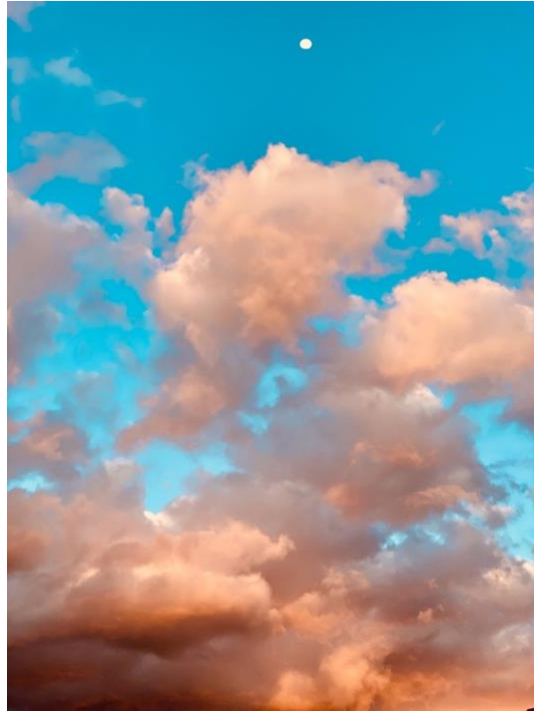


Century 1
Beforewords

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*Yonder sky that has wept tears of compassion upon my people for centuries
untold, and which to us appears changeless and eternal...*

*Our dead never forget this beautiful world that gave them being. They still
love its verdant valleys, its murmuring rivers, its magnificent mountains,
sequestered vales and verdant lined lakes and bays, and ever yearn in tender
fond affection over the lonely hearted living, and often return from the
happy hunting ground to visit, guide, console, and comfort them.*

Chief Si'ahl

1.
My good friend Akwasi Aidoo often starts his public talks with these words: *I have something to say before I speak.*

2.
I will follow Akwasi. These are my beforewords.

3.
I don't write books. When the moment comes, the book writes me.

4.
This book took a long time to find itself.

5.
It got lost a few times. More honestly stated, I got lost. Topics, questions, and ideas moved back and forth between heart and mind. They moved from front to back burner. For a considerable time, they sat on a low simmer.

6.
At least twice across the past few years I stopped writing. The block would settle in. Always around the five-chapter mark. I wrote poetry instead. Then poetry-prose.

7.
In my college days, a course syllabus led me into Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. He wrote seven propositions with sub-sequences of numbering, mostly in short sentences. They seemed to follow where his mind desired to go. I suspected he was led by his heart. Invited by the professor in charge of the syllabus to be creative in our response, I submitted my semester paper in Wittgensteinian style. I think it numbered from 1 to 25. If memory serves well, the grade was slightly below average.

8.
Grading never captures spirit. Likely unseen by the professor, mine had been released. I told no one of this as I learned to properly speak and write in the language of the learned. I took the last and shortest of Ludwig's propositions to heart, the sentence and proposition that concludes his book: *7. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.* In search of my whereabouts, my writing seemed to be in search of the whereof.

9.

Many years beyond my college days I discovered ascetical writing, like those of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, or the Middle English mystics.

10.

They lived in isolation. They contemplated clouds and unknowing, and how to find the breath of God between the two. With scant material resources, some memorized their insights in story, in bits of conversation. If written, some placed their tads of wisdom numbered from 1 to 100, a container referred to as a *Century*.

11.

As you see, it's an odd bit of structure. The wandering heart has a more direct line to the hand, perhaps bypassing the self-doubts of perfection and the scorching anxieties of the brain.

12.

Theologian David Fagerberg suggests the Century structure makes it easier to ponder. From one sentence or a paragraph to the next, the path can wander. As he puts it, in a Century the reflection *can lead many places, and the reader becomes an active participant in making connections*. He takes note that the whole endeavor is *friendly to paradox* and metaphor, which become *the currency of the realm*.

13.

I tend to ponder. Pondering is a form of sauntering.

14.

My disciplinary skill training did not offer pondering as a critical part of my profession. Over the years, I have found pondering profoundly significant. Ponderings appear as cairns, those impromptu rocks balanced to mark a path. I make note of the ones to which I circle back around. Sometimes I have to wander a wilding trail a half dozen times before I realize it's a path. I am not as adept as the mystics. My cairns did not always reach a clean one hundred. Nor do the bits and pieces all carry a tad of wisdom.

