

Silence is Golden (or, The Sound of Silence)

The sound of silence. A bit cliché, for sure. But have you ever thought about it, wondered what the "sound of silence" would be? Is this an oxymoron, or is there, in actuality, such a thing? Is it possible to escape all sound entirely?

The acoustic atmosphere where each of us lives varies in its proportions of being composed by nature or created by man, muted or loud. My preference is natural and soft, and thus I have been fortunate to have lived in some remote or rural areas—on a farm in Indiana, a lake in New Hampshire, a little-used road up to a notch in the White Mountains—that were, by all accounts, quite quiet. And over the years, my husband and I have done a lot of hiking and backpacking; we've sat in solitude on peaks, feeling, surely, we alone must be on top of the world; we've snowshoed and skied in dense, hushed forests; paddled on ponds with surfaces like polished granite; lain in hayfields under expansive skies. For the most part on these outings, we saw nary a soul for days. Yes, these places were peaceful. Serene. Hushed. But silent? No, not in the literal sense of the word. There was always a puff of wind whispering in the ear, the flutter of a leaf, the groan of a tree or the crack of a branch, the muffled rumbling of a distant river. But total absence of sound? Not likely. (Note: even in the wild, there is no pure silence: ants disturb the soil underground, rocks develop micro-fissures, and so forth, but these activities are undetected by the human ear.)

Last autumn, we spent a week in central Maine. Because it was "offseason," there were few tourists and even fewer campers and hikers. Through luck more than design, we found ourselves the only people on the edge of a huge lake with only one access. We sat around a sapphire pond in a crown of mountains. Ours were the watery expanse and wooded shore to share with the mergansers, bats, owls, deer, and other critters.

After a long day of hiking, we were ready to rest our weary bones and refresh our souls before turning in. There's nothing like savoring the surroundings and the nighttime beauty to revive the spirit. Careful not to rent the tranquility, we tiptoed to the broad lapel of sand collaring the water and nestled into the crooks of an old fallen log to soak in the evening. An almost deafening sound—a low roar, unidentifiable—filled my ears, my head. What was it? I had never heard it before, although I knew it wasn't generated by man. What I did sense was that it was something very special, extraordinary in its strength and its intensity. I was awestruck. Then it hit me: for those few moments,

I

was experiencing the magic and power of silence. Complete, absolute silence.

After a few minutes, a fish jumped, breaking through the calm of both the water and the stillness. The little ripples from his launch lapped against the sand. Although it remained so quiet that we swore we could hear the beating of a moth's wings, the vacuum of sound had collapsed, leaving us spellbound.

Later that fall, I read Rick Ridgeway's *Below Another Sky*, his story of returning to the Himalayas to search for the body of his climbing companion who died there several years prior. In one chapter, he mentioned a loud noise enveloping him, followed by his awakening to what this actually was: the temporary suspension of audible sound. Reading this, my earlier experience did not have to take back seat to my imagination: I knew precisely of what he wrote. True, his encounter with this rare phenomenon was, no doubt, more prolonged than mine, but nonetheless, we both were privileged to participate in something remarkable, to be cradled by silence.

Somewhere between this aural desert and the overwhelming clutter of clamor that intrudes on our senses is a place of audio balance. It is naive to think we can shelter ourselves from the everyday noises that accompany our lives. However; we can each do our part to alleviate as many of the extraneous ones as possible by becoming aware of the din emanating from our homes, cars, and activities, and trying to reduce, as much as possible, those that contribute to the overall ruckus around us. And let's also become attentive to those sounds that enhance our lives—the percussion of a woodpecker in the tree canopy, the haunting howl of a coyote, the staccato of March peepers, or the scolding of a red squirrel—and take time to appreciate what a gift they are.