

The Book of Signs

A Crowdsourced Field Guide

For

Followers of Jesus

(preview)

By

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The Book of Signs: A Crowdsourced Field Guide for Followers of Jesus

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Dedication

Anyone who knows Leonard Sweet, has heard him speak, or read any of his books will have little difficulty believing that bouncing around in Len's head are enough ideas to fill several lifetimes. The genesis of this book was one of those ideas.

I had known of Len Sweet's work for several years before I met him at a conference author's book table. Book signing tables can be lonely places for authors and so Len had time to engage in a little conversation. Our discussion was centered on what you might imagine, but I left the table knowing that Len Sweet and I met for a reason that day; we became friends.

This friendship resulted in my enrolling in the Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics and Future Studies program at George Fox Evangelical Seminary of which Len Sweet was (and is) the lead mentor. During my time there, I was honored to serve as his teaching assistant.

At the first gathering of our cohort, Len asked a question: "How would you all like to help me write a book?" Here was the idea. The book would somehow be a collaboration in which whoever wanted to participate would share in the task of generating a list of the top 100 words that make us Christian...and that was that.

As Len's teaching assistant, I felt a certain responsibility to figure out how to make this happen. Crowdsourcing seemed a perfect solution. I contacted a company called Ideascale¹ that created and maintained a platform on which individuals or organizations could set up their own crowdsourcing sites. They graciously allowed us an educational license for our project and we were ready to

¹ www.ideascale.com

begin.²

After the crowdsourcing research was complete, I compiled the information and forwarded it to Len who promptly said, “What you have given me is research that should become the topic of your dissertation”...and so it was. He also suggested that after graduation, the two of us work together to complete the book based on this research.

As time went by, the book went through several variations on its path to publication. But, ultimately Len came to the conclusion he was not going to be able to commit the time to this book it needed and offered it up to me to complete and make my own.

While I am grateful and honored to place The Book of Signs before you, this book will never be completely my own. Len birthed the original vision. Len provided the social media clout to announce and engage people to participate. And, Len’s confidence in me inspired me to complete this work.

And so, with great humility and pride, I dedicate The Book of Signs to my friend (and someday co-author) Leonard Sweet.

² You will find more information on crowdsourcing and how the project came together in the Prologue.

Prologue

Crowdsourcing – An Introduction

What if there was an approach to problem solving that, when used properly, tended to generate higher quantities of more robust potential solutions? If there were, wouldn't we expect to see the public and private sectors doing their best to leverage the benefits of this methodology to their respective advantages? Well, there is such a strategy and this is exactly what we are seeing as businesses, both large and small, attempt to utilize a problem solving strategy academics are calling distributed co-creation,³ more commonly known as crowdsourcing.

In the simplest of definitions, crowdsourcing is a process in which a crowd (a group of self-selected⁴ individuals) works together to find a solution to a problem. While a variety of factors contribute to effective crowdsourcing, one of the primary contributors to its ability to uncover innovative solutions seems to be attributable to the advantages associated with diversity in these problem-solving groups. Diversity in this scenario refers to individuals with diverse backgrounds, diverse understandings, and diverse approaches to problem solving. The toolbox is a good metaphor to help us better understand how this works.

Each of us likely has a toolbox of some sort at home. The tools in this toolbox enable us to take on certain projects; to solve certain problems. A hammer enables something different than a screwdriver. A socket set makes possible tasks in which the hammer or screwdriver would be less than useful. And, if one

³ Scott E. Page, *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools, and Societies (New Edition)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁴ Karim R. Lakhani and Jill A. Panetta, "The Principles of Distributed Innovation," *Innovations: Technology, Governance, Globalization* 2, no. 3 (2007): 105.

needed to create a precisely sized hole in a piece of wood, having no drill in the toolbox would prove quite detrimental.