15.

My low-simmer writing had a nocturnal bent. At night, nothing but questions carved the pathways, as if they were sauntering before me like a chattering *preambulus*. Then the preamble would scatter to the edges.

16.

I suppose this happens in a vocation that seeks to nurture human dignity and when the people you care about suffer incessantly.

17.

Two a.m. queries and doubts have a life of their own. They travel in packs. They stumble one over the other, rushing to get somewhere. It can feel like several Centuries fogged-in and surrounding the soul.

18.

Some nights the packs shift from fog to insight. The questions seem to tell me things with absolute clarity in the half-sleep dark. By morning I can no longer find their traveled path.

19.

People who study chaos theory say if you zoom-in *close enough*, and then zoom-out *far enough* away, and then moving between the two you wait and behold them *long enough*, a moment will arrive when the stumbling mess and madness will gather into a pattern.

20.

The theory seems to require three *enoughs*: In-tight. Far-flung. Steadfast.

21.

Thich Nhat Hahn called this *awake*. Middle English Mystics and Desert Fathers called it *unknowing*. My night pack of questions calls it *sleeplessness*.

22.

William Stafford held chaos in poems. He wrote one a day — poetry like vitamins.

23.

It started when as a conscientious objector he would rise and write a few words before dawn, his preamble before the daily physical labor of encampment began.

24.

He once wrote that what you fear *will take you into yourself and bless you and keep you*.

25.

I am not sure the roaming packs of night questions blessed me, but they did seem to cohere. Names remained elusive. With time, I got tight-in enough to feel the rooted suffering and far-back enough to sense that these questions had threads leading somewhere even though they refused to reveal their full tapestry.

26.

That's the thing about fear and questions, about writing cairns and following unfolding paths – they are always circling, shifting, and begging for a bit more.

27.

Questions kept coming back and around: *How will the human family survive the eco-fragility we have wrought? How will we learn to live with our vicious divides?*

28.

One pathway seemed to serve as the center of gravity: *How do we keep the generosity of the human spirit vibrant while we walk wounded?*

29.

Dale Dione, Kanien'kehá:ka clan mother, taught me about the seven generations.

30.

When I first met her in the summer of 1990, we found ourselves behind barricades. Weapons had accumulated on both sides of the Kahnawake boundaries outside Montréal. We were faced with a tinder box that had shut the bridges leading into the city. The precarious moment-by-moment intensity her community traversed was never overshadowed by the long view she gathered round her.

31.

More than once I heard her say, *what was decided seven generations ago still touches us today. The action we take today will ripple across the next seven.*

32.

In her community's fierce now I watched her care for others. Dale embodied fourteen generations. She wrapped centuries round her.

33.

Quaker teacher Elise Boulding helped me land in my two-hundred-year present. She started with a simple calculation based on a person — for example, you, the reader — gazing on their own biography, their family story. Here is what she would ask us to ponder.

34.

First, find the face of the oldest person who held you on their lap at your earliest memory. Take a guess at their likely birth decade. Mine would be my great-grandmother Lydia Miller, born in the 1860s, who held me on her lap when I was a child.

35.

Now, find the face of the youngest member of your extended family and close friends, a youngster who you have personally held in your arms or on your lap. Imagine a full life for this precious bowl of light, as the Native Hawaiians call the newborn. Think out to the decade that this person will likely live to see if they become a grandparent. Mine are my grandsons Isa and Oihan and granddaughter Sofia. Now in their early years, they will very likely live to see the turn of this century.

36.

Now place the dates side-by-side — the birth decade of the oldest person who held you and the potential decade to which the youngest you have held might live to enjoy.

37.

In my case, my great-grandmother's birth in the 1860s to my grandchildren's potential horizon into the next century.

$$\begin{array}{r} 2100 \\ - 1860 \\ \hline 240 \end{array}$$

Elise Boulding would call this my two-hundred-year present — crafted by the people who touched me and the people whom I have touched.

38.

These are the centuries that wrap round me.

39.

My two-hundred-year present covers the period of the 1860s' Civil War in the United States through the Civil Rights Movement of the

1960s and to who-knows-what-will-come by the 2060s. The fierce now and the long arc, as Martin Luther King Jr. always posited it.

40.

In 2021, African philosopher John Mbiti moved on to join the ancestors.

41.

He lived a robust two-hundred-year present. Committed to deep listening, he drew water from the wells of African wisdom. His words still ring. *The past*, he said, *lies before us*.

