

So I Listeth

Abby Quinn Thatcher

*University of California, Berkeley*

“The wind bloweth where it *listeth*, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth. So is every one that is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8)

1. Proposition: To list is to move as the Spirit moves me.
2. To do: Listeth to obey.
3. There is everything entire, eternal, and fixed in the act of listing.
4. There is everything fragmentary, ephemeral, and contextually contingent in the work of making, and making sense of, a list.
5. To contemplate is to list.
6. To list is to meditate.
7. To meditate, I discovered with Miranda Wilcox while we sit together in a sunny classroom on the topmost floor of the JFSB at Brigham Young University, is to wander.
8. I list (sense nautical, careen, heel, incline wildly) while I list (sense categorical, moving from one idea to another as they relate in time).
9. To list, as of a ship. There is an accident of printing, perhaps, a vowel misplaced, in a young Captain Smith’s 1626 *Young Sea-men* tract: “Cunning the ship, brave before the winde, she lusts, she lyes under the Sea.”<sup>1</sup>
10. Lusty ship = me.
11. I list to love God as I ought, but one letter holds me in thrall, and so I lust for what I ought not to want. There is an accident in me, perhaps, a vowel misplaced? No, maybe more: a Fall.
12. The Fall is an originary listing (sense navigational, to deviate from an original course).
13. The Fall is man’s first list.
14. Lately: I feel as though I list about among every wind of doctrine, riding waves as they crest and swell.
15. Anxiously: I am a lister; my Homeric epithet: Abby, the Maker of (Endless) Lists.
16. Always: I’ve been taught that to list is to kill spirituality and revive specters of bureaucracy and faithless order within religious life. (See also the evils appended to “the check-list faith,” “merely checking the boxes,” or “reducing people to numbers.”)
17. That is, to list is to curb spiritual delight and to spay the creative potential of congregants.
18. List, n. Pleasure, joy, delight. An appetite, craving, desire, and longing *to*, but rarely *for*. I have more list, says Walter Scott, *to* my bed than to have my ears tickled.<sup>2</sup>
19. I have more list, says I, to the abstract ideation of godly love than to love my realized enemies.
20. I list to be a more skilled lister; I list to list less.
21. I list for impossible and somewhat stupid things.
22. I list to be like Olympic gymnast Simone Biles.

23. Truth: I can only form half-rotated cartwheels in my mind; my admiration for her skill is a rueful recognition: I also have two hands and feet, legs and a torso, and yet, my body does not list to obey.
24. Similarly, Stanley Fish on expert fly-fishermen, Julia Child, and, especially, the authors of masterful sentences: “they do marvels with the language you use every day [that] would not have seemed [possible]...We marvel at them; we read them aloud to our friends and spouses, even, occasionally to passersby; we analyze them; we lament our inability to match them.”<sup>3</sup>
25. So, too of others’ spiritual experiences, Miracles with a capital M that visit everyone else (it seems), and accounts of prophets’ youth.
26. Envy colors one’s own spiritual oeuvre a resplendent green.
27. My childhood is not that of our beloved church leaders—no offering up of my prized rabbits to a hungry friend in need, and little visiting the widowed and the poor.<sup>4</sup>
28. Dare I list toward an account of my greatest Christian failure?
29. Sarah Bachelard: to hold one’s nerve is as essential an action of Holy Saturday observance as that of hope.<sup>5</sup>
30. The nerve of some people (i.e., me): in listing sum, the bite of ice on my nine-year-old hands, the red flush of blood in my fellow tormentors’ cheek, pats of snow shoved down a neighbor boy’s shirt; squirming prey, stronger captor (I); no provocation, only perverse juvenile street-ethics; rocky bits of frozen earth thrown at a freshly turned cheek.
31. The nerve of my people: my mother finds me in the kitchen. “Abby, that boy’s mother just called me. She said she had thought our church was a church of kindness. She couldn’t believe a member of our faith would do such a cruel thing.”
32. The failure of my nerve: shame-facedly frogmarched to their home to apologize; the bullied boy moves away when the snow thaws.
33. To do: nothing now, all these years later, but think of the sentence I made untrue: “She thought our church was a church of kindness.”
34. Miracle, big M: the marvel that God would love *me*, on a day when I was nine and the snow was falling and the boy was an easy target for the small grievances of my blustering soul.
35. The color of cold flesh ripped raw by cruel hands is hard, but not impossible, to capture in text. I fail now.
36. Flash to a passage that haunts and holds in the same breath of listing wind: “I have engraven thee upon the palms of my hands; thy walls are continually before me.”<sup>6</sup>
37. The color of cold flesh ripped raw by cruel hands: the engraving Christ keeps on his palms.
38. This is hard, but not impossible, to capture in text. The Word succeeds where I failed.
39. Flash to a passage of the engraving Christ: he kneels in the dirt before another woman who can only list about wildly in her own Christian failure, like so much flotsam in the wake of her lusty, listing ship.
40. What does he write? What is engraved in the dirt?
41. [ .]
42. (That is, a sentence only to be marveled at in its absence; a word by the Word of God that stopped the very earth from listing about.)

