Notes toward Silence: A Way of Hearing the Earth

Carol Ann Weaver

Silence, as such, does not exist—never has, not in our audible experience. Yet we cherish the metaphor of silence, continuing to hope and dream for its possible presence in our lives. Why? Because we yearn to come to the source of life, to the core of our own existence, bringing us to the beginning of sound, which from time immemorial has been referred to as *silence*. However, we often fear silence, filling our human interactive time with nonstop conversation and our private time with continuous media sound. As well, we often define silence negatively as the *absence* of various kinds of noises—whether intentional as in organized music, or human-made mechanical noises deemed polluting, unnecessary, and undesirable—rather than as the *presence* of a desired quality of life.

Silence can create some of the most powerful communication possible, whether inter-species or human to human. Many people cherish quality silent time spent with a domestic feline or canine. However, the silence of a large male grizzly, slowly rising on its hind legs to watch us hiking on a lonely Yukon mountain pass in Kluane National Park, deciding whether we are on the menu, can create a drama more powerful than words. Shared human silences too can seem almost endangered within our increasingly frenetic urban lifestyles. Tanzanian-born Annetta Miller, who has lived most of her life in East Africa, describes being with a Kikuyu friend: "We often sit in silence, she and I, soul to soul, spirit to spirit, a communication so easily found in Africa." Such communication through silence is "too easily forgotten, too easily lost by [our] Western inability to be silent and listen," Miller suggests.[1]

Swedish novelist Henning Mankell, also having lived many years in Africa, expresses the same idea in *The White Lioness* through his character Kurt Wallender, whose African, Arabic, and South American acquaintances

[1] Annetta Miller, *Sharing Boundaries: Learning the Wisdom of Africa* (Nairobi, Kenya: Pauline Publications Africa, 2003), 15.

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think that "not having time for a person, not being able to sit in silence with somebody [is] the same as rejecting them, as being scornful of them."[2] And the ritualized silences experienced during a Buddhist temple festival in CheonAn, South Korea or within unprogrammed (silent) Quaker meetings,[3] can be quite unnerving for those of us who may need to fill in gaps with speech, song, or programmed events.

There are various silences, including the silence of annihilation as detailed in Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*,[4] the silence of anger, or the silencing of voices we would rather not hear. But here I wish to focus on the silence of beauty and purity from which life comes and goes. Nothing is more silent than the moment before the birth of a new baby, nor after the last breath of a living being. Though we may fear it, we are drawn to silence, which the 13th-century Persian mystic poet Rumi calls "the root of everything."[5] Elsewhere he suggests that "silence reveals more than language"[6] and that "speech is a river; silence is an ocean."[7]

How can we define silence *positively*? How can we hear it as a valued part of our existence, as an essential part of our interaction with all of life? If we discover its deeper meanings, are we closer to attaining it?

The natural sonic environment, which is free from human or human-engineered sounds—mechanical, motorized, industrial—is experienced by many people as *silence*. This sense of silence is derived from the actual *sounds* of the natural world unfolding: sound of birds, crickets, wild animals in natural habitats, wind funneling through mountain passes, tree branches creaking or breaking, thunder, rain, ice cracking on a frozen lake, trickle

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[2] Henning Mankell, *The White Lioness* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 2003), 252.

[3] Having attended such Quaker meetings in Indiana, Virginia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Manitoba, Ontario, South Africa, and Kenya, I initially found the intentional silence baffling before I was able to experience it as transformative.

[4] Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962). This ground-breaking account of the detrimental effects of pesticides on birds and other life forms placed the world on high environmental alert, leading to the banning of DDT in North America.

[5] Jalaluddin Rumi, *Hidden Music*, tr. Azima Melita Kolin and Maryam Mafi (London: Thorsons Publishing, 2009), http://wahiduddin.net/dance/silence.htm, accessed February 1, 2015.

[6] Jalaluddin Rumi, *Rumi, the Big Red Book: The Great Masterpiece Celebrating Mystical Love and Friendship*, tr. Coleman Barks (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 73.

