
Take A Listening Walk and Learn To Listen

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Have you ever noticed how much time you spend making noise each day? There are friends and family to talk to. Music to play on the stereo, television programs to entertain you, grass to mow, dishes to wash and laundry to do. Your days are full of sound making.

Some of these sounds are important in that they provide useful information. Other sounds entertain. And still others are the by-products of human activity which form an ambient background for daily life.

It's interesting that even when we have a moment for reflective quiet we try to fill it with sound. For many of us quiet seems empty and void and because of that we seemingly become anxious without sound.

Taking time to listen to the sounds around us is worth the effort. We live in an acoustic environment full of subtle and not so subtle sounds that both enrich and detract from our daily life. Giving attention to these acoustical events not only enhances our appreciation of natural and human soundscapes but also makes us aware of endangered sounds and those sounds, which like weeds, may be destroying the soundscape.

We all listen of course. But purposeful listening is learned. By practicing purposeful listening we give attention to the soundscape around us. Here is a simple example. Stop for a minute at the end of this sentence and listen to the immediate sounds around you.

What did you hear? I heard a city bus pass by and a helicopter flying overhead. I also heard birds, the wind, a hall clock, and children playing.

What is important is that we both took a moment to stop and purposefully listen. In doing so, we started the first step to opening our ears and mind to the soundscape which surrounds us every day.

Some sounds may be disturbing to one's personal health. Those sounds that irate like the thumping of a neighbors stereo, or city traffic, can cause one to be anxious and disturb one's rest. In the long run one's cardiovascular system may be effected.

Other sounds are relaxing and give one a sense of peacefulness. Many believe the sound of the ocean surf or a flowing stream provide restful acoustic experiences.

Purposeful listening can be made into an enjoyable experience when combined with walking. A listening walk is something one can do by oneself, or share with others.

A few simple rules apply. First, talking is not permitted. The purpose is to listen and one's vocal and mental quiet is important for a walk to be effective. Second, plan a journey through a soundscape which may initially provide a variety of sounds. Later seek out more quiet soundscapes which require developed listening skills. Third, after the walk reflect about what you've heard and what affect it had on you.

Where to walk and the length of the walk should be determined by personal or collective

interests. Sometimes initial walks are interesting if done in places where a variety of sounds can be heard. Then, as noted above, choose increasingly difficult walks which include more and more quiet.

I once took a walk in Vancouver, British Columbia which began on a tree lined West End residential street filled with morning bird song. Then I proceeded onto the promenade along the bay where the subtle sound of waves washing over loose gravel could be distinctly heard. Bicyclists and joggers passed by and I listened to their sounds as well.

I turned from the bay and walked into the lobby of an old hotel and out the back door. The hushed sounds of thick carpet and overstuffed chairs created a aural sense of solitude and elegance.

I then went on to explore the acoustics of an apartment vestibule with hard reflective surfaces echoing every body movement. An empty band gazebo and the sound of a rain storm resonating on the roof brought the walk to a close as I returned to the tree lined street where large rain drops collected and fell from overhead branches thumping onto my opened umbrella.

Allow 30 to 60 minutes for a listening walk. First walks may seem a bit strange especially when participating with a group of people. I recall that on a recent walk strangers passed our listening group and noticed our quietness. One passer-by suggested that we must be some type of religious order given our non-talkative demeanor.

Each listening walk you make will provide you with new experiences. If you walk alone write down your reflections in a journal. If you are with a group spend a bit of time debriefing your shared experiences. Take the same walk at different times of the day or under varied weather conditions. Notice the differences in the quality and quantity of sounds you'll hear.

The more you walk and listen the more you'll discover. Listening walks are not only informative they are entertaining. There's always an ever changing concert of sound around you.

What is important is that you are taking time to listen and to give yourself time to reflect. Such activity openness one to

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