43. Boulders were not chucked heaven-ward and woman-toward because the priests read the Word's word: in sum, no stones thrown.
44. Faith (and text) can move and stop mountains (read: stones).
45. To-do: rethink past prayers-perceived-as-failures because mountains didn't move.
46. Can I move and stop mountains with *word* and *words* alone?
47. Temptation: I list *to* reread past failures as successes, and unholy events as miracles.
48. Example: a trial of one's life; tell a miracle, but tell it slant.
49. Examples: prolonged singlehood while others delightfully coupled up; a grandmother's failure to live up to unspoken expectations; premature arthritic knees; a friendship's betrayal, months in the devastating making; failing, and then failing again, to make a foolish, beloved dream come true. *Et cetera*.
50. Truth: this exercise is, almost always, at first taste unsatisfying, like a value-menu hamburger or the wet concrete after it rains: it is not as it seemed when first offered. (I've tried both.)
51. Looking-glass distortion is the underwritten danger to all spectacular endeavors. *Objects in mirror may appear different than they are*.
52. To wit: When God closes a business, he sometimes opens a Spirit Halloween.
53. Flash to a fortune cookie, opened in the frustrated heat of June 2020 on a moldering couch in Provo, read and promptly smashed against a used face-mask: "Failure is success in progress."
54. This is a quasi-theology of failure, but it fails to move me to more than self-destruction.
55. Existential quibble (quite good at these now, post-pandemic): If the only moment I can truly occupy is the present—past and future being but fictions to frame the reality of *now*—then failure is failure, no success in current (thus only) sight.
56. Unholy conversion which brings about a mighty change of heart: "I failed" to "I am the failure."
57. My fear of failures (professional, personal, spiritual) hovers over the great deep that is my life in July of 2024.
58. My hovering is anything but godly.
59. "There are no jobs," "there are no grounds for hope," "there are no options beside sustained engagement with prolonged pain" — all are latter-day perversions of "Many are called, but few are chosen."<sup>7</sup>
60. Why are they (*we*, *me*) not chosen?
61. The answer: it's arbitrary, as listing can sometimes be.
62. The truth: God's plan for me feels oftentimes arbitrary; this includes my recast failures.
63. The pivot: when lists are not arbitrary.
64. List, n. A catalog or *roll* consisting of the names of persons engaged in the same duties or connected with the same object.
65. Rolling equals listing.
66. "I see the stars; I hear the *rolling* thunder": God's power throughout the universe displayed.<sup>8</sup>
67. The gathering of Israel is holy listing; the numbering of the sands of the earth and the peoples of His creations is heavenly accounting.
68. The voice of Jehovah says, "I am the first and the last."<sup>9</sup>

69. I hear, “I am He who lists.”
70. To list is to move and be as God is.
71. To list about is to remain in spirited concert with God’s eternally extended Word and words that “glitter as with atmospheric dust,” so “precisely placed that in combination with other words, also precisely placed, they carve out a shape in space and time.”<sup>10</sup>
72. That is, listing is creating; hovering over the great deep and, from its unmattered chaos, calling forth that which is good.
73. The magic—the miracle, little m—of a list: its ability, by articulating dynamic relationships among fragments and splintered bits, to bring all together into one great whole, even as the fragments live on in themselves, little wonders as they grow.
74. That is, per the tinkering pilgrim, “I am not washed and beautiful, in control of a shining world in which everything fits, but instead am wandering awed about on a splintered wreck I’ve come to care for.”<sup>11</sup>
75. Dillard is right: we come to care for our world—this splintered wreck, precisely because it lists, “whose gnawed trees breathe a delicate air, whose bloodied and scarred creatures are my dearest companions, and whose beauty bats and shines not in its imperfections but overwhelmingly in spite of them.”<sup>12</sup>
76. To list is not to fall, then, nor to fall prey to the Fall, but to fight against the threat of a capsized craft.
77. To list, then, is to remain in the good ship *Salvation*, caring for the others on its slanting deck and navigating philosophical swells solely by the heavens above.
78. “Some nights in the midst of this loneliness,” writes Wendell Berry, we swing among “the scattered stars at the end of the thin thread of faith alone.”<sup>13</sup>
79. The thin thread of faith when cast up to sound heaven is a vertically oriented series of propositions that succeed each other in time.
80. The thin thread of faith is a list; the list is a prayer.
81. Something (suddenly) understood: George Herbert’s breathless and comma-filled form in *Prayer (I)*.
82. A list—a *prayer*—is “the soul in paraphrase.”<sup>14</sup>
83. To paraphrase this list is to paraphrase this prayer: The list is never what it seems, or never only what it seems.
84. Nothing is hidden; everything is given, without money and without price.
85. My pen hovers over the great deep of a blank sheet of paper in earnest expectation of the next revealed miracle, and the next, and the next.
86. This is, perhaps, why I list.