This metaphor is applicable to the matter at hand in that each of us possesses a cognitive toolbox containing a variety of problem solving tools.⁵ Some cognitive toolboxes hold years of experience in a particular area. Others might be stocked with knowledge in a seemingly unrelated discipline. While a different group of us might have tools that cause us to lean more heavily toward technological solutions, just to name a few.

Over time, we tend to become proficient with our particular tool set (or approach) which predisposes us to view problem solving primarily through the lens of these tools. It is easy for us to assume our particular tool set or approach is applicable to every situation because these tools are what we know and what we are good at. But, no matter our preferred strategies or how well-intentioned we might be, the reality is, none of us are capable of carrying around a toolbox with enough cognitive tools to know what is best in every situation. It's just not possible.

For an example, consider the following. A group of MBAs are going to have a certain set of problem solving tools in common. These tools would be valuable if called upon to forecast the profit to loss ratios for an upcoming product launch. However, this set of *common* tools would limit their ability to consider all the possible variables related to their forecast. In this illustration, the MBAs would likely not know the musical artist management secured to endorse their new product had lyrics in an upcoming album that were going to be offensive to a large group of the population consequently reducing product sales by their association with this artist. Perhaps expanding the forecast team beyond those on

⁵ Page, *The Difference*,103.

the accounting team would have helped avoid the public relations debacle in which they were about to be engaged.

For an example closer to home, suppose a group of seminary trained pastors, all of whom have earned their Masters of Divinity degrees, got together to ascertain the best way to enlist volunteers in outreach to the community. Their training predisposes them to a theological perspective. While this perspective and understanding may inspire their actions, it is possible (if not likely) a better way to engage volunteers might be uncovered by including the organizational theory professor at a nearby university or perhaps the volunteer coordinator from a local non-profit in their discussion.

Diverse perspectives enable better solutions to complex problems. C.S. Lewis perhaps summed up the benefits associated with a diverse group of problem solvers best when he said: "Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction."⁶

One of the more recognizable examples of crowdsourcing is Wikipedia. While it would be natural to assume the anarchy of the Internet would negate any confidence one might place in the accuracy of the articles on Wikipedia, research conducted by Nature magazine shows the error rate of Wikipedia is actually comparable to that of the Encyclopedia Britannica with only 3.86 errors per article on Wikipedia compared with 2.92 errors per article for Britannica.⁷ The key to Wikipedia's success hinges on the fact that those most qualified tend to edit and correct the postings of those who are not in an ongoing, albeit somewhat chaotic process.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays On Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub Co, 1994), 202.

⁷ http://news.cnet.com/2100-1038_3-5997332.html

Now lets look at a few examples of how the business world is attempting to monetize crowdsourcing.

- Innocentive⁸ provides a crowdsourcing platform upon which organizations post challenges offering a financial reward to the person or persons who propose the best solution. The amounts of the financial rewards vary from challenge to challenge. For example: Maintaining Crunchy in a Moist Environment - \$40,000, Sorting and Compacting of Washroom Waste Bins - \$25,000, or Harvesting the Energy in Buildings - \$15,000.⁹

- Threadless.com sells t-shirts, however, Threadless.com maintains no t-shirt designers on staff. Instead, their t-shirt designs are submitted by the crowd and selected for production by the crowd who votes on their favorite designs. The crowd submits, the crowd votes, and the crowd affirms their decision by purchasing t-shirts.

- Quirky.com is another example of innovation being fueled by crowdsourcing in that Quirky encourages inventors to submit designs or suggestions for new products to their website. When these ideas are submitted, Quirky encourages people to vote on their favorites and/or contribute ideas for improvement. Quirky then takes the best ideas (those with the greatest number of votes), manufactures them, and brings them to market. A device currently offered for sale on Quirky.com is something called the Pivot Power. Quirky states the inventor thus far has earned over \$11,000 while the community of contributors who helped in the design have earned over \$18,000. The math would suggest, crowdsourcing works quite well for Quirky.com.

