

Dan Keusal's e-newsletter
Spring 2015 edition: "List-ing..."

(note the formatting of this PDF is different than the emailed version;
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Greetings!

"I will not return to a universe of objects that don't know each other." That's what the painter Claude Monet says through poet Lisel Mueller, in her poem "Monet Refuses The Operation" (see "3 Good Poems," below). Like Mueller and Monet, I'm always looking for the ways different things in the world "know each other." This time around, I found connections between an alumni magazine, an old pick-up basketball teammate, and our culture's fascination with lists, which is the subject of my essay "List-ing..." This issue also includes one of my new photographs, a song of hope, a film of healing, a video (or two) of caution, and quotes from one or two sources you probably won't recognize. As Spring bursts into full bloom, may you find something here that opens you and supports your own blossoming.

~Dan

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Reflections: "List-ing..."

One day, when the latest issue of Notre Dame Magazine arrived in my mailbox, I turned first, as usual, to the "Editor's Note" inside the front cover that introduces the theme of each issue. The editor of Notre Dame Magazine is Kerry Temple, and about 25 years ago, I occasionally played basketball with Kerry at a lunchtime pick-up game for faculty and staff. In the years since then, I've found that Kerry's introductory notes frequently contain some bit of wisdom, often naming something I've "known," but for which I could never find quite the right words.

The theme of this issue was "Lists": "Six Reasons To Forgive," "Seven Things That Make Us Human," "Eight Measures of Success." More than 45 pages of lists, some profound, some playful. Kerry began his "Editor's Note" with this comment:

As a teacher of writing for 25 years, I have learned some lessons.

One is this: You can speak wisely and eloquently about the qualities of a written work, examining the author's craft, hoping to show young aspiring writers the way, the words and the triumph, hoping the coals of artistry will enflame their hearts . . . and they will sit and watch you and appear to be listening - without taking a note, writing anything down, recording any of the fine, inspiring points you think you are making, inviting you to wonder if your words scatter uncollected like leaves carried away on the wind.

But say this - "There are really 10 things you need to know about writing" - and pens come out, notebooks are opened, heads tilt forward and the young stenographers are at the ready, hands poised in anticipation of bequeathed truth.

After reading these words, I wanted to give Kerry a "high-five," the way I might have all those years ago after he had made a sharp pass to an open teammate, or hit a jump shot himself.

Because, you see, I've long been suspicious of lists. Especially those addressing matters of the soul, and especially those that begin with "the": The Seven Principles For Making Marriage Work (John Gottman), the Four Questions (Byron Katie), The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success (Deepak Chopra).

To "list" means to "enumerate," to "declare to be," to write down, to put in order. But it also means "to lean to one side." Combine these definitions, integrate them, and you may begin to glimpse the reason for my suspicions.

When we are listing, we are leaning to one side, and the side to which we are leaning is that of certainty: "Here are the things you need to know, or to do." Certainty is reassuring, it is comforting, and it is an illusion. When we are leaning to one side, we are leaning away from another side, putting one in the light, and the other in shadow. Wisdom almost always means seeing something from both sides, from many sides.

When a ship is "listing," it is in peril. One dictionary defines "list" as "to cant," meaning "to tip or tilt up or over...to turn upside down." Ever seen a picture of a ship listing to one side, and think to yourself "I wish I was on that ship"? (Do a Google image search for "[listing ships](#)," look at the resulting photos, and pay attention to how you feel). No--our instinct, rightly, is to stay away from a listing ship. And yet we run toward lists of psycho-spiritual principles, techniques, or skills. Why? Perhaps because the world itself feels like it is listing, turned over, upside down, and we cling to those lists as if they were life-preservers, hoping that they will save us, that they will set us aright.

My intention here is not to write off all lists (my own newsletter regularly includes "3 Good Poems"), nor to demean any particular psycho-spiritual list-makers. In fact, I chose the lists of Byron Katie and John Gottman as examples in part because I have colleagues (who are also dear friends) who use their approaches, and those colleagues do fine, healing work.

But in a world where lists rule the day, perhaps we can restore some balance by paying more attention to wisdom that comes to us as "uncollected, scattered leaves," as "coals of artistry." Put leaves and coals together, kindle them with patience, reflection, and discernment, and you just might get a bonfire, a light in the darkness, a circle around which we can gather. You just might get something that will throw out a spark, and, in Kerry Temple's words, "enflame our hearts."

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Photo: "Pink flowers in the driveway" (by Dan Keusal)
(click on photo to read its story, and to download a copy for your use)



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Quotes for inspiration and action:

"We have been stopped for so many years by not being able to follow small things."
(Lars-Anders Hansson)

"I think we forget things if we have no one to tell them to."
(from the movie "The Lunchbox")

"If I should wake before I die..."
(Buddhist Prayer)

"Work is love made visible."
(Kahlil Gibran)

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Resources for a richer life:

More than just "self-help," Resources For A Richer Life is meant to bring you music, movies, books, articles, web sites, events, videos, and more that will touch the depths of your soul and awaken the most alive parts of you.

(music): "[Life Holds On](#)" (Beth Nielsen Chapman). Deftly weaving [images](#) of the precarious and the precious, this anthem proclaims joy in the face of life's vulnerabilities, and hope in the face of it's uncertainties.

(movie): "[Departures](#)" (directed by Yojiro Takita; starring Masahiro Motoki). The cellist of a small community symphony in Japan loses his job when the orchestra folds. Desperate to find work, he answers a want ad that reads simply "Departures," thinking he is applying for a job at a travel agency. He soon realizes there has been a grave misunderstanding: the job is helping to prepare the dead for their funerals. When he discovers the mistake, he at first recoils himself and is ostracized by his young wife and by his culture. But in time, as he learns from the patience and presence of his elderly employer, he comes to see how the beauty of the preparation rituals brings dignity to the dead...and healing to the living. Winner of the 2009 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film.

(video): "[Eyes On The Road](#)." You can't get the most out of therapy, you can't get anything out of therapy, if you're dead. Text messaging while driving is now the leading cause of death behind the wheel for teens, surpassing even drunk driving, and "mobile distraction" [of all kinds](#), among all ages, is an increasing hazard, according to [data](#) from the Centers For Disease Control and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Please--when you're driving, put down your mobile phone, put down your iPad. Want more incentive? Watch the movie "Seven Pounds."

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3 Good Poems

Click on the titles below to read the poems online. You can also access them by going to the "[Writings](#)" page of my web site, finding the link for my "e-newsletters," and then clicking on the link for the Spring 2015 edition.

1. "[The Music We Are](#)" (Rumi)
2. "[We Have Come To Be Danced](#)" (Jewel Mathieson)
3. "[Monet Refuses The Operation](#)" (Lisel Mueller)