#### An Addendum:

I am interested in the forms that spiritual experience takes and the forms that bring me *to* and *through* spiritual experience. This is, I believe, at heart a question of genre. How does one properly narrate their

walk with God? More to the point, what literary form properly fits the other- and super-worldly experiences spiritual life brings about?

Should I use: a series of short stories, clipped with Hemingway brusqueness and bounding to an enigmatic close? “Perhaps,” says She, “An imagined dialogue in a five-act play?” “Preposterous,” say They, “For how to know which act one is ever in, where in the dramatic arc one stands? Besides, overlong monologuing is so much spiritual navel-gazing, it’s liable to give one a neck crick and a headache.” “Sigh,” says She. [Exit stage right.] Or, does a haiku/ count best, by counting each beat/ the Spirit, hushed, speaks? Do I, like Virginia Woolf’s Clarissa Dalloway, discover God while out buying the flowers myself; use accretive semi-colons to say, this is the Spirit; this is life? Or, like so many (re)counting of *Tender Buttons*, do I properly depict spiritual experience as one run-on sentence that resists punctuative pauses or the imposition of mortal sense-making structures such as subordinate clauses marked off by pesky commas that make too manageable too orderly too artificial the flight one takes by the Spirit’s side?

The many genre forms by which the Spirit speaks captivate me. I marvel, and I wonder: how do I properly narrate my walk with God? What form should my conversion narrative take?

The magic of literary form, even at its most basic level—that of the sentence—is its organization of disparate items in the world into structures of logical relationships. So, too, I find the wonder of the Spirit: I am often overwhelmed by the hosts of disparate items in the world I encounter—be they the doctrines of men mingled with scripture or the events in my life that resist cohesion in the fiction I tell myself to narratively, thus existentially, get by. The Word of God promises me more. By the experience of the Spirit, I become a “little world made cunningly” unto a higher purpose, and I enter structures of logical relationships with the worlds of others.<sup>15</sup> I become a sister, a wife, a daughter, a friend, a colleague, a person with purpose. All that is unformed in me begins to take shape as God hovers over the messy and oftentimes dark deep that is me.

I am an anxious person. To counter my anxieties, I make lists: Post-It notes paper my walls; scraps of old receipts now palimpsest reminders that this essay is due today; inked boxes stacked atop each other next to “Books I Will Read in 2024,” “Things I Will Do in My Mortal Probation,” and “MUST-DO: Items from Last Week’s List, Which are Carry-Overs from the Week Before!!!” (I quote.) I believe God knows that I am a lister. More so, I believe God *cares* that I am a lister, and that He speaks to me in the form of the list, and in listing form. My essay above expands on all that listing means to me, after years of being a Lister: inclining wildly, moving rapidly from one idea or task to the next, deviating from the original course, yes, but also longing, and meditating, and praying, to move and be as God is.

This essay was inspired by the wind and looks for a literary form to represent meditation-in-progress. It is also a response to criticism of the Latter-day Saint faith that reduces it to check-listing, and check-listing behaviors. In a way, it is, in the spirit of early (and anxious) church fathers, a Christian chronic lister’s apology. Above all, this essay is an experiment, which is to say, an act of faith.

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<sup>1</sup> OED, “list, v.<sup>5</sup>,” first instance of “list” in intransitive and nautical sense.

<sup>2</sup> OED, “list, n.<sup>4</sup>, 2.” Given as an 1825 instance of the same: Walter Scott, *Talisman* xiii, in *Tales of Crusaders* vol. IV., p. 267.

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Fish, *How to Write a Sentence and How to Read One* (New York: Harpers, 2012), pp. 8-9.

<sup>4</sup> From “President Thomas S. Monson: On the Lord’s Errand,” additional resource on The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’ Newsroom site.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Bachelard, *Experiencing God in a Time of Crisis* (Miami, Florida: Convivium Press, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 49:16 KJV.

<sup>7</sup> Doctrine and Covenants 121:34.

<sup>8</sup> From the traditional hymn “Be Still My Soul,” whose lyrics were penned by Katharina Amalia Dorothea von Schlegel (1697-1768), and translated into English by Jane Laurie Borthwick (1813-1897) in 1855.

<sup>9</sup> Doctrine and Covenants 110:3-4.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Burgess, *Enderby Outside* (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing, 1968), p. 202; Stanley Fish, *How to Write a Sentence and How to Read One* (New York: Harper, 2012), pp. 8-9.

<sup>11</sup> Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1975), p. 245.

<sup>12</sup> Dillard, *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Wendell Barry, *Jayber Crow* (2001), pg. 260.

<sup>14</sup> George Herbert, “Prayer (I),” *The Temple* (1633), line 3.

<sup>15</sup> John Donne, “Holy Sonnets: I am a little world made cunningly.”