⁸ www.innocentive.com

⁹ <https://www.innocentive.com/ar/challenge/browse>

This is all well and good for big business, but what about smaller groups or organizations that are unable to design and build their own crowdsourcing platforms: Ideascale¹⁰ to the rescue. Ideascale enables the creation of custom crowdsourcing platforms to meet the needs of a variety of organizations both large and small. In the large category, the Department of Energy is using this platform to help uncover “green” solutions to the energy challenges facing us in what they are calling their Energy Challenge.¹¹ On the smaller end of the spectrum, Ideascale is the platform used for Crowdsourcing Theology projects.

These are just a few examples that help make clear how crowdsourcing is being used in product development or research initiatives. But, what about the theological appropriateness of using crowdsourcing to help solve some of the difficult challenges facing our Church? The best way to answer this question was to conduct a crowdsourcing experiment to find out. This book is the result of just such an experiment.

Here is the invitation¹² that announced and invited people to participate in this theological crowdsourcing experiment via social media.

“Christianity is a body clothed in words. However, our garb has become garbled and our apparel is no longer apparent. Christianity seems lost for words because it is lost in words. It is when any words will do that words have to be chosen most carefully. It is time to address our identity crisis and identify those words that make us who we are.

What are the words that bridge the centuries, the words that chime on every page of church history? What are the most beautiful words in the Christian vocabulary? What are the words by which we live, the words over which we

¹⁰ <http://www.ideascale.com>

¹¹ <http://energychallenge.energy.gov>

*wrangle--our trigger words? In the rank of words time has tried and found true, what are the words that are up high? Or as the Welsh poet and novelist Robert Minhinnick puts it, what are you captured by---what are "the words that haunt, the words that teach,/the words that must overreach" (King Driftwood). What are the 100 words that make us Christian?"*¹³

This invitation launched a crowdsourcing theology experiment in which 229 individuals participated, 175 words were submitted, and 1025 votes cast over a research period of 4 months. The contributions were thoughtful, insightful, and inspirational. It is from this fertile soil, The Book of Signs was birthed.

¹² http://www.crowdsourcingtheology.com/crowdsourcing_theology/100_Words.html

¹³ Leonard Sweet for this project.

Introduction

We live in a world of signs. There are natural signs humanity has observed since the beginning of time and there are less than natural signs of our own creation. In fact, life as we know it would be next to impossible without these signs.

In the world of semiotics, a sign is anything that has meaning. Individual letters, words, images, sounds, smells, and tastes are all signs, as are a smile, a kiss, a hug, or a tear.

Identity is made visible through a rather elaborate system of signs: clothes, hair, language, demeanor, and even selfies (#justbeingmyself) are ways we announce to the world who we are and what we consider important. Even our skin is being used for sign space as we ink permanent images onto ourselves that make visible the story of our lives.

In the not too distant past for many of us (and currently in certain parts of the world) one's survival depended upon the ability to read signs to track one's dinner. The signs at the center of the trackers attention might be footprints in the mud or snow, or perhaps animal "droppings, or scat, remains of food, claw marks on trees or shrubs, and trails or corridors through the forest, as well as some not-so-obvious signs, such as turned stones and stunted vegetation."¹⁴ The tracker's ability to read these signs tell them where the animal has been, what it has been doing, where it is going, and more importantly what animal they are following.

While most of us today are not scanning the savannah in search of sustenance, we are however quite adept at traversing the economic terrain in search of those

¹⁴ Paul Rezendes, *Tracking and the Art of Seeing: How to Read Animal Tracks and Sign*, 2nd ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 24.

items that might satisfy our culinary quest. Evolutionary Biologist Carol Yoon suggests our ancient tracking skills have simply been re-purposed for the new environment in which we now find ourselves.¹⁵ In essence, we are still hunter-gatherers, we are just no longer tracking animals in their natural habitat but instead are maneuvering our way to aisle 7 in our preferred grocery garden.

Sign Reading Tools

The primary tools we use in the reading of signs in life, the forest, or the marketplace are the same: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and when these are combined with time, we can add experience.

