



Confessions Of A List Junkie

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There are few things in life that give me more pleasure than checking an item off a list. Beyond reminding us what we need to get from the grocery store (tortilla shells—check!) or having us wrestle with our own handwriting to remember the name of the author we heard last week on NPR (Tim Roney? Tom Rote?), lists ultimately serve as validators of our own worth, assuring us that our time has significance.

For instance: An hour from now, I'm going to retrieve my laundry from the dryer downstairs, one of many mindless tasks on the docket for the day. Ten minutes after it's done I'll have forgotten about it. But if I write "Get Laundry" on a scrap of paper and cross it out afterwards, well, I've accomplished something. If I want to feel especially Herculean, I could even make it two tasks—"Get Laundry" and "Fold Laundry"—ensuring that my sleep tonight will be sound and untroubled (especially if "Go To Sleep" is the last item I check off my list before heading in).

Lists are perfect for elevating the mundane to the significant. But the sense of accomplishment they give you is vulnerable to overuse, as anyone who's ever put "Make List" as the first item on a list knows. If you try to expand the laundry double-spin into a trilogy by adding "Put Laundry Away" or "Unfold That Laundry And Fold It Again Right, Damn It!," you're going to feel more like a line accountant than a productive dynamo.

A confession: when it comes to making lists, I'm an egregious overinflator. The proof resides in a hard green binder kept in my closet, one that holds more than a dozen loose-leafed sheets of paper covered top-to-bottom with books I should read (section I) and records I should listen to (section II). The selections run the gamut from Rajiv Chandrasekaran's *Imperial Life in the Emerald City* to the GZA's Legend of the Liquid Sword, all gleaned from the book reviews, magazine features, and Amazon search engine results I stumble upon

More than anything, the lists provide a snapshot of my media tastes at the time I wrote them. A cluster of fantasy novels reminds me of trawling around Amazon after finishing *The Best of H.P. Lovecraft*, while the music listings' evolution from Steve Earle to Peter Bjorn and John represents my transition from *Rolling Stone* to the *Onion's A.V. Club*. The oldest material—a pair of tattered, folded sheets tucked into the binder's front pocket—is a list of bands and albums gleaned from obsessive readings of the *Rolling Stone Album Guide* and the *Spin Alternative Record Guide* in high school. The fact that most of the bands listed haven't been crossed off is indicative of how often they're referred to.

Still, I keep making them. The green binder is backed up by the more selective moleskin notebook I carry with me, which has five pages of books, music and even websites (did I really think I was going to need to visit seedsavers.org again?). A Word Document on

my computer lists recommended video games, including twenty-nine selections for the Super Nintendo, a system that hasn't had a new game created for it in nine years, and fifty-two for the Playstation and Playstation 2, systems that I don't even own.

While those lists might be unnecessary, at least they're self-contained. The same can't be said of the scraps of paper that build up in the nooks and crannies of our apartment like dust bunnies, essential information that had to be recorded quickly on whatever was nearest at hand.

Three of them sit next to me on my desk as I write this. One notes the candidates I want to vote for in Chicago's city election, another holds the details of the Cubs tickets I purchased online last week, and the third says, helpfully, "Write story for *FLYMF*" (check!). The last one will at least be able to be thrown away soon; the others will hang around until they find a permanent home in a larger pile, a process that can be measured in geological time, much like pebbles adhering together to form a rock.

New technology has enabled my penchant for listmaking to go online. As my fiancée can attest, with some dismay, our Netflix queue has swelled to 490 movies, despite the fact that it's taken us more than a year to watch the last forty movies on our list. "We'll never get through all of them," she tells me, and I have to agree with her.

But that's not the point. While I may never read the majority of the books I've written down, or listen to the albums I've noted, or watch the movies I've added to my queue, I haven't let them go, either. The simple act of putting a title onto paper transforms it from a missed opportunity into a possibility. I may have put it aside for the moment, but as long as it's written down, I can always get back to it later.