

!!NOISE!!

THE ULTIMATE INSULT!

by ALFRED ETTER

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I speak today for a little girl who recently visited the Morton Arboretum where I am the naturalist. On the "floor" of a woodland, she discovered a small piece of a tree. Unable to recognize wood that had never been sawed or nailed, she asked what it was. When she learned that it was a piece of a genuine tree — just the way God made it — she was so delighted that she embraced it like a doll and carried it home to the ghetto with her on the bus. That is how ignorant of nature our people (especially our children) have become. For many of them, the "unnatural" has become the usual. And so it has been with "Noise".

I think I speak not only for this little girl but for people of every age who, because of rising levels of noise everywhere, are searching for something they feel they have lost. Without knowing it, they need to walk and sit together in a quiet place and look at the earth; to listen to how the birds sing and, perhaps, to puzzle how wild plants can grow and develop without ever making a sound."

When I requested permission to testify at this hearing, I was asked whether I wanted to testify as an "expert." How does one qualify as an expert in these matters? Must he have a PhD to speak out against the inhumanity of man's noise? Isn't just

being alive enough? Aren't ears sophisticated enough to tell the difference between what is strident and what is soothing? Aren't irritation and anger as good a measure as decibels?

If it helps impress someone then, yes, — I have a PhD. I have spent eight years in college and my entire life studying the earth and the life on it. I have made it my responsibility to understand how the world is put together. And not a little of this understanding has come from listening to the sounds of nature — the "silent sounds" of stars, the timeless flow of rivers, the enthusiasm of wrens, the gnawing of squirrels as they husk walnuts in the fall . . .

At the Arboretum on field trips, I often try to tell children's groups how we should take care of the earth. What hypocrisy! My words and their questions are drowned out by banging vehicles and rasping tires. The sounds of frogs or birds or squirrels might as well not even be! Not long ago there was national concern about a "Silent Spring." We have "solved" that threat with a greater one. Who knows whether the spring is silent or not amid the pandemonium of modern man's vehicles? . . .

On a farm where I lived and did research, it was an everyday observation that vibrations of every frequency were constantly being exchanged between animals, men and the earth. But this communication was only possible when everything was quiet. Life is absolutely dependent on *quietness*. Animals and birds depend upon it to make their living, to find

their mates, to protect themselves from attack. Embryos, still in the egg, communicate with their siblings in adjacent eggs, and so, synchronize their hatching. Have you ever watched a robin lean down to listen for a worm? What happens to the radar of bats, the trilling of toads, the prolonged symphonies of thrushes when their home ranges are invaded by raucous man-made racket? For the most part, they give up.

Last fall, I watched a string of Sandhill Cranes winding their way southward over their ancestral route, suburban Chicago, once a land of marshes and lakes and clear streams, now a checkerboard of streets blanketed with polluted haze, threaded with webs of jets, helicopters and small planes. How much longer will the wild cries of the adults keep the young of the flock on course until they find a sanctuary?

When animals are made to listen to noise, they grow sullen, unresponsive, erratic — or even violent. Is it any wonder that we have violent, despondent, indifferent people when they cannot hear, in their neighborhood, the once familiar events by which they timed their day, conjured up visions of friends passing by, of tradesmen plying their routes, of church services or children at recess? People need sounds to stimulate the joys of expectation; to reassure them that they are part of a system, a pattern; or to challenge them to be alert and observant — and to hear sounds, they need quiet . . .

Noise is the *ultimate insult!* It belittles us. It gives us nothing at which to strike back. It kills what is left of many things that we have loved — music, beauty, friendship, hope and excitement — and the reassurance of nature. Traditionally, noise is used to ridicule, embarrass, denigrate and curse. Silence is used for worship, respect, anticipation and love. Do we hate each other as much as our noise level indicates?

Collapsing Rome didn't give a damn how much noise it made any more than we do. Read *Juvenal* — and weep with him:

“Insomnia causes more deaths among Roman invalids than any other factor . . . How much sleep, I ask you, can one get in lodgings here? Unbroken nights — and that is the root of the trouble — are a rich man's privilege. The wagons thundering past through those narrow twisting streets, the oaths of draymen caught in a traffic jam — these alone would suffice to jolt the doziest sea-cow of an Emperor into permanent wakefulness.”

Will the noise of modern man jolt the doziest sea-cow of all, the American city where the sounds of Ancient Rome have been magnified a hundredfold? Unless it does, I see no future for man.

Whom do I blame? I blame no one. I blame everyone. I blame all the people, including myself, who have come to Chicago to find a place to live, a job to do, and in the process have destroyed nature and created a tumult of noise borne of their demands for every convenience and every novelty and every protection from exercise, from chance, from weather. We each demand too much. It is our demands that destroy us, that keeps the trucks roaring and the jets rocketing and gigantism proliferating.

Like the little ghetto girl who has seen nothing but boards all her life, we have come so used to living in this noise-torn world that we accept the dissonant and sonorous as part of our environment. We no longer recognize quietness, nor know that some can adapt to noise, as to other irritants. But no adaptation is achieved without sacrifice. If people ever rediscover quietness again, they will embrace it like the little girl embraced her piece of tree, and treasure it as something that is not sawed and nailed and misshapen by man, but which contains within it some of the secrets of life and some of the explanation of why we are here.