42.

There is a deep truth to Mbiti's insight in both metaphor and linguistic structure. Many of us have learned, and have likely said to youngsters around us, *Oh, imagine the future that lies before you*. Reality suggests that what we have lived is that which we have seen. It is the soil in which we dig to understand anything unknown that comes round. The yet-to-come, what we have not yet lived, none of us have seen. In a literal sense, what Mbiti found in the language structures he studied holds true. Our eyes have seen what we have lived. The past sits before us. Equally true, our eyes have not seen what we have not yet lived, the future. It sits behind us, or at least out of direct sight, scattered on the edges.

43.

From Hannah Arendt I understood the greatest of all human paradoxes. We have the capacity to remember, but no power to *change* the past. We have the capacity to imagine, but no power to *control* the future. To embrace the paradox of powerlessness, to hold its extraordinary tension, humility remains the constant guidepost.

44.

Humility (n): The courage to hold your truth lightly enough that the light of another, even one you fear, can unexpectedly illuminate your path; also known as living with a tender tenacity.

45.

Yet, humility, this simplest of human traits, appears so seldom practiced among us these days. It sits quiet, present. A cairn we fail to notice.

46.

This century, like those that preceded us, we walk backwards into the yet-to-come. We look back knowing what we have lived,

uncertain about what is coming. For the current iteration of the human species, we saunter into survival unpredictability.

47.

The pandemic brought uncertainty knocking on everyone's door, especially those who had no door to shelter. And by any account, the Corona-moment invited us, and invites us still, to reflect on the centuries wrapped round us that seem to be begging us to have just enough humility to face our shredding and precarious eco-systemic social tissue.

48.

Peacebuilding sits at the center of my life vocation.

49.

On the long list of professions, peacebuilder cannot be found on visa application forms or occupational registers. I always find myself falling in the category of OTHER. It comes with the annoying blank space: EXPLAIN. As space is limited, mostly two-word sentences may best describe this vocation by way of the Hippocratic peacebuilding oath.

50.

Seek truth. Acknowledge wounds. Wounds carried. Wounds inflicted. Repair harm. Reduce violence. Increase justice. Live balanced. Be grateful. Offer grace. Walk humbly. Lead into social healing. Reconcile. Love incessantly.

51.

Peacebuilding: Sequence and order uncertain. It circles. It seeds. It tends to deep roots. Suggested approach: Stay humble and know that everything touches everything. It's a relational thing.

52.

Words attributed to Chief Si'ahl, ancestor of the Duwamish and Suquamish tribes, offer a window into what everything might mean: *Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect.*

53.

I call this pathway vocational because peacebuilding will call you to walk and share your thread over and again.

54.

Academics narrowed the web when they titled it the inquiry into Conflict and Peace Studies.

55.

I have come to understand my vocation as learning to become human while holding pain and navigating division.

56.

Métis singer-songwriter Ferron once sang that the *tools for being human are wicked crude*.

57.

My night pack of roaming questions keeps sending up flare alerts. Something about finding ourselves on the endangered species list.

58.

What I learned in deep conflict: To survive, people must learn to human together better. To the editors and eventual readers of this book, *to human* was first a verb. It came to pass that breath entered and aliveness emerged. Breath and aliveness only survive when held and fed. They only flourish in relationship.

59.

Facing fear, fragility, and fragmentation will take courage and creativity. It will require gentle ways to wield the crude and gentle tools of being human.

60.

Over the past four decades my wandering in places of deep violence, rampant injustice, and daily fragility taught me to watch and learn from people who, against the odds, flourished with their dignity and imagination intact.

61.

Intact (v): Living whole while wounded; fully alive.

62.

Survivors cannot be reduced to victims. Nor do they merely survive. They are not vulnerable if the image associated with vulnerability is weakness. The opposite I find true. Far more than victim or survivor, they are artists. Artists of resistance. Artists of resilience. Artists of community. Artists of creativity. Aliveness means they

show up in the world of hurt with an audacious tender tenacity:
They birth thriving.

63.

War zones, violence, displacement, loss, and trauma — these wicked whetstones hone their experience and sharpen the sing-song music of their audaciousness.

64.

The challenges they face beset them with a penetrating depth of understanding, a fourteen-generation vision, and a creative generosity of spirit and joy. Intact.

65.

They do not fragment life into categories that politicians, economists, scientists, or humanitarian aid organizations proffer.

