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Sample from the book, *Quiet People in a Noisy World* (3 essays selected from 72 in the book. All three of these essays were previously published in *The Christian Science Monitor*.)

### Soaking Wet in the Sierras

Laura and I lived in Toadtown, in the foothills of the Sierras, west of the Sacramento Valley, before we had children, a car, or many material possessions. We did own an aluminum-frame, nylon backpack that carried groceries and laundry well.

Now, because of dangerous experiences, I won't hitchhike. Then, however, we did hitchhike, because it was the only way we had to travel distances beyond what we could walk. Early that day, we hitched a ride down the mountain, visited friends, bought essential groceries, and laundered at the laundromat. When we headed back up the road, dusk descended, hastened by heavy clouds gathered close against the mountain.

With our thumbs in the air, we hiked about three miles of a necessary ten, and rain began to pour down. We didn't own rain clothes, but the rain was bearably warm, and we kept walking. Our clothes soon soaked through. Water ran off our hair, noses, and fingertips and into our shoes. Laura said, "Why won't anyone give us a ride?"

"We're soaking wet. We would get their upholstery wet. Besides that, anyone who would walk in a downpour like this has to be crazy, and people shouldn't pick up crazy hitchhikers."

The rain began to erode Laura's spirit. I realized I could easily become discouraged. Then we would be two wet, discouraged walkers with a long way to go in a rainstorm. I sang songs I already knew, and songs I never heard before but pulled out of the dark rainstorm around us. I sang upbeat, even crazy songs. I danced. I blessed the rain and praised the clouds. I found reservoirs of energy that fired me with warm enthusiasm.

Laura's beginning descent of spirit stopped, then reversed. She kept walking. She cheered up. She laughed and realized good still surrounded us. I couldn't think of anything I'd rather do than walk with a heavy pack on my back, Laura by my side, singing in pouring rain as cars sped by, spraying water from their tires and soaking us more, if we could be more soaked.

Laura said, “All those people are in their warm, dry cars, with the windows rolled up.”

“I know. Think of what they’re missing. All the great outdoors. This wonderful rain. What do they have? A tiny, isolated little place, rolling along too fast, cut off from everything real. They’re missing out on this once-in-a-lifetime experience. Think of how boring their lives must be.”

Years later, tonight in fact, Laura told me I rekindled her energy and helped her appreciate the rain, the clouds above us, the water running off us, and the earth running with water under our feet, but she wondered if I was crazier than she had ever realized and if the dark, wet night might never end.

I thought her descent into discouragement might begin again, and I said, “We’ll get home in good shape, in good time, and we’ll look back on our rainstorm hike with appreciation.” The time had come, in her book, for that promise to develop.

A pickup passed us, and the brake lights came on. The pickup stopped on the shoulder of the road. A voice floated through the dark rain, “Jon, Laura, is that you?” and since it was us, and the driver was Pike and his passenger was Shirley, and they were our neighbors in Toadtown, we ran, put the pack in the back and crowded in front with them, because they said they didn’t mind if we were wet. They delivered us right to our front door.

We built a roaring fire in the stove. We discovered the backpack was, as advertised, waterproof, and while our clothes weren’t, our skin was, and our hair soon dried. We had carried home freshly laundered clothing, and we put some of it on after we hung what we had been wearing to dry.

I peeled and sliced apples while Laura made a pie crust, and the odor of baking apples and cinnamon soon filled the small cabin, already full of the sound of rain drumming hard on the tin roof and the sound of Laura singing of the joy of rainstorms and the joy of living.

### A Unique, Light Grey Cowboy Hat

Someone who studied that hat might have concluded it was a product of a hat factory and the Mad Hatter combining efforts. That was close enough to truth to qualify.

I camped out on Coalpit Mountain the summer I bought the hat, almost 25 years ago. I learned to walk again after having been hit by a drunk driver. I needed a hat. Sunshine at 5,000 feet in the clean air of eastern Oregon is intense, and a wide-brimmed hat would shade my face and neck and provide some shelter from eastern Oregon's sudden cloudbursts.

