If we start aiming at something different . . . our minds will start presenting us with new information, derived from the previously hidden world, to aid us in that pursuit.”²²

—“[W]hat you aim at determines what you see. That’s worth repeating. *What you aim at determines what you see.*” “What you see depends on your aim” (“and, therefore, on value—because you aim at what you value”).²³

—“Most of our vision is peripheral, and low resolution We point our high-resolution capacities at the few specific things we are aiming at. And we let everything else—which is almost everything—fade, unnoticed, into the

¹⁹ Peterson, *12 Rules for Life*, at 94.

²⁰ *Id.* at 221.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.* at 101.

²³ *Id.* at 96.

background.”²⁴

Isn't your present goal—a *meaningful life*? What better aim can you have than to be a *competent lawyer*?

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And all of this, according to Jordan Peterson, is how we deal with the “overwhelming complexity of the world”: “[Y]ou ignore it, while you concentrate minutely on your private concerns. You see things that facilitate your movement forward, toward your desired goals. You detect obstacles, when they come up in your path. You're blind to everything else (and there's a lot of everything else—so you're very blind). And it has to be that way, because there is much more of the world than there is of you. You must shepherd your limited resources carefully. Seeing is very difficult, so you must choose what to see, and let the rest go.”²⁵

—“Since you've ignored so much, there is plenty of possibility left where you have not yet looked.”²⁶

—“You look at the world in your particular, idiosyncratic manner. You use a set of tools to screen most things out and let some things in. You have spent a lot of time building these tools. They've become habitual. They're not mere abstract thoughts. They're built right into you. They orient you in the world. They're your deepest and often implicit and unconscious values. They've become part of your biological structure. They're alive. And they don't want to disappear, or transform, or die.”²⁷

—“One of the ways of conceptualizing the fundamental problem that human beings face . . . is an ongoing struggle with complexity.”²⁸ To navigate this world of complexity (and do so with the sense that life has some meaning), we move from point A to point B. “We are always and simultaneously *at*

²⁴ *Id.* at 97-98.

²⁵ *Id.* at 98.

²⁶ *Id.*

²⁷ *Id.* at 99.

²⁸ Jordan Peterson, “Peterson Graciously Schools Oxford Students on Hierarchy,” YouTube video, *supra*, note 18. “[T]he world is a complex and obstinately real place . . .” Peterson, *12 Rules for Life*, at 101.

point ‘a’ (which is less desirable than it could be), *moving towards* point ‘b’ (which we deem better, in accordance with our explicit and implicit values. We always encounter the world in a state of insufficiency and seek its corrections. We can imagine new ways that things could be set right, and improved, even if we have everything we thought we needed. Even when satisfied, temporarily, we remain curious. We live within a framework that defines the present as eternally lacking and the future as eternally better. If we did not see things this way, we would not act at all. We wouldn’t even be able to see, because to see we must focus, and to focus we must pick one thing above all else on which to focus.”²⁹

Here is what might loosely be described as a summary statement: “Everyone needs a concrete, specific goal—an ambition, and a purpose—to limit chaos and make intelligible sense of his or her life.”³⁰

Here is the question: “What is a really good goal? This is what we are trying to figure out.”³¹

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“We construct our idealized world, in fantasy, according to all the information we have at our disposal. We use what we know to build an image of what we could have and, therefore, of what we should do. But we compare our interpretation of the world as it unfolds in the present to *the desired world, in imagination*, not to mere expectation; we compare what we have (in interpretation) to what we *want*, rather than to what we merely think *will be*. Our goal setting, and consequent striving, is motivated; we chase what we *desire*, in our constant attempts to optimize our affective states. (Of course, we use our behavior to ensure that our *dreams* come true; that is healthy ‘adaptation.’ But we still compare what is happening to what we

²⁹ Peterson, *12 Rules for Life*, at 93.

³⁰ *Id.* at 226.

³¹ Jordan Peterson, “No Goal, No Positive Emotion,” Youtube video: <http://bit.ly/2EiUVia>. “There is a set of playable games.” And the set is quite large. You are “always within one of these little frameworks.” You can call it a game. Or you can see it as a hierarchy of competence. “You parse out a little part of the world, something you can handle . . . you posit a goal, you plot a goal . . . you have a motivation framework.” One goal might be to play games that “allow you to learn how to pursue other goals.” The goals you seek, and the games you play are related to your traits of temperament. *Id.*

want—to what we desire to be—not to what we cold-bloodedly expect.)”³²

If you have set out to live a meaningful life and you have set out to be a lawyer, there must be some connection between your work as a lawyer and the life of meaning you have set for yourself as a goal. If you think about your future as being determined by a goal, and you see this goal from a future-oriented perspective, then you can see how significant it may be to see your work as a student in terms of a meaningful life.

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“Don’t underestimate the power of vision and direction. These are irresistible forces, able to transform what might appear to be unconquerable obstacles into traversable pathways and expanding opportunities. Strengthen . . . yourself. Take care with yourself. Define who you are. . . . Choose your destination and articulate your Being.”³³

■ 4 ■

“[M]any problems in life . . . are ill-defined and require restructuring before they can be solved”³⁴ When you are a law student, you have an obvious goal—*become a lawyer*. The goal—consider it an aspiration—is, oddly enough, a problem. How can a “desired goal” be a problem. First, you might want to take another look at this idea that your goal, now that you are in law school is to *become a lawyer*. If you consider how difficult it is to fail out of law school, you must know that your problem is no longer *will I become a lawyer?*³⁵ The question now is *what kind of lawyer will I end up being?* Your goal needs to be updated and redefined. Becoming a lawyer is no longer your immediate problem; competence is your problem. The most immediate problem you face is trying to figure out how to be a competence student of law. (This is a problem that will, inevitably, entangle you in the thorns and thistles of the law school culture, and may end up bringing you face-to-face with the law school *shadow*.) Yes, you may have a problem figuring out how to navigate the

³² Peterson, *12 Rules for Life*, at 27-28.

³³ *Id.* at 63.

³⁴ Colin G. DeYoung, Joseph L. Flanders & Jordan B. Peterson, *Cognitive Abilities Involved in Insight Problem Solving: An Individual Differences Model*, 20 (3) *Creativity Res. J.* 278, 288 (2008).

³⁵ Yes, there is this last significant hurdle: you must pass a bar examination to become a lawyer. The concern and the worry about this last obstacle is, for most students, held in some remote location of the psyche during the first years of their legal education.

law school world, but you are far more likely to become lost in this world if you don't try to get a bearing on *what it means to be a competent lawyer*. Being a competent student is not, it turns out, the same thing as being a student who knows how to seek competence in the world that lawyers inhabit.