[7] Jalaluddin Rumi, *The Essential Rumi,* tr. Coleman Barks with John Moyne, A. J. Arberry and Reynold Nicholson (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 1977), 198.

and torrent of water in a stream or waterfall, gurgle of water trapped in a whirlpool, sand sweeping along unbroken desert. Such sounds become an organically sonic expression of the natural world, which we hear as music stemming from silence. On listening to forest sounds at night, R. Murray Schafer asks, "Doesn't the music really originate in nature and simply echo through us? Nature is the author and we are the echo—*not the other way around*. The music doesn't belong to me, it belongs to the forest."[8] Similarly, Canadian soundscape artist Hildegard Westerkamp describes her time spent in the Zone of Silence in Mexico, a deserted natural area with an unusual landscape and a seeming hole in the magnetic field. By using sounds and words from the desert, she describes the soundscapes she created as "an attempt to recapture the experience of silence as well as the desire for soundmaking that this environment created in us."[9] Furthermore, in the words of musicologists Frédérick Duhautpas and Makis Solomo, Westerkamp's richly environmental soundscapes work to "enhance a dialogue between . . . external sounds and our own 'inner life' . . . [showing] that the sounds of a quiet, peaceful forest environment offer us a space in which we can be rid of the restless sensations caused by urban acoustic environments . . . and allow us to adjust ourselves progressively to quiet surroundings."[10]

As a routine part of teaching music composition, I have university students attend to this quietness and silence by going outdoors, listening to and making note of all audible sounds and silences, from which they then create a composition using instruments of their own design. This project is informed and inspired by the work of Schafer and Westerkamp.

In fact, many spiritual and meditational practices, including Zen Buddhism, Christian contemplative traditions derived from Judaic roots, mind-body healing, yoga, sonic meditation,[11] and others, begin with silence

[8] Quoted in Jesse G. L. Stewart, *R. Murray Schafer and the Plot to Save the Planet: A Biographical Quest* (Toronto: Sunesis Productions, 2013), 242.

[9] From Westerkamp's notes and selected recordings on "Music from the Zone of Silence" (1988), www.sfu.ca/~westerka/program_notes/zonesilence.html, accessed September 11, 2014.

[10] Frédérick Duhautpas and Makis Solomos, "Hildegard Westerkamp and the Ecology of Sound as Experience: Notes on Beneath the Forest Floor," *Soundscape: The Journal of Acoustic Ecology* 13, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2013-2014): 8.

[11] Sonic Meditation TM, developed by American composer Pauline Oliveros, begins with

as the basis for discovering one's soul, sensing the presence or voice of God, hearing one's intuition, and becoming one with the universe. The Hebraic Psalmist decrees "Be still, and know that I am God"[12] and asserts "for God alone my soul waits in silence."[13] American composer John Luther Adams sums it up in these words: "Quantum physics has recently confirmed what shamans and mystics, poets and musicians have long known: the universe is more like music than like matter . . . [and by giving] attention to the fullness of the present moment, we listen for the breath of being, the voice of God."[14] And as we begin to listen to this stillness, we not only begin to sense a world beyond our physical surroundings; we also begin to hear a plethora of audible sounds interacting with each other in multiple layers and rhythms, creating infinite textures, timings, and patterns more complex than any human-composed composition. Such richness of unbridled sound led American experimental composer John Cage to say, in response to a question I asked him, that "my favorite music is no music at all."[15] In fact, in his thought-provoking classic *Silence*, which opened the doors for further work in sonic ecology, he describes his sense of music as "an affirmation of life . . . a way of waking up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord."[16]

As well, any responsible ecological sensibility needs to take into account the notion, expressed by spiritual writer Thomas Moore, that the earth is our home and that our "care of the world is a tending to the soul that resides in nature as well as in human beings."[17] Thus, listening to these silences within the natural world provides us with a direct entry into our own inner lives. After all, we are intrinsically *part* of that same "natural world."

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silence out of which vocal sounds emerge. More background can be found in Pauline Oliveros, *Software for People* (Baltimore: Smith Publications, 1984), 138-40.

[12] Psalm 46:10, NRSV

[13] Psalm 62:1, NRSV

[14] John Luther Adams, as quoted by Gayle Young in "Sonic Geography of the Arctic: An Interview with John Luther Adams," *MUSICWORKS,* no. 70 (Spring 1998): 40.

[15] From a Student Composition Seminar at Indiana University School of Music in 1972, where John Cage was guest composer.

[16] John Cage, *Silence* (Cambridge, MA; London, UK: MIT Press, 1966), 12.