66.

I rarely found them trafficking in hopelessness or cynicism, though they have a keen capacity to sniff out deceit. Their breath and aliveness depend on it.

67.

To flourish they tap inner resources, navigate narrowing opportunity, forge community, and imagine before and beyond what currently exists. Most of all, they feel and hold tightly to their web of relationships, the threads of connection like shimmering silver.

68.

In all this, they do not deny wounds. They learn to carry wounds with grace. Some call this compassion.

69.

While artists of tender tenacity sing the songs of pain and loss, they also chant the rhythms of beauty and bridging.

70.

They live by way of the thread Chief Si'ahl imagined precisely because they understand that survival only flourishes in the fabric of becoming human together. Some scientists call this the study of ecosystems.

71.

Most of the people I walked with in conflict zones understood this as being part of a wider family and good neighborliness. This means every neighbor counts, including the trees, stones, animals, rivers, seas, and skies. The web vibrates wide and deep when understood as everything.

72.

There is an art to thriving, to humans flourishing. It seems to rise with a sense of gratitude, to live generously because life emerged from generosity.

73.

This may sound odd to the reader, but if you have arrived this far, you likely noticed that the purpose of my writing is still unveiling. Proceeding onwards will require an adventuresome spirit.

74.

Mind the gaps.

75.

I first heard this in a subway station when passengers moved from one platform of travel to another. The step coming was not predictable – the train and platform at different levels and paces, unstable, the ground emergent. *Mind the gap* alerts us that we are venturing onto the in-between ground.

76.

The gaps in this book are frequent. I have decided not to fill them.

77.

Gaps and artists of aliveness have this in common: Both reach for something worthy of holding.

78.

Ponder. Reach. Hold. Fill-in. We do these when we hear a story. We look for the thread that weaves in and out of the fabric of meaning in this untamed, fragile, and beautiful life we hold within and between us.

79.

A student of conflict, I know that to human requires us to respond to life based on the meaning we attach to things around us.

80.

Of late, the gaps between us have grown wide and deep, our ground has become less stable. The landing grounds between us move at different paces and levels. We live in chasmland.

81.

These days, shared meaning gets suspended faster for longer. Trust has weakened if not folded. Truth spills among us like mercury.

82.

We watch with narrowing vision, witness with fixed filters, speak through muted masks.

83.

Collapsed trust has us listening with our eyes and blinking with our ears.

84.

We *look* first for who said something, so we can *see* what it means.

85.

Words rarely matter, except to confirm or deny in the blink of an ear what is already known. Well before the words even enter the listening canal, much less the heart, meaning has long been sussed.

86.

We live hyper aware. Sociologists say this happens as conflict intensifies. Fanatically alert, we perceive more but believe less.

87.

We live aware but not awake. At least not in that deeper sense Thich Nhat Hahn employed when he suggested that for things to *reveal themselves, we must abandon our views about them*. Jesus said the doorway onto the path requires becoming a child. A beginner's mind.

88.

We seem aware of our allergy to awareness. Criticisms abound about our woke culture.

89.

No matter its guise, arrogance roils the skin.

90.

While so many declare the weakness of others' wokeness, reality seems to suggest the opposite. Deep down inside, we all think that our thread unveils more of the true fabric of our web than theirs; mine more than yours.

91.

As a professor I discovered that many people do not read past the back cover and the first pages of a book. For those of you who may not wish to go further, let me offer the whole book in a few words.

92.

We are not awake.

93.

We are living in the wake of our own behavior.

94.

To survive what we have wrought we will need to become creators of tender tenacity, artists of thriving, weavers of flourishing. Some think this begins with precise analysis and prescription. These are certainly windows into the complex reality and ways forward worthy of exploration. But these have equally served as blinders.

95.

The cairns and circling paths hint at something deeper. Between the feet and the brain, the heart holds a quiet flame. So much begins with our hidden inner works – with habits of how to saunter into wholeness while walking wounded.

96.

Our challenge does not primarily sit within the particulars of carbon, the matters of heat, the content of politics, the breaking of reality into manageable pieces, or the logic of numbers that we must somehow miraculously envision, understand, and project.

97.

It is us. We will need to understand the matters of heart and tissue, to find the threads and bridges that bring us back into our shared, tenacious humanity.

98.

The centuries wrapped round us are speaking.

99.

The web is abuzz with their vibrations.

100.

I have decided to follow the thread.

john paul lederach

october 2025