

February 2, 2020
Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster
Susan Gascho-Cooke
"Fifty Things"
[I Corinthians 1:18-31](#)

A little over a year ago, a Mennonite scholar of conflict transformation, John Paul Lederach, wrote an essay for *The Mennonite*, entitled "Advent Manifesto: Does My Soul Still Sing?" (1)

I was astonished at the format: It was simply a list of 100 things. Some were just one sentence. Some were haiku. Some were images. Some were paragraphs

I was going to share with you my own list of 100 things, but in an attempt to keep to a reasonable length of time, I'm going for 50. You're welcome.

To start, I'll read the first few items in Lederach's list, to help you get in the groove that I found when I read his piece:

1.

"Some good friends in the world of Mennonite publications asked if I might write a few Advent reflections on hope in times of despair, inspired in part by my practice of haiku poetry."

2.

"I opted for this numbering style of writing. I follow my thoughts where they lead. This can be chaotic, especially when one *listens with the ear of the heart*, as St. Benedict once remarked."

3.

"Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein used a similar writing method. For a time, I required my students to write a Wittgensteinian essay: Start with one idea. Notice where it goes. Number each idea. Keep them short. Don't worry if you hop around. Read and play with what emerges. It may take a while to understand what you are trying to say. To yourself."

4.

I'm taking the baton now, you can't blame any of the words to come from this point on on John Paul Lederach. It's all on me. Here I go.

5.

Today is Super Bowl Sunday. And/or Candlemas. And/or Groundhog's Day.

6.

I am admittedly only vaguely aware of who's playing football today. I'm pretty sure Kansas City is playing. My primary connections to Kansas City are Mennonite Conventions and

barbecue. Conventions that were difficult. Barbecue that was so good we made Teman's parents fly to Kansas City with us the second time just to try it. (2)

7.

If you know me and Teman and barbecue, that's saying something.

8.

Groundhog's Day is a brilliant 1993 movie. In it, a man keeps going to sleep and waking up to repeat the same day — which happens to be Groundhog's Day. He desperately tries to make changes to alter his fate and finally wake up on a new day. It proves to be very hard.

The older I get, the more I believe it is closer to documentary than fiction.

9.

Candlemas is a Christian Holy Day in the liturgical calendar, so we are at least now heading back into more sermon-appropriate territory. It always occurs on February 2, because it is the midpoint between the winter solstice and the spring equinox.

10.

Traditionally, every household brought a candle to that service to be blessed and carried home again to make the six weeks until spring more bearable. I guess that's a more proactive solution than waiting to see what a groundhog decides and going with that. By celebrating Candlemas, you're choosing the light.

11.

Some years I'm Team Candlemas. Some years I'm Team Groundhog. By which I mean, some years I'm Team Groundhog-Sees-Shadow, because that means you get to scuttle back to your den for six more dark, sleepy weeks.

12.

This year I'm on the fence. I want to want to be Team Candlemas. That's about all I know.

13.

What team are you this year?

14.

I decided not to add Imbolc to the list of things today is back in #5. I changed my mind.

15.

Imbolc is the Celtic, pre-Christian name for the midpoint between winter and spring. It was St Brigid's Day — St Brigid of the green cross that was up in our sanctuary last Lent and Easter.

16.

The Romans assimilated Imbolc and made February 2 a celebration of the Roman goddess Februa. Then Christians made it Candlemas.

17.

I find deep solace in knowing that my ancestors have been seeing the same natural phenomena, and making meaning of it for so many thousands of years. That we have all shared a deep need to be reminded that seasons shift. Light returns. But also that darkness sometimes last longer than other times. And that sometimes we need light from each other's candles. I'm so glad that Christianity didn't try to rid itself of that wisdom just because people before them also shared it.

18.

These holidays that honor something very specifically Christian, while also honoring the movement and patterns of the natural world, feel very incarnational, in the same sense that I celebrate Jesus Christ as the incarnation — the place where the divine and human co-mingle. Can be one. Are one.

19.

The scripture that is read at Candlemas every year is the story of Jesus' being presented at the Temple by his parents in Luke 2. When they take him there, they are met by two elders of the faith: Simeon and Anna. Each, separately, has been waiting for the Messiah. And each in fact recognizes that Mary and Joseph's little boy *is* that Messiah.

20.

I interrupt this list to use #20 to point out that today's date — 02-02, 2020 — is a numeric palindrome. Just 'cuz.

21.

Simeon and Anna might be my favorite two people in the Bible. For their gentleness, their steadfast faith.

22.

