

The Silence and the Quiet

September 2020

For the past several weekends, to get ourselves as far away as we can from the pandemic—not that that is really possible—we’ve packed up our camper, lovingly dubbed “Scotty Scamper”, and have headed west and up. Up to the Snowy Range Mountains or, as we did this past trip, to the forests above the town of Arlington, west of our town. The Forest Service has guided all of us away from the campgrounds, many of which are closed, and toward “dispersed camping,” where we find a patch of the woods or a meadow large enough to slip into the spot a camper and a car, and set outside a travel table and two chairs. During the day, we hike trails and keep our voices at a whisper; we’re looking for magnificent wildlife, who are bedded down well into the woods and, well hidden, are probably staring at us as we pass. In the evening, we carefully employ our camp stove for a hot meal. We talk in low voices, hoping to spy a deer or elk stepping noiselessly into the open in search of its own meal.

On one hike, through a rough woods, the trail narrow, we came to a small meadow. The sun sent its beams through the dark woods, thick with pine trees, and the undergrowth shone intensely as if the tiny leaves of the plants were themselves aflame. A squirrel skittered past, jumped upon a log, and was gone. We were far from any roads, far from any mountain trail vehicles. We stopped walking and stepped into the meadow. The air was still. Our Labradors, usually with us on mountain excursions, were home with our visiting son, who loves to spoil the family pets. Thus, there was no panting, happy yipping, or crashing about on the forest floor.

I closed my eyes and listened. There was stillness, quiet, silence. Nothingness, in a sense. But was that true? Do we as human beings who all live in some proximity to community really know silence? And is silence the same as quiet? And is, at least in my case, the craving for silence what I really want and what I should want?

I must say, dear reader, that this last question had me so perplexed on an earlier hike that I grew a bit frightened. For many summers, my husband has desired to return to a wilderness area that he had frequented years earlier. Without the pups along on this trip, we had the opportunity. The road to the wilderness area was rutted and rocky, so we parked the car and walked the rest of the way. The woods we passed through seemed benevolent, most of the trees still alive and standing in spite of the plague of the pine beetles. The area was free of deadfall and of tall, dead pines that swayed too easily in the wind gusts. As we entered the wilderness boundary, however, what had been a casual walk became a descent that required careful attention to our every step. Deadfall abounded; dead pines, arrested in their fall by a net of several living pines, creaked ominously in their precarious slants. We heard no bird song. We felt not even a breeze.

We stopped on the wilderness trail to rest and drink. I closed my eyes. Creak, creak, then silence. When the creaking stopped, there was silence, true. But in that silence was in fact a noise, that of a vacuum filled with suspense, with tension. What would it take for the soil to suddenly release the roots of what had not long ago been majestic, proud trees with green-needled plumes and rust-colored bark? What would it take for the silence to be shattered by the grinding and cracking and whooshing and exploding as the tree plummeted to the rocky ground? This dramatic scene in Nature would have, at its opening, silence. And at its end, silence.

Is silence, then, filled with the mechanisms, the forces, of suspense? Is it a prelude and postlude filled with significance? Does one—sound or noise—have dominion over the other? Does one diminish the other? Or do they act or react in harmony? Does one carry more certainty? More clarity? And where does the mere human stand in all this? Which feeds us? Which shatters us? Are our existences based on the ebb and flow of silence and sound? In silence, we are given no clues, yet in noise we are given too many. These thoughts carried me halfway down the steep slope, and I will share that I was no longer a sure-footed hiker. My husband marched along just ahead of me, his footing sure. His resolute gait stemmed my fear somewhat. But still...

Silence may actually be impossible for humans. I spent most of my adult life in the classroom. Often, when an activity required that each student work alone, I would, at various moments, have to ask my students for quiet. They good naturedly brought down the noise level and returned to their task at hand. Quiet ensued, but silence had no chance. There was that soft tapping of a pen on a desk top, a sigh, a clumsy stretch in a too-small desk. Sound was inevitable, perhaps necessary. Even critical? I remember once asking my high schoolers, in a whimsical, Friday afternoon moment, to try to be perfectly still, to try to be silent. The quick giggles soon turned into howls of unchecked laughter, my own included.

It is silence we feel the need to fill. Ask anyone who has ever gone out on a blind date. Quietude is a more comfortable friend.

Yet, I do crave silence. After the sun yields its burst of orange, igniting the surrounding clouds, it drops below the horizon, and a chill wafts over us as does darkness. I want the glory of this moment to be one of utter silence, a still and peaceful nod to an exquisite day. Peace does come. We imagine the wildlife stirring and coming to the edge of the forest to graze. We will soon settle inside Scotty Scamper, our lives simplified by the camper's design. We have traveled light—a bit of food, maps, jackets, a good book. Peace comes from simplicity, and from simplicity comes quietude, and isn't that really what I want?

Henry David Thoreau said, "Simplify." The Danes practice *hygge*, characterized by uncomplicated and simplified gestures of greeting and living and design. An uncomplicated house is a quiet house, but it is not silent, for comfort and relaxation and contentment carry with them the most gentle of sounds—a sigh. I have a writing room. For me, it is silent until I enter and pick up my pen or open a file on my computer. Then, it is quiet, a room of simple and sparse design. Quiet—because I am not disturbed. However, I am surrounded by the cherished traces of my youngest son's youth, for the room was once his room. These memory shards make a soothing pounding in my heart, where my writing comes from. Silence is not necessarily the peace I am looking for.

My oldest son reminds me that sometimes we need to be quiet in order to truly and deeply listen to others. He did not use the word "silent." To be silent may mean to ignore, to close our hearts, to seal ourselves off, to turn inward. To do nothing. Quiet may instill empathy and good works.

How interesting that Henry David Thoreau, who urged a simple and thus quiet life, also reminded us to "live deliberately."