“A *problem* may be defined as a situation in which one's current state differs from some goal state, and in which there is some uncertainty as to whether or how the goal can be achieved”³⁶

■ 5 ■

“[T]he world is a complex . . . place.”³⁷ There is part of the world you have explored; your explored world feels familiar to you. And beyond your known world there lies vast reaches of the world of which you know nothing. “So there you are, surrounded by some things that you understand in an ocean of things you don't understand at all.”³⁸

—“One of the ways of conceptualizing the fundamental problem that human beings face . . . is an ongoing struggle with complexity. Complexity emerges as a consequence of finite bounded individual consciousness (and the excess

³⁶ *Id.* Problem solving can be “considered a central task of human existence and thus of the mind/brain.” *Id.* “Problems may be divided into two general classes: well-defined and ill-defined. In a well-defined problem, the correct formulation is given—that is, the problem is presented with the expectation that the current state, goal state, and operators will be sufficiently obvious to allow steady (if not certain) progress toward the goal. . . . Most problems in life, however, are ill-defined. In an ill-defined problem, uncertainty inheres not only in whether the goal will be reached but in how best to conceive the current state [and] goal state The real problem, therefore, is how to develop a new problem formulation, transforming the ill-defined problem into a well-defined problem that can be solved.” *Id.* at 278-279. “Ill-defined problems usually become apparent as such when the way in which one is approaching some goal proves inadequate and when all other readily conceived strategies . . . also prove inadequate.” *Id.* at 279.

What determines “when an impasse will lead to abandoning the initial formation [of the problem]” and the search for a new formulation begin? *Id.* at 281.

³⁷ Peterson, *12 Rules for Life*, at 101.

³⁸ Jordan Peterson, “2017 Maps of Meaning: Lecture 6: Story and Metastory Pt2,” Youtube video, <https://bit.ly/2tt586P>.

of the unbounded everywhere else, even including beneath consciousness).”³⁹

—One fundamental way that “you deal with the overwhelming complexity of the world: you ignore it, while you concentrate minutely on your private concerns. You see things that facilitate your movement forward, toward your desired goals. You detect obstacles, when they pop up in your path. You’re blind to everything else (and there’s a lot of everything else—so you’re very blind). And it has to be that way, because there is much more of the world than there is of you. You must shepherd your limited resources carefully. Seeing is very difficult, so you must choose what to see, and let the rest go.”⁴⁰

—“Think about it this way. You look at the world in your particular, idiosyncratic manner. You use a set of tools to screen most things out and let some things in. You have spent a lot of time building these tools. They’ve become habitual. They’re not mere abstract thoughts. They’re built right into you. They orient you in the world. They’re your deepest and often implicit and unconscious values. They’ve become part of your biological structure. They’re alive. And they don’t want to disappear, or transform or die.”⁴¹

—“Your eyes are tools. They are there to help you get what you want. The price you pay for that utility, that specific, focused direction, is blindness to everything else.”⁴²

—“Most of our vision is peripheral, and low resolution. . . . We point our high-resolution capacities at the few specific things we are aiming at. And we let everything else—which is almost everything—fade, unnoticed, into the background.

If something you’re not attending to pops its ugly head up in a manner that directly interferes with your narrowly focused current activity, you will see it. Otherwise, it’s just not there.”⁴³

—“Since you’ve ignored so much, there is plenty of possibility left where you

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ Peterson, *12 Rules for Life*, at 98.

⁴¹ *Id.* at 99.

⁴² *Id.* at 98.

⁴³ *Id.* at 97-98.

have not yet looked.”⁴⁴

—“If your life is not going well, perhaps it is your current knowledge that is insufficient, not life itself. Perhaps your value structure needs some serious retooling. Perhaps what you want is blinding you to what else could be. Perhaps you are holding on to your desires, in the present, so tightly that you cannot see anything else—even what you truly need.”⁴⁵

—“We only see what we aim at. The rest of the world (and that’s most of it) is hidden. If we start aiming at something different . . . our minds will start presenting us with new information, derived from the previously hidden world, to aid us in that pursuit. Then we can put that information to use and move, and act, and observe, and improve.”⁴⁶

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We move forward; we explore the world. Most of our movements take place in the world we already know. One thing we know, or learn along the way, is that what we know—our known world—exists alongside the unknown; the unknown constitutes a fundamental part of what we know to be real. Jordan Peterson pictures the unknown as a realm of *chaos*.

Some of us, enamored with the familiar world, become psychologically intolerant of uncertainty, fearful of the inevitable *chaos* that surrounds us. Uncertainty, and the unknown, can be an annoyance, a frustration, a source of fear and dread, a nightmare. An intolerance of uncertainty may be sufficiently deep-lying, so existentially present and operative in the reality of your everyday life, that this avoidance of uncertainty can be located as a trait of personality.⁴⁷

You cannot, easily or assuredly, engineer your personality traits so that your existing

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 99.

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 101.

⁴⁷ See R. Nicholas Carleton, *Fear of the Unknown: One Fear to Rule Them all?*, 41 *J. Anxiety Disorders* 5 (2016); R. Nicholas Carleton, *Into the Unknown: A Review and Synthesis of Contemporary Models Involving Uncertainty*, 39 *J. Anxiety Disorders* 30 (2016); Danielle Einstein, *Extension of the Transdiagnostic Model to Focus on Intolerance of Uncertainty: A Review of the Literature and Implications for Treatment*, 21 *Clinical Psychol.: Sci. & Prac.* 280 (2014).

line-up of traits allow you to habitually steer away from anxiety when you venture from your known world into the realm of the unknown.⁴⁸ You can, however, as with any part of the psyche that lies beyond present awareness, invite that part of the self into the conscious realm where you can reflect on it and align yourself with or against the pull of that seemingly autonomous part of the self.

