

The Lister in Us  
February 2021

I am sure that, if I could snatch a memory from a dark corner of my mind, I would be able to say, “Yes, as a child, I kept lists.” In spite of incredible shyness, I was a bossy little nymph, and I can almost hear my voice, insisting to my little friends that we must do this first, then this, then this. Follow the do’s, or don’t play in my backyard.

In college, I became a serious lister. As a freshman, I was having too much fun with my sudden freedom to regard my studies as of the utmost importance. A paper for my Psych class would have slipped through the cracks had I not jotted, on the pages of my spiral notebook, what was due and when for each class. In graduate school, my lists included sub-lists. As a mother—my sons will corroborate—I came to a complete standstill if I didn’t have a list, or two, or three, etc.

Note, dear reader, that in this very moment, I have been overwhelmed with ideas and directions for this musing. Bless the word processor; I have jotted several lists among these paragraphs.

The first step toward the invention of the sticky note was made in 1968, when Spencer Silver, a 3M chemist, created an adhesive that could be applied, allowing for easy and repeated removal and replacement. Such a clever helpmate wasn’t, of course, his career objective, since his assignment was to create a strong and lasting bonding material for the aerospace industry. The formal invention, the post-it note, was supposedly the result of a clever-minded gentleman named Arthur Fry, who was having trouble keeping his church hymnal on the right page and who, incidentally, knew Spencer Silver. My Google search went in myriad directions from there, so what I present as history will have to suffice for my readers.

I bring up post-it, aka sticky, notes because they have not made listing any easier for those of us who cannot make it through the day without lists. The problem may stem from their being sold in overly-thick blocks or pads, resulting in a frenzy of over-use. Browse in the school-supplies aisle and I dare you, oh lister, to refrain from reaching out and caressing that enormity of slips of paper married to each other with handy little strips of adhesive. One thick block could cover—why not?—an entire kitchen cabinet or —my dear listers, you know who you are—the bathroom mirror. And of course they attach to each other, allowing the lister to form streamers and wall designs that could rival the anatomy of a piñata. Sheer bliss. But then—too many lists and sub-lists, and sub-sub, and suddenly the world becomes mile-long fragments and explosions of internal thought, with no beginning, middle or end. Lists are meant to induce order, not create SNAFU. And what happens when the adhesive dries out, or the wind blows through the house?

The ideal list is one that is pristine, ordered, parallel, and uncomplicated. One begun early in the morning and ended well before slumber, perhaps between sips of tea or coffee. The writer starts at the top of an empty, white slip of paper, not too large and not too small. The writer chooses for the day to write in cursive or print, with a favorite pen or pencil, which will be kept at the side of the piece of paper, a dear and helpful companion. In my opinion, the best place for the list is on the kitchen counter, far from the threat of the inevitable flying debris of meal preparation and other household mishaps. A list must have its pride. A list made up of bits of torn paper will be mistaken for trash, and we know where that inevitably winds up.

Beyond all that, a list is a custom job. Some write their items in acronyms, BTP translated to “buy toilet paper”. Some write in a type of fully understandable notehand: cln flrs (clean floors) is never mistaken for cll fls (call florist). Underlining indicates the crucial. A happy face on my list denotes that I’m feeling good about this task or item, such as “puppy biscuits”. Some write in capital letters, some in lower case. Over-underlining indicates that someone else should have done this job or bought this item long ago.

A list can be one of the best things you do for yourself each day, ranking right alongside dark chocolate. How deliciously satisfying it is to cross off the dreaded or difficult items one by one. How comforting it is to know that a single sheet of paper will do all your thinking, all your remembering. The list, and all the activity that it embodies, gives one a sense of importance, purpose, existence. It gives to our lives concreteness, safety, control. My mind appreciates this.

Lister Beware! The list itself could become more important or meaningful than the actual activities or entries contained therein. If there is nothing more palatable than a list full of cross-outs, what has become of the joy of taking one’s time to complete each project, allowing items to dribble into the next day? What satisfaction is there in throwing the dog into the sudsy bath water, scrubbing to the tempo of “Stayin’ Alive”, yanking the dog out and sketchily toweling off the dripping fur, merely to leap for the pencil to scratch off, in victory, the item “smelly dog”?

As well, there is something gratuitous in the practice of padding a list. Sometimes I add an item that I know I could never forget. A few weeks ago, my list skimpy, I added “Feed dog”. That was ridiculous. Every night, at exactly ten minutes before feeding time, our Labrador positions himself on the rug, eyes wide, the stare penetrating, as I attempt to finish reading the last page of an exiting chapter. From his mouth dangles at least one noticeable string of drool.

Why would anyone pad a list? Just for the glee of crossing something off? Just for a feeling of self-importance? Do we fear being labeled as non-productive and, therefore, of little value? It’s as if the list governs. It’s as if the orders of Captain John Smith, of the colony Jamestown, ring true and ominous in our hearts: “He that will not work shall not eat.”

The opposite of busyness, someone recently said to me, is laziness. That really isn’t so. Sister Clarence, my first-grade teacher, would agree with me. Our new workbooks were titled “The Think and Do Book.” She allowed us time to look through them, and then she asked us to close the books and look up at her. She said that there was a time to think and there was a time to do. That there was a time to be busy and there was a time to just sit and be still. She raised her arms, palms up, depicting a scale. She said that a good life included thinking and doing.

Wouldn’t it be nice, some morning, to lay a sheet of paper on the kitchen counter, write LIST at the top of it and nothing more, and then sit down, stare out the window at the branches of the tree, listen to the birds chirping, feel the warmth of the cup, smell the tea or coffee...and be still for however long you desire. Know that you shall still eat. And you don’t even need to drool.