

In Pursuit of Silence



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Want music? Wherever you are in twenty-first-century America, just flip a switch—or do nothing at all. Carefully mixed and edited sound is everywhere. You can tune in at the store, in your car, in your doctor’s office, at your place of work, and even in the woods.

We Americans like to set our lives to music. In the supermarket, we hum along. Stopped at a traffic light, we dance in our seats. Different songs energize us, unite us in patriotism, draw tears, dignify disappointment, or prime us for romance. Melody often soothes. Recorded tunes are predictable: they stay the same for every performance.

Still, our private concerts isolate us. If I am listening to my MP3 player, I am not chatting with you. Even if you are standing right beside me, we are cut off from each other. I have partly withdrawn from you and the outside world. Why?

The roar of tractor trailers, the whine of the chainsaw, and the distant drone of backhoes—these jarring noises and others provoke ongoing residual irritation, a form of low-key anxiety. I can’t stop them; you can’t either. Perhaps we push a button to drown them out. If so, the cure is not without cost. In fragmenting our consciousness, we cut ourselves off from mindful awareness of our bodies.

Each day, weather permitting, I drive to the top of Talcott Mountain to Reservoir 6. It’s a manmade lake, long and jagged, flanked on one side by steep woods and on the other by a dike. As I walk the 3.76 mile perimeter, I share the path with other hikers and runners. I seldom see one without headphones or ear buds.

In the woods I hear the tattoo of woodpeckers, the rustling of squirrels, and the sighing of the wind. The cold air is laced with the acrid smell of the wet leaves underfoot, beneath the ice and snow. Around me lies a black-and-white landscape, cold and austere, to which these sounds and smells belong and through which I am moving, one stride at a time. If I watch closely, I may glimpse a

heron poised at the water's edge below me. All of this information is compatible, complementary.

I wonder what would happen if we all unplugged. Suppose we pulled off the Walkman, doused the radio, and just listened. If we practiced mindfulness, what would we learn about our surroundings and our responses to them? If we did not retreat into isolation, how else could we take care of ourselves? Reflecting, I found myself transported back in time.

It was August 1986. I was paying a first visit to Monhegan Island, off the coast of Maine, a place with virgin forest and acres of unpicked wildflowers but without traffic or electricity. The machine-free quiet of each day there settled around my ears like a weightless blanket, oddly velvety. Of course it was not really silence. I could hear birds, voices, the wind, and the sea, but nothing seemed out of place or out of proportion. I found the experience liberating and enlightening.

The natural world shows me congruence, both within myself and between me and my surroundings. It helps me feel connected, whole, alert to harmony and to dissonance, ready to respond. I can't help regarding this willingness to engage, mind and body, as necessary for my well-being. Without it, how can I—or can any one of us—fully witness and participate in the world?