Here is something worthwhile to keep in mind: We have, as human beings, an “exploratory circuit” in the brain. You can exploit the human predilection to explore; you can teach yourself to be an explorer. “When we explore, we transform the indeterminate status and meaning of the unknown thing that we are exploring into something determinate—in the worst case, rendering it nonthreatening, non-punishing; in the best . . . categorizing it so that it is useful.”⁴⁹

q q q

We might want to look at something so vital to a student of law as critical thinking as itself an act of exploration. “Thinking might in many cases be regarded as the abstracted form of exploration—as the capacity to investigate . . . It is only when this capacity [to investigate, to explore] fails . . . or when it plays a paradoxical role (amplifying the significance or potential danger of the unknown through definitive but ‘false’ negative labeling—that active exploration (or active avoidance), with its limitations and dangers, becomes necessary. Replacement of potentially dangerous exploratory actions with increasingly flexible and abstracted thought means the possibility for growth of knowledge without direct exposure to danger, and constitutes one major advantage of the development of intelligence. . . . The world of human experience is constantly transformed and renewed as a consequence of . . . exploration.”⁵⁰

q q q

“Sometimes new information [and you might think of law school as a source of much

⁴⁸ You may not, with an act of will, be able to replace the personality trait associated with neuroticism (that leaves you vulnerable to negative emotion) with the trait of openness to experience (the trait that favors exploration, learning, and tolerance of uncertainty). Neuroticism and openness are the personality traits most clearly associated with intolerance for uncertainty and fear of the unknown.

⁴⁹ Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, at 61. Peterson observes that we “enjoy” our “capacity for investigation.” *Id.* at 65. Human beings are “characterized by the innate capacity to take true pleasure” in exploration. *Id.* at 65-66.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 66.

in the way of ‘new information’] means mere lateral adjustment of behavior—the modification of approach, within a domain where still defined by the familiar goal. Sometimes, however, the unknown emerges in a manner that demands a qualitative adjustment in adaptive strategy: the revaluation of past, present and future, and acceptance of the suffering and confusion this necessarily entails.”⁵¹

■ 6 ■

“[Seek out] strategies for dealing with emergent complexity.”⁵² We confront complexity when we face uncertainty (knowing that a deep-lying intolerance of uncertainty can morph into anxiety). In the quest for competence you will inevitably face uncertainty.

“We answer the question, ‘*how then should we act?*’ by determining the most efficient and self-consistent strategy, all things considered, for bringing the preferred future into being.”⁵³

■ 7 ■

“The stories that we tell—and that we live in—are fundamentally ways that we deal with the complexity of the world.”⁵⁴ In a “simple determinate world”⁵⁵—a known world—a goal can be represented as a simple story: “I was here, and that was

⁵¹ *Id.* at 257.

⁵² Jordan Peterson, “September 2018 Patreon Q & A,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2PzNc1j>.

⁵³ Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, at 14 (emphasis in original).

⁵⁴ Jordan Peterson, “Ways of Dealing with the Complexity of the World,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2zSEIxb>. “You live inside a story.” “We live in stories.” “We have evolved a story-like structure for interpreting the world.” *Id.*

⁵⁵ In Jordan Peterson’s lexicon, a “determinate world” “contains particularized conceptualizations of the current state of affairs and the desired end Currently functional determinate worlds are productive, predictable, and secure, composed, as they are, of previously encountered, explored, and familiar phenomena.” Jordan B. Peterson, “The Meaning of Meaning,” in Paul P. T. Wong, Lilian C. J. Wong, Marvin J. McDonald & Derrick W. Klassen (eds.), *The Positive Psychology of Meaning & Spirituality* 11-32, at 25 (Charlottesville, Virginia: First Purpose Research, 2012). A determinate world contains “the structural elements of the simplest narrative or story: I was here, and I went there (by certain means). . . . Individuals operating with the confines of a given story move from present to future, [on] a linear track.” *Id.* at 14.

insufficient, so I went there.”⁵⁶ This simple version of the story can, and undoubtedly will, be fleshed out with more detail—more life: “Description of the vicissitudes encountered in the course of . . . a journey adds interest to the basic plot.”⁵⁷ Instructed as we are by simple stories we have a need for meta-stories: “[T]he most complex and fascinating story is a meta-narrative: a story that describes the process that transforms stories. It is identification with this process of story transformation that constitutes metaidentity, predicated upon recognition that the human spirit constructs, destroys, and rejuvenates its worlds, as well as merely inhabiting them.”⁵⁸ Story-transformation requires exploratory forays. “This transformational [exploratory] process is both perilous and enriching. It is perilous because descent into the motivational and emotional chaos extant between determinate worlds is stressful It is enriching because unexplored anomaly contains information whose incorporation may [be of] functional utility”⁵⁹

It will require ingenuity to squeeze life-enhancing meaning from the existing law school world. We are more willing to set off on the necessary (and perilous) exploration of the unknown law school world if we understand: “We are novelty processors, no less universally [than we are processors of motivational states and emotions], but [we] do not completely understand this ability, nor explicitly appreciate its absolutely central place in our adaptive striving.”⁶⁰ By “adaptive striving,” Peterson refers to the way we deal with the unknown world—the unfamiliar and the unexplored. We seek in this unknown world, resources that we can use to reconfigure the crusty reality of the law school world we inhabit—a world a student must navigate and survive to become a competent lawyer. Adaptive striving is a response to a determinate, known world beset by anomalies or “emergent insufficiencies.”⁶¹ An anomaly, in Peterson’s schema, is created by “occurrences that are not understood, not explored, and cannot be placed into the context of the current motivational world.”⁶² An anomaly is both “negative, in potential, and positive, in

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 25.

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ *Id.* at 27.

⁶¹ *Id.* at 18.

⁶² *Id.* at 19.

potential, and irrelevant, in potential”⁶³ Psychological distress is a manifestation of negative potential; well-being and a meaningful life are expressions of positive potential. Irrelevant potential are the aspects of law school culture that do not trigger a stress response, and does not awaken the sleeping dragon in your psyche.

■ 8 ■

“We differ in how we perceive the world, how we filter our facts, and how we arrange our goals and actions.”⁶⁴ The personality traits that best help us understand our psychological orientation in the world are described in what is called the Big Five Personality Factor Model. This empirically-based model of personality establishes five factor domains that constitute one’s personality: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. A domain outlines a personality trait. You might think of a personality trait as a sub-personality, a domain of your being that has sufficient breath and depth that it inclines you in identifiable directions, actions, aims, and orientations that define you as being one kind of person and not another.⁶⁵

The Big Five domains most closely related to the way we deal with uncertainty and avoidance of the unknown are openness and neuroticism (neuroticism is a measure of emotional stability following an experience of negative or positive emotion).⁶⁶ An

⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁴ “Personality Assessment for Individuals,” <https://www.understandmyself.com> (featuring the work of Jordan Peterson and his colleagues). I was introduced to the Big Five Model by Jordan Peterson and now find this widely-accepted model of temperament traits far more useful than the Myers-Briggs elaboration of Jung’s psychological functions.

