

Rule 3 — Make friends with people who want the best for you

Reading the first six pages alone can humble us all: compared to Peterson, we who grew up in Hong Kong are like fairy-tale princesses. The trying environment in Fairview, Alberta is hardly for city people: only brave explorers can endure such hardship and utter cold. Suddenly, the Disney song ‘Let It Go’ does not sound so charming anymore: just read the part on house cats on p. 68. For a teenager growing up in such harshness, friendship would really mean everything.

The Greek philosopher Epicurus is often misunderstood: many take him as a Hedonist when he says that pleasure is the end and aim in life. He is in fact devoted to the pursuit of happiness, for which three things are necessary: friendship, freedom and self-sufficiency. Wealth and power are not among them — and yet friendship is. Friends can challenge us, they can mould us into the best version of ourselves and, naturally, it is true for the opposite side as well. The examples of Chris and his poor cousin show us how our very course of life can be defined by friends because we trust them.

I am by no means saying we should not trust our friends. The contrary is true. The following lines by Seneca the Younger give us fundamental advice on making friends:

‘... if you consider any man a friend whom you do not trust yourself, you are mightily mistaken and you do not sufficiently understand what true friendship means. Indeed, I would have you discuss everything with a friend; but first of all discuss the man himself. **When friendship is settled, you must trust; before friendship is formed, you must pass judgement.**

... Ponder for a long time whether you shall admit a given person to your friendship; but when you have decided to admit him, welcome him with all your heart and soul. Speak as boldly with him as with yourself.’ (Seneca, p. 11)¹

Peterson is in a way spelling it out in his book on how to ‘pass judgement’ here. Given we are honourable, we must make friends with those who want us to excel not just so in words. The stark contrast between Peterson at college (known as university here) and Chris’s bright and witty cousin Ed can shock one to the core: Peterson was brought out of his comfort zone to explore new possibilities and achieved beyond himself while Ed fell to ruin under marijuana. A new place brings new beginnings and opportunities but with bad company it only spirals down.

The last statement can sound cruel to the undiscerning: who are we to define people as good or bad for us? Of course this is not what Peterson meant. His discerning factor is whether one shirks from responsibility for oneself. From teenagers crashing parties and vomiting everywhere to university companions making a Student Union’s books balanced again and starting newspapers, the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ is about taking responsibility for ourselves.

The distinction is a kind one because it reminds us that we have the power to change our lives, that Fate does not grab us by the throat, that fortune can be ours if we try.

¹ Seneca, Lucius Annaeus. *Epistles 1-65*. Translated by Richard M. Gummere, Harvard University Press, 2006.

This idea also neatly explains the entire section on ‘Rescuing the Damned’. We cannot ‘rescue’ friends who have given up on themselves; nor can we be ‘saved’ by others if we ourselves give up. The power is *within us* and not anyone else. Neither the moral high ground of the charitable or bittersweet victimhood of the suffering is real: they make poor substitute for genuinely standing upright and shouldering our own burden. If you must help someone, ‘treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping’. That way, one can lead by example and influence. Friends can mould us not because they want to but because *we allow them*. One has to want help before one can reach for it. Toxic friends is hence best left alone so they can help themselves — perhaps given a copy of Peterson’s book as well.

If we can take Seneca’s advice and be honest with our friends as we are with ourselves — both of which are very hard to do indeed — we will be able to negotiate loyalty with our friends fairly and honestly and, most important of all, reciprocally. The long final paragraph on p. 82 is worth reading again and again, so I will not quote any of it. The encouraging message of Michelangelo’s marble *David*, however, is so succinct I should use it here to wrap up:

You could be more than you are.