

Musings on Sound

As I lay in bed very early one morning, I decided this would be a good opportunity to listen to the sounds of silence for our writing group experiment. I sat, gently closing my eyes, and seeking to breathe deeply and rhythmically. All was quiet 'on my Western Front' except for a low-level hum emanating from the air handler fan in a closet nearby and the soft sounds of Bryan's breathing. I listened and listened and listened but no other sounds appeared.

I fell back to sleep and when I awoke for the 2nd time, Bryan was just waking, becoming conscious of the world around him in that second-by-second way. I told him about my sound experience and my inability to hear anything beyond the nearby noises. I heard no birds singing nor dogs barking nor squirrels running up and down the nearby trees. I think it was too early for all that. There were no sounds of water gurgling in the pipes or wind rattling the windows. It was just that persistent hum, a gentle buzz much like what you hear climbing a hill with high tension wires overhead.

I suggested we do the sound experiment together for a few moments, to see if the soundscape would change. We continued with eyes closed, breathing slow, listening focused. Again, I heard the familiar hum but nothing more. "*What did you hear?*" I asked. Bryan responded, "The humming noise and the tinkle of Forrest's spoon on his coffee cup downstairs." Not me I thought.

This experience catalyzed my pondering how we all have different strengths and skills, some developed, some inborn, that can powerfully influence our lives. Bryan has always had a very acute sense of hearing. Mine, in comparison, seems dull. I think of it a bit like dogs hearing frequencies that humans cannot. When it comes to hearing sounds (particularly of mechanical equipment or sounds in nature), Bryan is a star. A few years ago we had an incident that, if Bryan had lacked his acute sensitivity to certain types of noises, it could have substantially changed the course of our lives.

It was the winter of 2021 and we had sold our house in Lexington, Massachusetts where we had raised our sons for the better part of their lives. We had a few months before we needed to move. One night, Bryan and I decided to enjoy a bottle of wine in front of a fire in our living room with our beloved dog Siena by our side on the sheepskin rug.

The fireplace in our living room had been ground zero for our family during the cold winter months in New England. We shared many fond memories of the four of us, the fire blazing while the kids did homework or played a game, as Bryan and I chatted after dinner or finished up work in the evenings. The kids – and sometimes us adults too – jockeyed for the best seat on the sheepskin rug directly in front of the fireplace. Sometimes, we made human towers, laughing as we fell, while other times we shared the limited space, each getting a sliver of the precious rug.

On one particular night, Bryan and I were reminiscing. We discussed moving into this third stage of our lives together, post raising our sons. We laughed, we smiled, and we felt the comfort of two people whose lives had been entwined for more than 30 years. At one point I was sharing a story and Bryan – totally out of character – abruptly shouted shhhh!! I quieted and he said, “I want to listen. I’m not sure but I may have heard the faint sound of a chimney fire.” I thought, “What? I didn’t hear a thing.” We were silent for 30 seconds, maybe a minute, both listening intently before resuming our conversation. A few minutes later, again abruptly, Bryan implored, “Call 911.”

We were out of the house in a flash, Siena in our arms as we ran to the street. We could see flames dancing from the chimney. It felt surreal.

In no time the fire department arrived with lights flashing and engines whirring. Because we lived on a steep hill and had a fenced in back yard, it was difficult for the engine to reach the house. From high up on the hill, the fire truck ladder was extended horizontally over our side yard to precisely cross and lay atop the chimney. Perched on the ladder, the firemen were able to spray into the chimney and squelch the flames. It was a sight to see.

While Bryan and I intently watched from our front lawn, the firemen came to speak with us as soon as the fire was completely extinguished. They thoughtfully mopped the water on our hard wood floor in front of the fireplace and explained the creosote that had built up turned a few sparks into a conflagration.

Bryan and I talked - holding Siena tightly - after the firemen left. We allowed ourselves a few moments to imagine what if What if Bryan’s hearing had not been so acute ? What if he lacked familiarity with what this very faint, barely perceptible sizzle could mean?

We were intensely grateful for the outcome: that our joyful memories of our fireplace as the true heart of our home in the winter had not been transformed into tragedy.