The next time I went to town, I went into a western-wear store. A cowboy hat would be a good starting point, I had decided. It turned out as I had thought it might; there wasn't a hat in the store large enough for me. That was all right. The sweat band inside the hat took up some room, and it would come out, once I was on the privacy of my own mountain. I bought the largest, light-grey, felt cowboy hat without mentioning my plans.

With groceries and my new hat on the back seat of the car I had borrowed for the summer, I drove back up the dusty, gravel road and packed my supplies the last hundred yards up Coalpit Mountain to my camp, with the still too-small hat riding high on my head. I put everything away, ate lunch, and went to work on the hat. I removed the leather sweat band. Without it, the hat fit just right. The hat came with a double crease in the crown. I punched it out smooth. The double crease had been pressed in, so all the lines still showed in the felt.

I soaked the hat overnight in a bucket of water, then smoothed it over the bottom of a gallon jar and let it dry in sunshine. I liked the result, a high, round crown. I put a large dimple in the front of the crown, and I started wearing the hat.

Without a leather sweat band, the soft grey hat was very comfortable. Because there was less adherence between the inside of the hat and my head than there would have been with a leather band, it blew off easily in sudden wind.

The next time I left the mountain and visited my mother, I soaked the hat again and ironed it while it was still damp, to take the remnants of lines from previous designs out and to stiffen the soft felt somewhat. I bought a long, leather thong, circled the outside of the hat with it, cut holes both sides of the crown and pushed the thong through, rigged a sliding bead, and I had an effective chin strap, to keep the hat from blowing off.

Then a red tailed hawk left a very nice wing feather near camp. As the hawk screamed its hunting scream in the high air above Coalpit Mountain,

I said, "Thank you. That's exactly what I need. I treasure this feather." I cut two holes in the side of the hat's crown and passed the feather's quill in and back out, and I had a feather in my hat. I rolled the left brim up, the right down, and I adjusted the forward brim slightly up or slightly down, depending on where the sun stood or later, when I left the mountain and resumed social existence, depending on what I wanted to communicate about my willingness to communicate or my temporary taciturnity.

Nobody messed with my hat. I didn't have to tell anyone not to mess with it. Apparently, nobody even considered the idea. Until Laura came along. Every time I put the hat down, she picked it up and put it on. I thought that was rather cheeky of her. But then I decided she looked good wearing the hat. Partly because she was cheeky enough to wear the hat and looked good wearing it, we eventually married, and the hat went with us as we progressed through the world. Both of us often wore the hat, though it was too big for Laura, through nine moves.

We owned it still when we lived in Whitney Valley. When we weren't wearing it, we hung it on the wall, on a section of weathered barn wood that someone before us had nailed up as interior wood. The hat blended well with the aged, silver-grey color of the wood and with the ancient, almost forever quality of the old, ramshackle house.

The old, remodeled, unique, light-grey, wide-brimmed, high-crowned cowboy hat took on a slightly numinous quality over the years. It shaded our eyes from intense sunlight and gave our faces and necks protection from driving rain. To some degree, it symbolized the striving toward creative individualism that led me to learn to walk again, that led me through difficult times of finding and adhering to my own direction, largely against the currents of the culture. To some degree, it came to represent the melding of my forces and directions with Laura's.

It fits with the slightly numinous, symbolic quality the hat began to have that neither of us now has any idea what became of it. We owned it and wore it in Whitney. We no longer owned it when we left Whitney Valley.

With all powerfully positive numinous symbols, the material manifestation loses importance as the symbolic meaning and the numinous weight are understood and absorbed. Though we still need shading from

intense mountain sunlight and sudden rainstorms, we carry within us the memory and the meanings of the hat.

Sometimes I wonder what became of the hat. Perhaps it passed from material existence, in fire, in a dump, who knows how? Or perhaps even now someone wears it, shielding eyes from sun, sheltering from sudden rain, building meanings for the wearer beyond its mere hatness.

### Quiet People in a Noisy World

When we managed Tomahawk Girl Scout camp, I had Tuesdays off. We lived in a house provided by the Girl Scouts at the camp, and I stayed home most of my days off and usually wrote. I wrote at the dining-area table while Mike, a young man who worked on fireplaces, glued blue tiles onto the hearth, along the sides of the fireplace and over the mantel I'd built. The sound of my pencil leaving words on the page, the clink and scrape of tile, and the occasional sharper sound as Mike cut tile to fit his work were the only sounds.

