

Listening is good for our soul

By Janet Albrechtsen, *The Australian*, 24 February 2018

Why has an obscure Canadian academic become a phenomenon across the Anglosphere? The man seems genuinely surprised at his 18-month transformation. Hence his tweet asking why so many people have watched the interview he did on Britain's Channel 4. On March 8, Jordan Peterson kicks off his Australian speaking tour. At sold-out events in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane he will talk about his bestselling book, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*.

One way to explain this rise of a man who has been described as a cowboy psychologist and an egghead who gives practical advice is that he drives many on the left bonkers.

There are at least a dozen reasons for this, but this is a column, not a book, so here are six.

Reason 1. Peterson reckons that listening is good for our soul and even better for human progress. Sounds banal, but in an age when campus outrage and an angry mob mentality have seeped into our broader culture, listening to those we disagree with is a truly revolutionary message.

The University of Toronto psychology professor is old school. He gathers information and builds knowledge the Socratic way, by listening and testing ideas. That's how he developed a fascination with why totalitarian regimes murdered millions in the quest for utopia. He's suspicious of ideology, dogma and the doctrinaire. Ideology is dangerous, he says, because it's too certain about things and doesn't allow for dissent.

Moral relativism is equally dangerous because it makes no judgments and is blind to the greatness of Western civilisation. Human beings need a moral compass. The demise of religion has left a vacuum, and it has been filled by rigid ideologues and nihilistic moral relativists. Well-timed, given so many millennials are bunkering down with socialism or moral relativism.

If you want to ignore Peterson, that's your right. But he is a symbol of what's rotten within parts of our culture. When he speaks, his critics try to howl him down. Students scream over him, university administrators try to censor him.

Last year, Lindsay Shepherd, a teaching assistant at Ontario's Wilfrid Laurier University, played one of Peterson's YouTube videos in a communications class. In a meeting with university honchos, one professor, Nathan Rambukkana, accused her of breaking Canadian law and creating a toxic environment for students. Another said her decision to show a Peterson debate clip was akin to the Nazis relying on free speech. The meeting was taped. It's literally crazy. An uproar led the university to apologise to Shepherd.

Some of this explains why, as of Thursday, Peterson's cracker interview with Channel 4's Cathy Newman has attracted 7.4 million views since it aired on January 17. Sure, some of us have watched it more than once, because it's funny, it's serious and it ought to be shown in the first lesson of a journalism 101 course.

As reported in *Inquirer* last month, the interview is a 30-minute precis of what happens when you don't listen. Peterson was calm, measured, respectful. He used science and evidence when explaining the differences between men and women. He raised obvious questions about dogma on the gender pay gap. And he smiled politely when a woman who brought him on to her show wasn't interested in listening.

There are now memes about Newman's closed-ears interviewing style. Like this one. Peterson: "Women want strong and competent men." Newman: "So what you're saying is women are incompetent." And this. Peterson: "I'm a clinical psychologist." Newman: "So what you're saying is I need therapy." But none is as humiliating as the interview.

Reason 2. Peterson believes in free speech. He's worried about the illiberal direction of modernity, not just on campus. That's another reason this solid-gold cultural disrupter, with a quiet but firm tone, drives many on the left nuts. The professor attracted headlines at home in Canada when he said he wouldn't abide by Bill C-16, introduced in May 2016, amending the Canadian Human Rights Act and making it illegal to use the wrong pronoun. It became law last June. Peterson balked at being told by the state to use the pronoun "ze" for transgender people. He said if someone asked him to use it for them, he's a polite guy and he'd do it. But when the state tells you what to say, the state has crossed the line into forced speech.

Reason 3. Peterson is a force because he's also damn good at getting his message across. He uses our most important stories, drawing from history, psychology, neuroscience, mythology, poetry and the Bible to explain his thinking.

The man described as an "ardent prairie preacher" grew up in the small town of Fairview, Alberta, watched some of his friends succeed while others ended up drug addicts. He spent years searching for answers to big questions such as what makes life more meaningful and, going back a step, why meaning even matters.

His *12 Rules* book, extracted in *Inquirer* earlier this month, sprang from an online free-for-all forum called Quora, where anyone could ask questions and provide answers. His answers attracted a huge online crowd, then a curious publisher, and this week his book is topping Amazon's bestseller list in Australia.

Why storytelling matters calls for a divergence. Last December Jonathan Sachs, a rabbi and member of Britain's House of Lords, said we need an army to defend a country. And to defend our civilisation we need a conversation between generations. "We need to teach our children the story of which we and they are a part, and we need to trust them to go further than we did, when they come to write their own chapter," he said.

This is not woolly idealism, Sachs said. "It's hard-headed pragmatism." Understanding our own story, our history, where we went wrong and what we got right, allows children to face the challenges and the chaos of a rapidly changing world. "We need to give our children an internalised moral satellite navigation system so that they can find their way across the undiscovered country called the future," he said.

Peterson is a navigation system with a twangy Canadian accent, trying to direct us towards meaning. Wrong way, go back, he'll tell you when you're heading down a dead-end street.

Reason 4. Peterson is secretly feared by utopians on the left. Life is full of unexpected and unavoidable suffering, he says. We get sick, we get betrayed, we lose jobs and friends and a sense of order. Get used to it. Deal with it.

This starting premise is where he departs so spectacularly from cultural Marxists. The utopian imaginings of socialism and communism created great suffering. So stop dreaming, Peterson

says, accept that life can be hard. Accept, too, that each of us is capable of being monstrous and marvellous in all our human complexity. And make choices about that. Accept individual responsibility.

Start by standing up straight because it can “encourage the serotonin to flow plentifully through the neural pathways desperate for its calming influence”. If people around you see you as strong and capable and calm, you might too — and vice versa.

Face your problems with honesty, he says. Choose friends who are good for you. Pursue what’s meaningful rather than what’s expedient. It’s the kind of advice given a generation ago when people talked more about responsibilities than rights and parents warned their children that life is tough. Today it offends our rights culture, not to mention our mollycoddling parenting. So three cheers for common sense from this Canadian disrupter.

Reason 5. Get your own house in order before you start lecturing others or presuming to know how to fix other problems. Peterson’s message is a direct challenge to two particularly rank strains of modernity: victimhood and virtue-signalling. Both are cop-outs. Much harder, and more important, says Peterson, is to fix what you can at home because if we all did this there would be fewer victims and less misery in the world.

Reason 6. Men need to grow the hell up, he says. A whiny guy who blames others for his poor life choices is of no use to himself, no use to women, no use to children and no use to a world that has prospered from those who take responsibility. A boy who never grows up can’t possibly deal with the periods of chaos we all must face. And parents shouldn’t bother children when they’re skateboarding, meaning let them take risks so they can manage them as adults.

Maybe now you’re seeing why the mild-mannered Canadian psychologist is attracting brickbats and bouquets.

Those living in a women’s studies world can’t bear him and wail about him entrenching the patriarchy. Men especially want to listen to him, and plenty of women, to be fair, because he makes a reasoned case, based on evolutionary science and evidence, for men to be men, in all their masculine complexity. The “patriarchy” hasn’t hampered human progress, he says, but helped it.

Peterson, who is the only member of his department to maintain a clinical practice, draws on his work with patients when he says that being “agreeable” doesn’t drive achievement. Instead, it’s being assertive, even aggressive.

And there’s this. He said recently he has figured out how to monetise social justice warriors. The more they scream and go crazy over what he says, the more money he makes.

They just keep feeding him material to work with and he’s making a motza each month from a crowdsourcing fund that pays for his YouTube videos.

If this information leads some of them to change their tune, it will mean they have listened after all.