Vision

Vision is one of the primary tools in our sign reading toolbox. It locates us within our environment. It enables us to see where we have been, to see where we are, and in a sense, vision allows us to look into the future as we peer in the direction of our destination. This directionality of vision has a drawback though: we can only see in the direction we are pointed.

Hearing

Hearing is omni-directional in that we can hear a full 360 degrees irrespective of which direction we are facing. Hearing can alert us to the presence of a friend or foe as it helps us locate the source of a sound. Hearing also rises to the top of our sensory hierarchy at night, as darkness does not obscure our ability to hear.

Smell

¹⁵ Carol Kaesuk Yoon, *Naming Nature: The Clash between Instinct and Science* (New York: W.W. Norton, ©2009), 280.

We can see and hear things at great distance, but smell is more intimate. Smell exists at the point where the outside enters in. Even though the odor may originate far away, this sense informs us of an invisible presence and alerts our eyes and ears to search for its source.

Taste

Taste is unique in the senses in that what we taste not only enters in, it becomes part of us. Taste can alert us when something should not be eaten and taste can drive us to pursue something we have a taste for. As such, taste is the most intimate of senses.

Touch

Touch implies a closeness and familiarity. To feel the warmth or the texture one must be near enough to touch. Touch can be used to explore or touch can be used to push away. But touch also goes beyond the physical in that when a story or a scene or a person affects us in certain ways we say that we are touched...touched in ways that make little sense to our senses.

Experience

Vision, hearing, smell, taste, and touch are the tools in our semiotic toolbox, but we learn to use these tools through experience.

We have seen this before.

We have heard this before.

We have smelled this before.

We have tasted this before.

We have felt this before.

All of these experiences combine in ways that enable us to successfully make our way in this world, but they also leave marks of their own. These markings reveal where we have been, what we have been doing, where we are going, and more importantly who we are. We are the sum of these experiences even when these experiences don't seem to add up.

Jesus Signs

Jesus was a man of many signs...signs that were rich in meaning.

*But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the paralytic—"I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home."*¹⁶

As the news of Jesus and the signs he was performing began to circulate, John the Baptist sent two of his disciples to find Jesus and ask him a question: *"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"* Jesus answered them. *"Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them."*¹⁷

Did Jesus answer John's question by discussing his pedigree or the many ways in which prophecy aligned with his existence and presence? No, Jesus pointed to the signs...signs that revealed who Jesus was and the truth of his identity.

Today, the majority of the signs we utilize to validate our identity as followers of Jesus are found in things we can count. For churches, these signs typically revolve around the following:

How many people are in your congregation?

¹⁶ Matthew 9:6, Mark 2:10-11, Luke 5:24

¹⁷ Luke 7:22, Matthew 11:3-5

How many baptisms did you have last year?

How many new members have joined?

What percentage of members tithe?

As individuals, we tend to have a different set of metrics to determine the depth of our discipleship:

How often do you attend church?

How often do you read your bible?

Been on any mission trips lately?

Are you a tither?

We love to count because counting is verifiable and measurable, but we should count the cost of this strategy since it places the accountant at the head of the table rather than Jesus.¹⁸

So, if Jesus' answer to the question from John's disciples concerning whether Jesus was the Messiah or not was revealed by the God signs in Jesus' life, what are the God signs in our lives and the life of our churches that reveal the truth of our identity as followers of Jesus? The Book of Signs is an attempt to answer that question as it provides us with Jesus signs that make sense to our senses.

Each section features a primary word (or sign) contributed by trackers (followers) of Jesus based upon their experience: the sights they have seen, sounds they have heard, scents they have followed, tastes they have learned, feelings they have had, and experiences they have lived—all signs providing evidence that Jesus, the one they were "tracking," was near.

¹⁸ Thanks to Peter Block and his book *The Answer to How is Yes* for this insight.

