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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.