⁶⁵ “What exactly is a trait? Think of a trait as an element of personality. And I think the best way to think about a trait is as a sub-personality. So you are made up of sub-personalities that are integrated into something vaguely representing a unity, but the unity is diverse. There are describable stable elements that describe *you*—that are elements of your Being.” Jordan Peterson, “2017 Personality 14: Introduction to Traits (Psychometrics/The Big Five,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2C5pKVV>. Peterson views personality traits as akin to sub-personalities. They can be described as: (1) “frame[s] of reference” (“a kind of *a priori* conceptual structure that you bring to bear on a whole sequence of environments”); (2) patterns of behavior; (3) a set of “stable motivations”; and (4) a “system of values.” *Id.*

⁶⁶ On neuroticism as a personality trait associated with a negative response to uncertainty, see Jacob B. Hirsh & Michale Inzlicht, *The Devil You Know: Neuroticism Predicts Neural Response to Uncertainty*, 19 *Psychol. Sci.* 962 (2008).

individual high in trait openness is more open to experience, and more engaged in (and by) learning. The openness trait is related to “exploration at a cognitive level,” as well as “expression of an intellectual or philosophical pursuit,” showing a willingness to “map out more of the environment.”⁶⁷

■ 9 ■

“Bargain with reality.” Your law school experience is shaped—not determined—by a law school culture that poses as reality. Law school is a world apart. Law school is a high-stakes game—a peculiar game. Peculiar in the sense that not everyone is playing by the same rules. Law school makes no effort to hide its hierarchal structure.

Some folks will want to remind us: We can’t tinker with reality. Yet, we know reality consists of what exists at present and what will appear in the future. We cannot be expected to know what the future holds for us; yet, we know the future exists—the future is real. As a law student, you are acutely aware of the future; you know you have a particular kind of life ahead of you. Everyday work in law school is done with one eye on the future. Being aware of the future, acting with the future in constant view—even a future that is unknowable—means that we treat the future as real. The future is something you can bargain for, you can bargain with.

One way we bargain with the future is to make sacrifices. “You give up something of value in the present, so you can improve the future.”⁶⁸ Your present situation—being a law student—may not be paradise, and it may not be a path to paradise (there will always be snakes in the garden): “The future is actually the place where there is threat . . . So what do you do? You make sacrifices in the present so the future is better [arrives with fewer threats, fewer snakes in the garden] . . . You can bargain with reality.”⁶⁹ You can anticipate new threats; seek out strategies that increase your chances of lasting out the storm.

⁶⁷ Jordan Peterson, “2014 Personality Lecture 16: Extraversion & Neuroticism (Biology & Traits),” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2SFXmiF>.

⁶⁸ Jordan Peterson, “What Sacrifice Means,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2BaSSt7>.

⁶⁹ Jordan Peterson, “Jordan Peterson on Sacrifice,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2zNgdRZ>. The promise we make to ourselves, a promise that is socially-sanctioned, is a promise that what we do now in the present will “pay off in the future.” Jordan Peterson, “Jordan Peterson on Sacrifice,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2zU44KV>.

■ 10 ■

“You have to put up with a hierarchy if you’re going to have any values.”⁷⁰ Finding yourself in a new hierarchy can be a source of anxiety. In law school, you find yourself in a culture that prizes, promotes, and preserves a law school hierarchy. You can let the law school hierarchy drive you crazy—*anxious, depressed, self-medicating with alcohol (or some other substances)*—or you can reconceptualize the nature of the hierarchy you intend to inhabit. There are actually two hierarchies in law school that will dramatically affect your future life as a lawyer: a law school culture hierarchy and a hierarchy of competence. Only if you can figure out how to navigate the two hierarchies—the culture hierarchy and the competence hierarchy—and see how they define you as a student can you avoid cashing out your sense of well-being.⁷¹

h h h

If you are “aiming up”—and one must assume that making your way to law school was an aim up—this “aiming up produces a hierarchy . . . Produce a value system and you produce a hierarchy”⁷²

Hierarchies, according to Jordan Peterson, are inevitable; we know we live with them; we know they do not produce perfect results. Hierarchies are as simple as they are profoundly complex. Hierarchies complicate our lives in the course of simplifying them and recognizing merit and accomplishment.

—We are designed, by evolutionary adaptation, to exist in hierarchies; we are socialized and educated so that we can navigate hierarchies.

—Attaining the highest levels of any values hierarchy is, by functional operation of the hierarchy, difficult to attain. Most people stack up at some level well below the top levels of the hierarchy.

⁷⁰ Jordan Peterson, “Inequality and Hierarchy Give Life Its Purpose,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2C5ydZm>.

⁷¹ In law school, you have entered what Jordan Peterson calls an indeterminate world—a “zone of recalibration.” “Sometimes . . . the counter mechanism [the “primordial calculator” that tells you where you stand in a hierarchy] can go wrong. Erratic habits of sleeping and eating can interfere with its function. Uncertainty can throw it for a loop.” Peterson, *12 Rules for Life*, at 17-18.

⁷² Jordan Peterson, “Inequality and Hierarchy Give Life Its Purpose,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2Lba9XQ>.

—“Hierarchies can become rigidified and they can be corrupted.”⁷³

—“We don’t know how to fix the problems with hierarchies.”⁷⁴

—We can’t get rid of hierarchies. “You can’t perceive the world without a hierarchy of values.”⁷⁵

■ 11 ■

“There is an unspeakably primordial calculator, deep within you, at the very foundation of your brain, far below your thoughts and feelings. It monitors exactly where you are positioned in society”⁷⁶ We are positioned in social hierarchies that evolved from neurobiological structures. The structure, ancient and deep, is related to our survival as a species.⁷⁷ Here is Jordan Peterson, in *12 Rules for Life*, explaining the function of hierarchies:

—“The order that is most real is the order that is most unchanging—and that is not necessarily the order that is most easily

⁷³ Jordan Peterson, “Sam Harris, the IDW and the Left,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2RRUBL9>.

⁷⁴ On the problem with hierarchies, *see* Jordan Peterson, “Iceland: 12 Rules for Life—Lecture 1,” Youtube video, *supra* note 17.

⁷⁵ Jordan Peterson, “Sam Harris, the IDW and the Left,” YouTube video, *supra* note 46. Hierarchies have an “eternal nature.” “We inevitably arrange ourselves in hierarchies.” *Id.* They are fundamental at the neuro-chemical level. “Hierarchies are not the product of patriarchy or capitalism.” *Id.* The effort to look at the world as if there are no hierarchies is “a bone-headed way of looking at the world.” Jordan Peterson, “Iceland: 12 Rules for Life—Lecture 1,” YouTube video, *supra* note 17.