As an author, my task has been to honor the result of their collective wisdom, exploring and expanding upon these signs as a way to help Jesus trackers better recognize the sights, sounds, scents, tastes, feelings, and experiences in their lives that not only keep them on the trail, but reveal a Jesus that is making Himself known in our midst.

Reading the signs of others may bring certain signs you have experienced to mind that are not recorded in this Book of Signs. If it does, there are several pages at the back of the book where you can record signs of your own in the Field Notes section.

And so, this is a handbook or field manual, a book of signs that echo John's question and Jesus' answer: Are you the one, one of the followers of Jesus and is your church a community full of signs pointing to a Jesus that is alive, healthy, and nearby?

Welcome to The Book of Signs.

1 - Hear

Most of us have likely heard at some point we have two ears and one mouth so we will listen more than we talk. While there is some degree of truth in this statement, from a biological perspective, we have two ears for a much more practical purpose: sound localization. As sound arrives at each ear in differing intensities and with delayed arrival times, we are able to quite accurately locate its source. Knowing the source of what we are hearing and who we are listening to can make a big difference... sometimes the difference between life and death.

We find an example of such magnitude in the way sound recognition enables generation after generation of Emperor penguins to survive in the harsh conditions of Antarctica. Each year, after the female penguin lays her single egg, she passes this egg off to her spouse while she and the other girls venture off in search of the open waters and food. This journey may take her up to 50 miles away and separate her from her family for possibly two months. Upon her return, she must locate her somewhat malnourished mate who has been shielding and caring for their chick during the brutal winter of Antarctica. Research has shown these pairs of penguins locate one another using a two-part sound-producing organ known as the syrinx.¹⁹ To better understand how this organ contributes to spousal localization, scientists conducted tests in which they recorded the voice of a penguin's spouse and played it for their mate to confirm they would respond to this voice...they did. However when the recording was modified in even the slightest manner, the mate did not respond.²⁰ The familiarity the penguin parents

¹⁹ T Aubin, P Jouventin, and P Hildebrand, "Penguins Use the Two-Voice System to Recognize Each Other." *Proceedings of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 267 (2000): 1081-87, accessed January 22, 2015, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1690651/>.

²⁰ Ibid.

have with the sound of one another's voice enables them to single out and identify each other from perhaps 100,000 competing voices.

As it turns out, people are not that different from emperor penguins in their ability to zero in on the voice of a spouse. In research conducted by Ingrid Johnsrude, she found that when the voice of a spouse is recorded and played back while also playing back a competing, yet unfamiliar voice, the listening spouse was much more accurate when asked to repeat what it was their spouse was saying in this exercise.²¹ She discovered the benefit of familiarity was sizable and comparable to the benefit associated with trying to distinguish between sounds emanating from different locations.²² Interestingly, when playing out the opposite scenario, spouses were also better able to ignore the familiar voice of their spouse to listen to an unfamiliar voice as compared with trying to distinguish between two unfamiliar voices.²³ Whether human or emperor penguin, familiarity seems to enhance our ability to hear the voice of those most important to us.

Life in contemporary culture exposes us to an abundance of voices attempting to tell us that completeness, fulfillment, or happiness is found in whatever it is they are selling. Long term exposure to this noise can diminish our ability to discern the voice of Jesus who speaks in contrast to these illusions as he tells us true completeness, fulfillment, or happiness can only be found in him.

However, just as a pair of emperor penguins can hear the voice of their mate from amongst the cacophony of competing voices and a spouse can zero in on the voice of their beloved, we as the Body of Christ, the bride of a most holy groom, must be intimately familiar with the voice of Jesus if we are to successfully follow him today.

²¹ <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/news/releases/your-spouses-voice-is-easier-to-hear-and-easier-to-ignore.html>

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

The ability to recognize his voice above all others, both inside and outside the walls of the church, is a sign the footsteps you are following, are the footsteps of Jesus.