After more than an hour, Mike put aside his work and stood up. He said, "This could be the longest quiet time I've ever spent in my life. I always have the TV going, or the radio. When I work outside, I pull the van up close and open the doors and let the music blast out of there. I'm going to have to do this more often. I like it." He went back to work, quietly. So did I.

Laura, Juniper, Amanda, and I live quietly. We make our own sounds without reservation, including music from instruments and voices, but we employ no electrically-driven background sounds. We have a television set, because someone who had excess and was alarmed that we had none gave it to us, but it never comes out of the closet.

We own a radio and tape deck. Some early mornings, we listen briefly to the radio, to see if the school Juniper attends will close because of snow. If we play music, we listen to it. It becomes our activity. We don't use it as background to our other activities.

For eight and a half years, we lived in Whitney Valley, with no close neighbors, no electricity, and little sound from traffic. Our thinly-insulated house let in the sounds of nature; a chorus of hundreds of frogs in spring, bird songs, elk whistling; during mating season, the bull elk bugling,

coyote serenades, wind, thunder, rain on the metal roof. We listened to those sounds and enjoyed them. We had a battery-powered tape deck, so we could listen to music, but when we did, it became our point of concentration.

When we moved to better-insulated houses, supplied with electricity, we didn't change our habits concerning sound much. We still lived away from busy cities and traffic, so we opened windows, weather permitting, and let the outdoor sounds in.

The car we bought, more than two years ago, has a radio. I thought it didn't work. One day, I drove about Fort Collins, Colorado, the city nearest us, filling various needs. When I left the Mini Mart after buying gasoline, the radio began to play some music for me.

I was surprised and momentarily pleased. I turned the knob and found more than a dozen stations with people talking and with various kinds of music. None of it interested me much, so I shut the radio off.

When I got home, I told Laura, "The radio started working after I bought gas today."

She said, "It always has worked. Nobody ever turns it on, because nobody cares about listening to it."

It takes about an hour to drive from our home on the mountain to Fort Collins. Several times since the day I discovered the radio worked, I've turned it on as I drove down the winding road. The longest I've left it on has been less than ten minutes.

Were I talking with the people or hearing the music live, I would be more interested, but I don't participate with what comes over the radio. The engine running, tires on the pavement, the sound of the heater fan require no concentration from me, and I am satisfied with my own thoughts or my own singing.

On a warm afternoon in Fort Collins, I rolled the window down. Pedestrians waited for the light to change and tell them they could cross as I stopped.

I was doing rather well, I thought, singing "Glory, glory hallelujah, His truth goes marching on," when I looked at the pedestrians. I don't think I imagined several of them looking at me with some incredulity.

I kept singing, working some to avoid having self consciousness at the unexpected audience cause me to slip off key or into diminished volume. That song requires full voice more than many do.

Singing for our own enjoyment may be unusual. Thus, dozens of cars at stoplights, with music machines turned up loud enough to shake the pavement and rattle the traffic lights, cause not a second thought, but a man building his own music with his own voice stands out from the norm, for better or for worse.

The light shone green, and I drove again, still singing and still thinking. Most stores I go into have music playing or voices, electrically reproduced, talking. Anyone singing should be as valid as music coming over speakers. Were I self confident enough, I would continue singing as I disembark from the auto, cross the parking lot, and shop in the store.

I am not that self confident. My voice fades to a whisper halfway across the parking lot and gives way to nothing but breathing as I enter the store. At the same time, a young woman carrying a “boom box” across the parking lot plays raucous music at high volume without a trace of self consciousness and without turning anyone’s head.

That’s all right. I’m seldom in town. If I were in town more, if it were more a part of my life, I might want to attempt to bring about some changes in the world around me and in me. For now, I’ll accept the ways it seems to work.

I’ll sing in the car, because it is, at times, my habitation. I’ll sing at home, in the garden, even at a declared performance, when the audience has consented to be an audience.

One day, I may be able to overcome self consciousness, because I know any living voice should have as much right to be heard as music coming over speakers, but that time is not quite yet.