
Quiet Is Freedom

By Kenneth Maue

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All things I love dwell in quiet. I don't mean total lack of sound, which is rare, and never perfect anyhow since we hear our own heartbeat, breathing, and nerves when other noises fade, but the soft, sparse body of sound we hear in nature, empty rooms, and the deep of night. Quiet is now so uncommon that many people don't know what it is (when the radio's turned low?), or shun it. True quiet isn't so much a lack of something as the presence of the world's wholeness. Noise, like pain, is local, forcing attention into isolated spots; quiet, like love, reaches out, linking ever-further chambers of being. Hearing quiet is an art, like thinking, or reading books. There is more to quiet than meets the ears.

Sitting in Silence

At Quaker school we attended Meeting: the assembly of everyone sitting in silence. Sundays it was an hour; midweek, a half hour; other days, a few minutes. Roughly speaking the aim is religious but with no program to it, except that anyone can speak on anything at any time, it's whatever you make of it. Like many students, to be naughty I liked to cut Meeting, but a familiar story came true for me too: returning graduates told us that however often they'd cut Meeting, it was Meeting they recalled most vividly, cherished best, from school. Like others I shrugged at the boring declaration; thirty years later, I say the same words myself. What is so compelling about a silent assembly, even for restless young people? The answer, I think, is a mystery, for silence is a changing thing, unique to each of us; yet behind silence's myriad faces burns a light the eyes don't see but the soul yearns for as fiercely as the lungs want air. We need no religion or belief, or even wisdom, to meet in the spheres of silence the soft-flowing source of all we ever love.

Silence brings us to that source, yet many sounds do too. Bird songs, crickets, rustling leaves and grasses; waves at the beach, gurgling streams, waterfalls; the voices of loved ones, their footsteps and everyday motions -- such sounds refresh and brighten. Paradoxically, sounds often convey quiet better than pristine silence, as room furnishings convey more space, more possibility, than the room when bare.

The Sharing of Space

Quiet rewards the closest listening. One of my great joys is the habit, acquired young, of noticing all sounds. A drawer creaks; pen scratches paper, ice tinkles, frying onions sizzle, a fridge hums, coins bounce on pavement: the world is music, full of subtlety (compare cold and hot water poured in a cup) and variety (listen to a children's playground). Nothing gives me more faith in the world than hearing the shifting richness of quiet: its beauty, variety, and above all, connectedness, for sound is a binding thing. Listening, we hear life's wholeness. Each thing has a place in the orchestra, a part in the rhythm, a voice in the counterpoint. More than other senses, more than thinking, hearing tells us that everything belongs, everything relates. And quiet says this best, for the common trait of quiet sounds is that they share the space they fill.

Listen to birds: except for a few bullies, bird songs leave room for all other sounds, invite the ears to hear everything, the mind to think afresh. Dog barking, in contrast, blots other sound, grabs attention, jams thought. Quiet is less an issue of loudness than blend. Why does a roaring waterfall calm the soul, while a tiny faucet drip wrecks a night's sleep? Quiet isn't acoustic mildness, it's sharing space, each voice having its fair place, none blotting others out. Quiet is more than a pleasant luxury. It's the commons of freedom.

Noise and Passivity

When harsh noise hits, instead of reaching out to greet the world with open ears, we shrink back into shells, or try to; in truth the ears can't shut, nor like the eyes turn away. Noise controls space like an occupying army, travels through walls, enters homes, molests bodies, violates privacy, stops thought, batters each of us into isolation.

Today we live in a storm of noise. Some of it is industry at work but mostly it's consumer products: convenience and recreation devices producing noise which till recently would have been thought bizarre. Why? Rudeness? Anxiety? Loss of community? One hint may lie in the simultaneous advent of today's noise and saturation advertising. "Creative means intrusive!" a college advertising text says on page one; in a marketplace society, where selling rules, must we shriek ever louder to get the attention we need just to exist?

People accept even painful noise, or remain oblivious in sharp contrast to other preferences. At a college shop I asked the manager how she liked the loud radio. "I hate it! But the students say they need it to stay awake." A cafe owner saying her workers' music tapes gave her headaches marvels at hints she choose the tapes. A landlord who insists on "quiet" plays TV his tenants hear 15 hours a day. A man sound-proofs his home, and runs a leaf-blower at the open window where his neighbors dine. Natural food stores play synthetic pop music, acoustic analog of the synthetic pop food they shun. A village dictates the colors shops may paint window trim, and allows deafening outdoors music supposedly for drawing business. Homeowners adamant about property rights let lonely dogs bark for hours, acoustically invading neighbors' homes. Can we ever regain quiet?

Restored to Its Own Music

At the laundromat one day, made ill by pounding pop music, I swallowed my outrage and politely asked the young clerk if she might turn it down. She did, then a minute later turned it off. My delight abounded. At once I was relieved by the noise's end, happy at overcoming passive misery with polite assertion, pleased by her courtesy, delighted by her voluntary extra gesture.

And more: invasive music gone, the laundromat became a lovely piece of music. Few sound bodies reward the ears so richly as a dense drone of washers and dryers. Gladly I soaked in the sound, thoughts flowing easily, mind's ear inventing tunes: an uplift, almost like a waterfall. So pleasant did the laundry become, restored to its own music, that after folding my clothes I sat for a while savoring the beautiful washer-dryer music.

When I left I thanked the clerk; she smiled. A grace had entered. I'd resented her for the pain the radio caused me, and then together we mended the breach in the commons. Did she enjoy the natural sounds of her workplace? I hoped so.

Our Souls Are Speaking

Can we end the storm of noise, overthrow noise tyranny, keep the acoustic commons open? Restoring quiet takes work and risk: part of the freedom struggle. To think, to act, to love our neighbors, we must hear the wind, and crickets, flapping flags and falling rain.

Asking others to respect the acoustic commons, I would not want to curb anyone's freedom, only to insure that all be heard. Musicians learn a working rule: Always listen, always blend. Thus does harmony thrive.

Waking, I hear dawn's first bird. The landlord's familiar footsteps pad across the ceiling. Soon, I will hear your voice too, and the voice inside your voice. Our souls are speaking.

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