2 - Grace

Anyone who has ever been truly lost knows the vulnerability and despair associated with this experience. The kind of lost we are talking about here is not the lost we get while driving, for this kind of lost can easily be overcome by asking for directions or consulting the GPS.

The lostness to which we refer is more like being lost on a raft in the ocean with dwindling supplies, not knowing which way to go or having the strength to move that direction if we could. If we were to find ourselves in the midst of this kind of lostness, a lostness where the hopelessness of the situation threatened to overtake us, then the joy of being found could not be overstated.

John Newton wrote a song about being lost and then found we know as Amazing Grace.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,

That saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost but now am found,

Was blind, but now I see.

This anthem of human redemption tells the story of being spiritually lost in ones wretchedness and blind to the God that stands before us, but then celebrates the joy of being found and rescued through the grace of God...Amazing Grace.

Interesting, one is not found unless a search is in progress, for if one somehow makes their way back to familiar surroundings, they were not found, they simply found their way home. This distinction is critical in our understanding of Christianity in that Christians are those who have been found and rescued from

the wretchedness of their situation, not those who found their way to some spiritual destination. Being found implies a finder and it is in the presence of this finder...Jesus...that we are found in grace.

And so, if we are to look for signs that we are following Jesus, we should look for evidence of grace in our lives. Are we graceful with the graceless, hopeful with the hopeless, helpful with the helpless, and merciful with the merciless? These signs of grace will signify that Jesus is near and the footsteps we are following will lead us home.



3 - Love

If we perform a Google search for the word “love”, we find almost 3 billion results. Search love in film...1 billion, love in music... 1.73 billion, love in books... 1.1 billion etc. Searching for love on Google or any other search engine is quite simple. However, in life that search can be more difficult as even defining love proves somewhat problematic. We love what we do and yet we love a day off. We love our family, we love our spouse, we love our children, we love our friends, but we also love chocolate, fashion, fast cars, and anything on sale.

Even the terminology we associate with finding love indicates that our search was not necessarily intentional, we simply fell in love. Some seem to be somewhat gravitationally challenged as they fall in and out of love at the drop of a hat, while others, perhaps more sure of their footing never seem to stumble into love. And yet, our search for love continues.

We have learned about love from those who have gone before us on this journey. They have done their best to provide us with a roadmap to this most intimate of destinations, but the map isn't clearly marked and the signs are easy to overlook.

And so, our search for love takes us down many roads. Some roads turn out to be dead ends. Some roads seem promising but prove only to be detours. Still others lead us in the right direction as they enable us to see love a little clearer, but in the end, stop short of our destination.

This search for love is not for the faint of heart. Some grow tired, settling for something else and calling it love. Others attempt to redirect their energies toward a less elusive endeavor in hopes that success, power, or prestige will quench the fire, but in the end, love's embers remain un-fanned.

The best example of love for this book of signs can be found in what is likely the most familiar text in the Bible.

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”²⁴

This kind of love is more than a love we might have for chocolate, fashion, or fast cars. This kind of love requires a sacrifice of that which is nearest and dearest, a re-ordering and restructuring of our lives in Jesus’ direction. Finding ourselves in the presence of this kind of love is not the result of a stumble or a fall, it is found in surrender.

And so, if we are to be successful in our search for love, we must pay attention to the signs and consider the evidence that reveals the true nature of the love standing before us. Is it a love similar to the love one has for chocolate, treated as a guilty pleasure only to be enjoyed on special occasions or with great remorse? Is it a love similar to a love of fashion, showing greatest enthusiasm for the novel and new, tiring of love when it shows signs of wear or stress as it can easily be replaced with something new. Or, is it a Jesus kind of love, a love found in surrender, a love without end?

Jesus is the longitude and latitude of this love. No matter our wrong turns, missed turns, or the quantity of our re-turns, our spiritual GPS (God Positioning System) will always recalculate our trajectory, pointing us in the direction that leads to the foot of the cross, for it is there and only there we truly find the meaning of love.

²⁴ John 3:16 KJV