⁷⁶ Peterson, *12 Rules for Life*, at 15.

⁷⁷ The dominance hierarchy, rooted in biological inheritance, is ancient, set in place before you and I arrive on the scene. We are talking here about Darwin and what he taught us about “selection” and the “survival of the fittest.” You can recognize the reality of the dominance hierarchy (and that our chances of survival can be predicted by our place in the hierarchy), or deny the existence of the hierarchy and the reality it represents. Denying the existence of reality doesn’t make it less real. (I will not attempt here to layout the politics and the ideological stances reflected in the acceptance/denial of the dominance hierarchy. Jordan Peterson has spoken often on this point, and I leave the ideological/political analysis to Peterson.)

seen.”⁷⁸

—“[‘N]ature’ is ‘what selects,’ and the longer a feature has existed the more time it has had to be selected—and to shape life. It does not matter whether that feature is physical and biological, or social and cultural. All that matters from a Darwinian perspective, is permanence—and the dominance hierarchy [is] . . . permanent. It’s real. . . . [The dominance hierarchy is] a near-eternal aspect of the environment We (the sovereign *we*, the *we* that has been around since the beginning of life) have lived in a dominance hierarchy for a long, long time. . . .

The part of our brain that keeps track of our position in the dominance hierarchy is therefore exceptionally ancient and fundamental. It is a master control system, modulating our perceptions, values, emotions, thoughts and actions. It powerfully affects every aspect of our Being, conscious and unconscious alike.”⁷⁹

We may be willing to contemplate dominance hierarchies that exist in the animal domain, and yet, without a second thought, dismiss them as an oppressive feature of our own social world. Jordan Peterson cautions against this kind of dismissal.

A dominance hierarchy is a social arrangement which determines access to desired commodities. In most cases, these commodities are cues for . . . experiences that signify movement toward or increased likelihood of attaining a desired goal. Relative position in the dominance hierarchy—at least in the perfectly functioning society—is in itself determined through social judgment. That judgment reflects appreciation of the value of a particular individual. That value reflects how society views the ability of that individual to contribute to attainment of the goal. . . . Every phenomenon, experienced within the confines of a particular society, is laden with dominance-hierarchy and goal-scheme relevant information.⁸⁰

That we tend to think of hierarchies as pernicious does not mean that hierarchies do not exist. You can’t make a hierarchy of value go away. The hierarchy that we deplore and wish to eradicate lies well beyond our intentions and motivations;

⁷⁸ Jordan Peterson, *12 Rules for Life*, at 13.

⁷⁹ *Id.* at 14-15.

⁸⁰ Jordan Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, at 267.

hierarchies of value shadow and inflect our desires.

■ 12 ■

“What is the real world made of? Everything you know. Everything you don’t know.”⁸¹

the world of existential reality

known	unknown
familiar	unfamiliar
explored	unexplored
determinate	indeterminate
order	chaos

Jordan Peterson, in *Maps of Meaning*, contends that a central feature of existential reality is the sense we have of inhabiting a known world surrounded by a larger, far more vast, unknown world. We have all kinds of maps (of particular interests are cognitive and psychological maps) that represents the reality of our known world; we also accept as reality, a still more vast unknown world that surrounds our known world. We might think of this map—of the known and unknown world—as a representation of the fundamental, existential reality that defines our existence. We use maps because the world we inhabit is complex.⁸² This map may prove invaluable to you in your navigation in law school world.

When pushed or pulled beyond what is familiar, beyond the world we have explored, we find ourselves in a place where we can no longer rely on an assured step-by-step program for progress in reaching a “desired goal”; extrinsic sources for motivation end-up promising more than they can deliver. The threat of uncertainty looms in a menacing way. We don’t know how to unwind the knot we have tied ourselves into.

The most salient feature of our known world is that it is familiar to us; we have found pathways in this world and we feel comfortable (in some relative sense) with explorations we undertake of this world that allow us to follow existing pathways.

⁸¹ Jordan Peterson, “How to Find Your Balance in Life,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2EfrJUg>.

⁸² “The world is too complex to manage without radical functional simplification. . . .” Peterson, “The Meaning of Meaning,” *supra* note 57, at 11. A map is a form of simplification. The law is a vast, complex structure of ideas and concepts, ideals and values, rules and doctrines that come together in the form of an order that organizes our social existence. We need a map to navigate this world of law, a map for learning what we can do in the world of lawyers.

As our motivations, goals, and desires become known to us, they prompt further exploration of our known world. We experience security and comfort and well-being in this known world. (A failure to feel some reasonable degree of comfort in the known world suggest a high level of a personality trait known as neuroticism.) The known world is a familiar world. We know something of the world we inhabit and how it operates; we experience a sense of threat and loss when the world doesn't work as we expect it to work.

When we find ourselves beyond the familiar world, we confront a world that is unexplored. This is the world found on the part of the map of existential reality that lacks landmarks. This is the world we have not explored. A fear of this unknown world—referred to in the research literature as “intolerance of uncertainty”—creates conditions that give rise to psychological distress. Well-being is threatened. Chaos lurks in the shadows. Tigers stalk us in our dreams. Then, the tigers show up in ur waking life.

This fundamental demarcation—familiar and unfamiliar worlds—known and unknown worlds—explored and unexplored worlds—is a way of thinking about existential reality. Knowing the existence of this reality we begin to see it everywhere; it provides us with a way of understanding the world that can save us from unnecessary suffering.⁸³

■

“Many things begin to fall into place when you begin to consciously understand the world in this manner. . . . This is the kind of knowing what that helps you know how.”⁸⁴

■

“The known is explored territory, a place of stability and familiarity [We have narratives that] guide our ability to understand the particular, bounded motivational significance of the present, experienced in relation to some identifiable desired future, and allow us to construct and interpret appropriate patterns of action, from within the confines of that schema. We all produce determinate models of what is, and what should be, and how to transform one into the other. . . .

‘Narratives of the known’ . . . describe established territory, weaving for us a web of

⁸³ No one has spend more intellectual energy developing the language to describe this existential reality—and the existence of this map of meaning and how it can be put to use to understand ourselves in the situation we find ourselves—than Jordan Peterson.