In brutal honesty, I probably love them so much because they were clearly regular churchgoers for their whole lives. As a pastor, that actually just about brings tears to the eyes. That people wanted to show up every Sunday. Swoon. (We won't mention that they came to church every Sunday of their lives and almost died of old age before they found what they were looking for).

23.

They also remind me of Luke and Mary Bomberger, and other elders I've known in the church over the years who surprised me by their capacity to recognize and welcome the face of Christ in young faces and in new expressions of identity and theological understanding.

24.

I'm so glad I was able to tell them *both* that they reminded me of Simeon and Anna, when Mary was still with us, and Luke was able to understand, when I preached on this passage back in 2012.

25.

I should tell people the lovely things I think about them more often.

26.

I have also learned over the years that I'm not a very good judge of who will be (by my estimation) "open-minded" and who will not. When I was young, I assumed "old" people were summarily *not* open-minded. At least not as open-minded as *me*. *Ha*.

27.

I have been wrong a lot. About ideas, but mostly, I think, about people. Thinking I knew what motivated them. Thinking I knew why they thought what they thought. Thinking I knew what they thought at all. I have learned to love being wrong about people. I hope that others take the time to figure out whether they're wrong about their judgments of me, too.

28.

Hoping and praying that I'm wrong about my judgments about people is something I do a lot right now. Because I judge a lot right now. I am panicked about the world. There are many people I read about every day that I feel very judgmental about. I'm pretty sure they're wrong. I'm pretty sure I'm right. Sometimes just hoping I'm wrong about them is as generous as I can get.

29.

It's a lot harder to figure out what to do with the reality that some people might actually be motivated by the very things that I judge them for, and they might think what they think anyway, and do what they do anyway.

30.

I read the following cheery headline recently: "Humans are hardwired to dismiss facts that don't fit their worldview." Philosopher Adrian Bardon wrote the article about "motivated reasoning" — "the process of deciding what evidence to accept based on the conclusion one prefers." "The failure of" ... a group "to acknowledge the truth about" something "is not explained by a lack of information about the scientific consensus on the subject. Instead, what strongly predicts denial of expertise on many controversial topics is simply one's political persuasion." (3)

31.

I'm guessing no one needed to tell you that on this particular week, after watching the Senate impeachment trial, and watching our country collectively watch that trial and come to

radically, almost incomprehensibly, different conclusions about what was presented. But I'll read more from the article anyway

32.

“Our ancestors evolved in small groups, where cooperation and persuasion had at least as much to do with reproductive success as holding accurate factual beliefs about the world. Assimilation into one's tribe required assimilation into the group's ideological belief system. An instinctive bias in favor of one's “in-group” and its worldview is deeply ingrained in human psychology.” (3)

33.

“In ideologically charged situations, one's prejudices end up affecting one's factual beliefs. Insofar as you define yourself in terms of your cultural affiliations, information that threatens your belief system ... can threaten your sense of identity itself. ... situations that represent a threat to established systems trigger inflexible thinking and a desire for closure.” (3)

34.

The scripture we read this morning was a letter written by the apostle Paul to the church at Corinth. The scholars I read said that there was a lot of conflict among Christians in communities across the Middle East. And conflict within churches in the same communities. So, I Corinthians was a letter to a church experiencing both internal and external conflict.

35.

Conflict about what it mean to be Christian within their church. Conflict about what it meant to be Christian between them and other churches in other communities. Conflict between people who'd become Christians who were previously Jewish and those who were previously Gentile. Conflict about how to be Roman citizens and Christians. Lotsa conflict. Conflict conflict conflict.

36.

I think most of this I already knew from listening to “The Boxer” by Paul Simon, *Live in Central Park* version: “All lies and jest, still a man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest.” And “after changes upon changes, we are more or less the same, more or less the same.” (4)

37.

I find it interesting that Paul notes the flaws in each sub-group. What each held in highest esteem. And called each foolish in their own way. In fact, he never says what wisdom *is* — just that whatever you may think, wisdom is probably somewhat “other” than that. I like that no one he addressed could use this as a clobber text on another. Each person and group was being asked to evaluate their own wisdom and motivations, to consider their own calls, not those of others.

38.

I keep coming back to the very first line: “the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

39.

I learned a new word this week. The Word.A.Day email strikes again. “Biblioclast.” *One who destroys or mutilates books.* Since I’ve gotten into collage, my books are not safe anymore.

Although I prefer to call it “*altering*” books, rather than “*mutilating*,” if I find an image that strikes me, I will cut it out of an otherwise whole book.

40.

If could, I would cut out the word “perishing” and the words “being saved” and I would swap them and glue them down in each other’s place. It would read: “the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are being saved, but to us who are perishing, it is the power of God.”

41.