⁸⁴ Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, at 43.

meaning that . . . eliminates the necessity of dispute over meaning. All those who know the rules, and accept them, can play the game—without fighting over the rules of the game. This makes for peace, stability, and potential prosperity—a good game.”⁸⁵

■

“The unknown is, of course, defined in contradistinction to the known. Everything not understood or not explored is unknown.”⁸⁶

■

“The known, our current story, protects us from the unknown, from chaos—which is to say, provides our experience with determinate and predictable structure. Chaos has a nature all of its own. . . . If something unknown or unpredictable occurs, while we are carrying out our motivated plans, we are first surprised. That surprise—which is a combination of apprehension and curiosity—comprises our instinctive emotional response to the occurrence of something we did not desire. The appearance of something unexpected is proof that we do not know how to act If we are somewhere we don’t know how to act, we are probably in trouble—we might learn something new, but we are still in trouble. When we are in trouble, we get scared. When we are in the domain of the known, so to speak, there is no reason for fear. Outside that domain, panic reigns. It is for this reason that we . . . cling to what we understand. This conservative strategy does not always work, however, because what we understand about the present is not necessarily sufficient to deal with the future. This means that we have to be able to modify what we understand, even though to do so is to risk our own undoing. The trick, of course, is to modify and yet to remain secure. This is not so simple. Too much modification brings chaos. Too little modification brings stagnation (and then, when the future we are unprepared for appears—chaos).”⁸⁷

■

“The right hemisphere [of the brain] appears capable of dealing with less determinate information. It can use forms of cognition that are more diffuse, more global and more encompassing to come to terms initially with what cannot yet be understood but undeniably exists. The right hemisphere uses its capacity for massive generalization and comprehension of imagery to lace the novel stimulus in an initially meaningful context, which is the *a priori* manner of appropriate categorization. This context is defined by the motivational significance of the novel thing, which is revealed first by

⁸⁵ Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, at 14.

⁸⁶ *Id.* at 26.

⁸⁷ *Id.* at 18.

the mere fact of novelty (which makes it both threatening and promising) and then in the course of its detailed exploration. The right hemisphere remains concerned with the question ‘what is this new thing like?’ (Meaning ‘what should be done in the presence of this unexpected occurrence?’) and does not care ‘what is this thing objectively’ ‘What is the new think like’ means ‘is it dangerous, or threatening (first and foremost), satisfying or promising’”⁸⁸

■

“So there you are, surrounded by some things that you understand in an ocean of things you don’t understand at all.”⁸⁹

■

“[We understand the] eternal landscapes of known and unknown, world and underworld. We’ve all been in both places, many times; sometimes by happenstance, sometimes by choice.”⁹⁰

■ 13 ■

“Everyone understands order and chaos, world and underworld . . . We all have a palpable sense of the chaos lurking under everything familiar.”⁹¹ “The world is made out of order and chaos.”⁹² “Chaos and order are two of the most fundamental elements of lived experience— two of the most basic subdivisions of Being itself.”⁹³

“Chaos and order are fundamental elements because every lived situation (even every conceivable lived situation) is made up of both. No matter where we are, there are some things we can identify, make use of, and predict, and some things we neither know nor understand. . . . [S]ome things are under our control, and some things are not. . . . Living things are always to be found in places they can master, surrounded

⁸⁸ *Id.* at 69-70.

⁸⁹ Jordan Peterson, “2017 Maps of Meaning: Lecture 6: Story and Metastory Pt2,” Youtube video, <https://bit.ly/2RS3btc>.

⁹⁰ Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, at 43.

⁹¹ Peterson, *12 Rules for Life*, at 43.

⁹² Jordan Peterson, “Yin-Yang, Order & Chaos,” YouTube video, <http://bit.ly/2Rtzkuw>.

⁹³ Peterson, *12 Rules for Life*, at 38. Peterson refers to order and chaos as the “primal constituents” of our “world of experience.” *Id.* at 35.

by things and situations that make them vulnerable.”⁹⁴

■

“Order is where the people around you act according to well-understood social norms, and remain predictable and cooperative. It’s the world of social structure, explored territory, and familiarity. . . .

Chaos, by contrast, is where—or when—something unexpected happens. Chaos emerges, in trivial form, when you tell a joke at a party with people you think you know and a silent and embarrassing chill falls over the gathering. Chaos is what emerges more catastrophically when you suddenly find yourself without employment, or are betrayed by a lover. . . . It’s the new and unpredictable suddenly emerging in the midst of the commonplace familiar.”⁹⁵

■

“Order—explored territory—is constructed out of chaos and exists, simultaneously, in opposition to that chaos (to the ‘new’ chaos, more accurately: to the unknown *now defined in opposition to explored territory*). Everything that is not order—that is, not predictable, not usable—is, by default (by definition) *chaos*. The foreigner—whose behaviors cannot be predicted, who is not kin, either by blood or by custom . . . is *equivalent* to chaos (and not merely metaphorically equated with chaos). As such, his appearance means threat, as his action patterns and beliefs have the capacity to upset society itself”⁹⁶

—order—

“Order . . . is *explored territory*. That’s the hundreds-of-millions-of-years-old hierarchy of place, position and authority. That’s the structure of society. It’s the structure provided by biology, too—particularly insofar as you are adapted, as you are, to the structure of society. . . .

Where everything is certain, we’re in order. We’re there when things are going according to plan and nothing is new and disturbing. . . . Familiar environments are congenial. . . . There, things work, and we’re stable, calm and competent. We seldom leave places we understand—geographical or conceptual—for that reason, and we

⁹⁴ Peterson, *12 Rules for Life*, at 44.

⁹⁵ *Id.* at xxvii-xxviii.

⁹⁶ Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, at 148.

certainly do not like it when we are compelled to or when it happens accidentally.”⁹⁷

■

“Order is when you are where you are producing what you want to have happen. So why is this order? Because you can predict it. You do A and B happens. So what does that mean? You know where you are. You know what you are doing. You know things are working. Then you’re calm because there’s nothing to be nervous about. And you’re moderately happy because you’re getting what you need and want and there is evidence that you are competent because that’s why things are working. That’s order.”⁹⁸

■

“Order is the place and time where the oft-invisible axioms you live by organize your experience and your actions so that what should happen does happen.”⁹⁹

—a negative aspect of order—

“[O]rder is sometimes tyranny and stultification . . . [this happens] when the demand for certainty and uniformity and purity becomes too one-sided.”¹⁰⁰

—chaos—

“Chaos is the domain of ignorance itself. It’s unexplored territory. Chaos is what extends, eternally and without limit, beyond the boundaries of all states, all ideas, and all disciplines. It’s the foreigner, the stranger, . . . the rustle in the bushes in the night-time, the monster under the bed, the hidden anger of your mother, and the sickness of your child. Chaos is the despair and horror you feel when you have been profoundly betrayed. It’s the place you end up when things fall apart; when your dreams die, your career collapses, or your marriage ends. It’s the underworld of fairytale and myth Chaos is where we are when we don’t know where we are, and what we are doing. It is, in short, all those things, and situations we neither know nor understand.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Peterson, *12 Rules for Life*, at 36.

⁹⁸ Jordan Peterson, “Yin-Yang, Order & Chaos,” YouTube video, <http://bit.ly/2Rtzkuw>.

⁹⁹ Peterson, *12 Rules for Life*, at 37.

¹⁰⁰ *Id.* at 36.

¹⁰¹ *Id.* 35-36.

■

“Something unexpected or undesired can always make its appearance, when a plan is being laid out, regardless of how familiar the circumstances.”¹⁰²

—positive aspects of chaos—

“In its positive guise, chaos is possibility itself, the source of ideas, the mysterious realm of gestation and birth.”¹⁰³

■

“And even if it were possible to permanently banish everything threatening—everything dangerous (and, therefore, everything challenging and interesting), that would mean only that another danger would emerge . . . How could the nature of man ever reach its full potential without challenge and danger? How dull and contemptible would we become if there was no longer reason to pay attention?”¹⁰⁴

—living with order & chaos—

“We eternally inhabit order, surrounded by chaos. We eternally occupy known territory, surrounded by the unknown. We experience meaningful engagement when we mediate appropriately between them. We are adapted, in the deepest Darwinian sense . . . to the meta-realities of order and chaos . . . Chaos and order make up the eternal, transcendent environment of the living.

To straddle that fundamental duality is . . . to have one foot firmly planted in order and security, and the other in chaos, possibility, growth and adventure. When life suddenly reveals itself as intense, gripping and meaningful; when time passes and you’re so engrossed in what you’re doing you don’t notice—it is there and then that you are located precisely on the border between order and chaos. The subjective meaning that we encounter there is the reaction of our deepest being, our neurologically and evolutionarily grounded instinctive self, indicating that we are ensuring the stability but also the expansion of habitable, productive territory, of space that is personal, social and nature. It’s the right place to be, in every sense. You are there when—and where—it matters.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² *Id.* at 37.

¹⁰³ *Id.* at 41.

¹⁰⁴ *Id.* at 47.

¹⁰⁵ *Id.* at 43-44.

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“Order is not enough. You can’t just be stable, and secure, and unchanging, because there are still vital and important new things to be learned. Nonetheless, chaos can be too much. You can’t long tolerate being swamped and overwhelmed beyond your capacity to cope while you are learning what you still need to know. Thus, you need to place one foot in what you have mastered and understood and the other in what you are currently exploring and mastering. Then you have positioned yourself where the terror of existence is under control and you are secure, where where you are also alert and engaged. That is where there is something new to master and some way that you can be improved. That is where meaning is to be found.”¹⁰⁶

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“Order is inherently unstable, as the chaos of complexity . . . continually conspires to re-emerge. New threats and anomalies continually arise, as the natural world ceaselessly changes. These threats may be ignored, in which case they propagate, accumulate, and threatens the integrity of the current mode of being. Alternatively, the unknown may be forthrightly faced, assimilated and transformed into a beneficial attribute of the renewed world. Upon this . . . edifice is erected every narrative, every theory of personality transformation—perhaps every system of truly religious thought, as well. Error must be recognized, and then eliminated, as a consequence of voluntary exploration, generation of information, and update or reconstruction of skill and representation. Things that are bitter, feared and avoided must be approached and conquered, or life finds itself increasingly restricted, miserable and hateful. Our greatest stories, therefore portray the admirable individual, engaged in voluntary, creative, communicative endeavor; portray that individual generating a personality capable of withstanding the fragility of being, from such endeavor. We are thus prepared to find sufficient sustenance in stories portraying the eternal confrontation with the terrible unknown, and its transformation into the tools and skills we need to survive. If we act out such stories, within the confines of our own lives, then the significance of our being may come to overshadow our weakness. It is in the hope that such a statement might be true that we find the most profound of the many meanings of meaning.”¹⁰⁷

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“How can what has not yet been encountered be comprehended, understood, embodied, faced or adapted to?”¹⁰⁸ “[W]hat has not been encountered must be comprehended. The range of our experience continually supersedes the domain of our

¹⁰⁶ *Id.* at 44.

¹⁰⁷ Peterson, “The Meaning of Meaning,” *supra* note 57, at 28-29.

¹⁰⁸ Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, at 149.

determinate knowledge. We are therefore prone to constant contact with the unknown. It appears every time we make an error; every time our presumptions are wrong—every time our behaviors do not produce the consequences we expect and desire. The absence of specific depiction, appropriate to inexplicable circumstances, does not alleviate the necessity of appropriate action—even though the nature of the action cannot yet be specified. This means that the nature of the unknown, as such, must become represented, in order to design action patterns, *which are broadly suited for response to what cannot yet (and cannot eternally) be predicted or controlled.*”¹⁰⁹

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“The act of turning away from something anomalous is the process of labeling that anomalous thing as ‘too terrifying to be encountered or consider,’ in its most fundamental form. To avoid something is also to define it—and, in a more general sense, to define oneself. . . . The act of turning away therefore means willful opposition to the process of adaptation, since nothing new can happen when everything new is avoided or suppressed. The act of facing an anomaly, by contrast, is the process of labeling that even as tolerable—and, simultaneously, the definition of oneself as the agent able to so tolerate. Adoption of such a stance means the possibility of further growth, since it is in contact with anomaly that new information is generated. This ‘faith in onself and the benevolence of the world’ manifests itself as the courage to risk everything in the pursuit of meaning. If the nature of the goal is shifted from desire for predictability to development of personality capable of facing chaos voluntarily, then the unknown, which can never be permanently banished, will no longer be associated with fear”¹¹⁰

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“If the unknown is approached voluntarily (which is to say, ‘as if’ it is beneficial), then its promising aspect is likely to appear more salient. If the unknown makes its appearance despite our desire, then it is likely to appear more purely in its aspect of threat. This means that if we are willing to admit to the existence of those things that we do not understand, those things are more likely to adopt a positive face. Rejection of the unknown, conversely, increase the likelihood that it will wear a terrifying visage when it inevitably manifests itself.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ *Id.*

¹¹⁰ *Id.* at 367-368.

¹¹¹ *Id.* at 166.