I find that a lot of things feel deeply wise to me that didn’t when I was younger. I often feel much closer to the “perishing” side than the “saved” side. By that I don’t mean I feel like I’m going to hell. I mean an awareness of the fleetingness of life. And of the lastingness of identity and struggle. There are so many things I thought I’d grow out of by now. Procrastination. Nail-biting. Over-eating. Perfectionism. Conflict avoidance. Always always editing myself as I think and speak. I’m becoming increasingly aware that there are some relationships in my life that will likely never be fixed. Mistakes and wounds (by me and to me) whose scars will never completely fade away. Old injuries that will remind me of themselves on rainy days or when I stand still in place too long. I am perishing.

42.

I had no idea what “being saved” meant when I was the age that all the adult Christians around me let me know I definitely needed saving. I hadn’t exactly lived a life of crime, and I was too chicken (rather than too virtuous) to have done anything requiring much confession. But I agreed to be “saved,” anyway. “Motivated reasoning,” I guess.

43.

Now, though. What I wouldn’t give for a little saving. I’ve come to hate the current fashion of re-telling every fairy tale to make the princess rescue herself. *And* the prince, usually, and the whole kingdom (that part never changes — it’s still a *king*-dom, even if she saves it). I don’t like the idea of being helpless and dependent, but why did the pendulum swing all the way over so that the princess has to do it all?

44.

Seriously, though. Saving sounds good. To have a fresh slate. To be cleansed of all I’m complicit in. To be able to start some things over and not carry the weight of them. Sometimes I wish I *could* forget, not just forgive. Just because by the time you’re in mid-life there’s just so much to remember. The logic of the cross, of Jesus, seems so much more powerful, so much more *salvific* to me now that I’m aware I’m perishing. Now that it feels like

the world is perishing. Now that the need for saving makes sense. Saying, like Jesus did, I will not keep feeding this cycle of violence begetting violence begetting violence. Saying, I will not feel shame for the things that are killing me, even though the world would make me feel ashamed. The world tried its most shameful death out on Jesus — capital punishment, on a hill, with a bunch of other shamed nobodies. And he wouldn't receive the shame of it. He rose from it, scarred but alive. And no longer living on the same plane as them and their slings and arrows. That is wisdom to me now in a way it never was before. That is hope.
That is saving power.

44.

Oops. My numbers are getting longer.

45.

As is this sermon.

46.

In the spirit of Super Bowl Sunday, I confess that in this season, I am quick to join in with oppositional and team thinking. Us and them. Winner and loser. I pray I may find some other way.

47.

In the spirit of Groundhog's Day, I pray that I may be willing to face my shadow when I see it. And instead of shame, reach for saving. I am thankful for *real* Groundhog's Day heroes, like Joseph McNeil, Franklin McCain, Jibreel Khazan, and David Richmond — four African-American college students who, on Feb 1, 1960, decided they weren't going to let the alarm clock ring the next day on an unchanged world. So, they sat at a White's Only counter at a Woolworth's in Greensboro, NC. They started a wave of sit-ins that helped to change our country forever. (5)

48.

In the spirit of Candlemas, I speak my gratitude to each of you, for the light that you bear to me. For the way my candle is blessed and re-kindled in the present of your faith and love. For the Simeons and Annas you are, showing up here Sunday after Sunday, certain that you will see Christ in one another here.

49.

In the spirit of Imbolc, I pray for wisdom to love and care for this beautiful, perishing world — to face its changes, mark them, honor them, not hide away in fear. I acknowledge that more people and more traditions have contributed to what I call my tradition than I will ever know.

50.

"I have spoken." by Kuiil, from "The Mandalorian" (6)

¹ John Paul Lederach, "Advent Manifesto: Does My Soul Still Sing?" *The Mennonite*. December 10, 2018. https://themennonite.org/feature/advent-manifesto-soul-still-sing/?fbclid=IwAR1mkIHdHOVgurNhYS22CLx7kv_ONTaOuj3G4eYOBGBqfSZTjAIWGQRG RvA

² Jack Stack Barbecue. <https://www.jackstackbbq.com>

³ Adrian Bardon, "Humans Are Hardwired to Dismiss Facts that Don't Fit Their Worldview." January 31, 2020. <https://www.yahoo.com/news/humans-hardwired-dismiss-facts-dont-130032262.html>

⁴ "The Boxer." Simon and Garfunkel, Concert in Central Park, September 1981. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JUbfj0Blc4>

⁵ Michael Ray, "Greenboro Sit-In." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Greensboro-sit-in>

⁶ "The Mandalorian" is an American space Western web television series created by Jon Favreau and released on Disney+. It is the first live action series in the Star Wars franchise. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Mandalorian