“The fundamental constituent elements of reality are *order* and *chaos*.”¹¹² Jordan Peterson, in his claim about *order* and *chaos* is talking about the reality you confront in law school—presented to you in the form of a particular kind of culture. But this law school reality gives way to what is more fundamental—an existential reality. When you become a law student, you abandon your settled life (as unsettled as it may have actually been), and when you do, you deal with the uncertainty that comes with finding a place for yourself in the law school world you now inhabit. You have, in becoming a student of law, stepped out of your existing, determinate world, a world of order, into an unfamiliar world where your habits in your known world will no longer suffice.

One way to describe the constituent elements that define your law school existential reality: *order* and *chaos*. *Chaos* means that you don’t quite know where you are—you don’t know the lay of the land—you don’t know what predators you may encounter (predators known to inhabit this law school territory and predators of your own psyche, your *shadow* being one of them).

Order and *chaos* are the “fundamental constituent elements” of your existential reality, so fundamental that the brain is structured to deal with each of these constituent elements. The left hemisphere is the domain that deals with what we understand and what we know; the right hemisphere of the brain is the domain that deals with what we don’t understand, and what we don’t know.¹¹³

¹¹² Jordan Peterson, “Iceland: 12 Rules for Life—Lecture 1,” YouTube video, <https://bit.ly/2LaX3tz>.

¹¹³ “The manner in which we conduct our abstracted exploration [of chaos] appears as tightly linked to the physiological structures of our brains” Peterson, *Maps of Meaning*, at 67. Of the left and right hemispheres of the brain, we can say that “the *right* governs the response to threat (and to punishment), while the *left* controls response to promise and, perhaps (although must less clearly), to satisfaction. This basically means that the right hemisphere govern our initial responses to the unknown, while the left is more suited for actions undertaken while we know what we are doing.” Peterson goes on to note: “The left seems at its best when *what is* and *what should be done* are no longer questions; when tradition governs behavior, and the nature and meaning of things has been relatively fixed.” In contrast, the right hemisphere “appears to have remained in direct contact with, and to be specialized for encounter with, the *unknown* and its terrors, which are perceived in the domain of instinct, motivation and affect, long before they can be classified or comprehended intellectually. . . . The right hemisphere appears integrally involved in the initial stages of analysis of the unexpected or novel—and *it’s a priori* hypothesis is always this: *this (unknown) place, this unfamiliar space, this unexplored territory is*

Order is represented by your old life, your life before law school, the life where you put together a resume of academic achievement and other accomplishments you deemed notable. In your new life—you are now a law student—you learn, as one of the first lessons of law’s school’s *implicit curriculum*, that what you bring to law school—your resume—no longer counts in a way that signals that you will be successful in the law school hierarchy. The implicit message is that you, and your colleagues, have taken up law school with a clean slate. *Nothing before law school counts*. Of course, we know this can’t be true, and it’s not true, but the law school accounting system—oddly enough—contends otherwise. What they don’t tell you in law school is that this idea that *nothing before law school counts* is another way of saying that you are now in a new hierarchal structure; your place in the pyramid has yet to be established. You are now in unexplored territory.

The paradox could not be more apparent; everything that you have made of yourself before law school counts (and will always count) while the essence of law school seems to be an insistence that nothing counts but what you do—and do *now*—in law school. The paradox is an oracle. All you can do is submit your question to the oracle and await a cryptic reply. Here is the question: How will you draw upon the *order* represented in your life before law school to help you confront and navigate the *chaos* introduced into your life by what you find in law school? *Chaos*, as we use it here, does not mean the unraveling and dissolution of all that we know as reality. *Chaos* is an active, vivid representation of uncertainty; in *chaos* we experience that uneasy feeling of being in unexplored, uncharted territory.

And, here is another feature of the law school paradox: In law school, you are confronted with law as a representation of *order*, yet, there is nothing but *chaos* that pervades your thinking in realizing how little you know about how to work with what you find in legal order. Will your confrontation with law be a “meaningful engagement” if your law school experience is enveloped in *chaos*? You can, of course, deny the *chaos*. You can sit and do nothing. Jordan Peterson tells us that “[s]itting and doing nothing” makes the *chaos* more threatening, and therefore, is

dangerous, and therefore partakes in the properties of all other known dangerous places and territories, and all those that remain unknown, as well. . . . As situation-specific adaptive behaviors are generated as a consequence of exploration, this provisional labeling or hypothesis (or fantasy) might well undergo modification (assuming nothing actually punishing or determinately threatening occurs); such modification constitutes further and more detailed learning. Anxiety recedes, in the absence of punishment or further threat (including novelty); hope occupies the affective forefront, accompanied by the desire to move forward, and to explore (under the guidance of the left hemisphere).” *Id.* at 69.

unlikely to be “the right solution.”¹¹⁴

To navigate the perilous boundary of *order* and *chaos*, you must “do something, you have to value something.” You must aim at something. “To aim at something is the same as valuing it. You have to act . . . you have to have a value structure. You are in a value structure; you are acting out a structure of values.” “You need a value structure . . . something worth suffering for.”¹¹⁵ Recognizing that law school is a value structure, acknowledging it with what Clifford Geertz, the anthropologist, calls a “thick description,” provides you with an orientation, a resilience against the disturbing fear we confront when we are immersed in *chaos*. We think of *chaos* as extreme disorder, as dissolution of adaptive strategies for survival; what *chaos* actually represents is potential. Potential is real; potential is the reality of the future. You can’t partake fully in the reality of the future without exploring (and exploiting) *chaos* for the potential it represents.

You may have found your way to law school to partake in *order*, not just order for your own life, your achievements and accomplishments, but also an order that we so often associate with law. You’ve heard the expression *law and order*; law and order are sometimes conceived as synonymous terms. But then you get to law school, and learn that law is not so orderly as you once assumed. Another lesson of the *implicit curriculum* (and a far more rare explicit message delivered in traditional, doctrinal courses): law is rather messy. You come to law school expecting to find a paradigm of *order*, and you find law being presented as a sustained exercise of hope by which we address the futile effort to contain *chaos*. Law is an antidote to *chaos*; the antidote is operative only when one confronts the *chaos* that lurks in the dark passage one undergoes in legal education.

The potential found in law school work—and in the law school culture—is both positive and negative in how it can play out in your life. We know that the future speaks of potential. The aim is to make the positive aspects of this future potential a reality, to perform sacrifices now that will make real the potential that lies in the future.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Jordan Peterson, “Iceland: 12 Rules for Life—Lecture 1,” YouTube video, *supra* note 38.

¹¹⁵ *Id.*

¹¹⁶ Law school work isolates you from the outside world. One way we portray this isolation is in the idea of law school as a “closed world,” a world apart, a world that creates its own reality. When you isolate yourself in law school, you subject yourself to the chaos of negative potential.