[17] Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), 270-71.

From this context of listening to the earth, to the stillness and sounds emerging from the natural world, and to our interactive human sounds in relation to the earth, it is important for us to recognize our part within the earth's ecosystem, knowing that we have generously added our own noises—musical, spoken, mechanical, motorized, industrial—to the larger global soundscape. Musically, we have done so in splendid and magnificent ways since the beginning of human history, from birth wails to requiem masses, from circle dances to symphonies. But it is essential that we listen *beyond* our human spectrum, to the natural world lying about us, some of which may soon disappear if we listen *only* to human-made sounds.

Listening to the natural world has become increasingly challenged. Note the ear-budded bike rider, musak-ed interiors, ubiquitous machine sounds, constant indoor air circulation noises, and windows closed to the morning birds. Even within forests or other natural areas, we frequently resort to loud and vivid conversation rather than listen quietly to our surroundings. Those spiritual disciplines requiring silence have much to teach the larger world.

As well, there was a time when we believed we had more important things to do than to listen to or look after the welfare of the cheetah, the Cerulean Warbler, or the rhino. But times have changed, and we are running out of time. Either we do all we can to listen to their voices, help maintain their lives, and celebrate their existence on this beautiful but fragile planet, or they may go like the dinosaur, leaving us to remain with the mosquitoes, ticks, and cockroaches.[18]

It is predicted that earth's human population will reach nine billion by mid-21st century, and that most of the growth will occur in developing countries, with some 70 percent of people living in urban areas.[19] Environmental writer and activist Al Gore is but one of many writers noting that "human civilization is colliding with the natural world" and that some 20 to 50 species may become extinct by mid-century.[20] Further work by Jurriaan

[18] Scientists speculate that cockroaches, preceding us by millennia, will also survive us by at least that long: http://wonderopolis.org/wonder/could-a-cockroach-survive-a-nuclear-war, accessed Jan. 11, 2015, and that ticks and mosquitoes continue to resist many insecticides (see Carson, *Silent Spring*, 270, 271.)

[19] Al Gore, *The Future* (New York: Random House, 2013), 151.

[20] Ibid, 281.

de Vos and others predicts that for every million species, 100 extinctions will occur per year.[21] Gore reminds us that it is crucial to act now in order to lead us away from environmental destruction and further depletion of resources and species. At no time has the task of musicians and listeners been more important than today: to put an ear to the ground, hear the earth speak, and translate this sound into forms and shapes that can change our future.

We can start by listening to yesterday and today in order to hear tomorrow with clarity. Several questions readily come to mind: Have certain sounds become endangered or actually disappeared, and if so, can we recover them? How can we attempt to shape our current sonic environments so as to deal with noise pollution issues? Can we still find silence? In "Seeking the Sounds of Silence," R. Murray Schafer uses humor and irony to decry the use of leaf blowers, street cleaners, and other sonic offenders to create a "sonic sewer,"[22] with noise bombardment stemming from such machines making areas visually beautiful but aurally unlistenable.

The following suggestions may help us to listen, remember, and become creatively proactive regarding sonic health and the larger well-being of our planet. As we continue writing letters to editors of local papers about noise pollution, arguing on environmental, aesthetic, spiritual, economic, and social well-being levels, we must also follow through with strong reasons why quieter, less polluting devices would make for more consonant, well-balanced communities.

1. Create or join a local group to recount treasured sound stories from the past such as:

- the sound of bugs and flies dancing with the ceiling lights in a rural Virginia Mt. Clinton Mennonite Church on a Sunday night summer service;
- the sound of heavy, weighted wood-framed windows opening

[21] Jurriaan M. de Vos, Lucas N. Joppa, John L. Gittleman, Patrick R. Stephens, Stuart L. Pimm, "Estimating the Normal Background Rate of Species Extinction," *Conservation Biology* 29, no. 2 (2015): 452-62.

[22] R. Murray Schafer, "Seeking the Sounds of Silence," *The Globe and Mail*, September 18, 1989, A7.

in a grade school classroom, sliding upward with a ritual-like chorus of creaks and rattles;

• the sound of 500 people listening to a sermon in a college chapel—shuffling, benches creaking, whispered murmurs, stifled coughs, chirping of birds outside open windows;

• the sound of 500 people opening hymnbooks to page 32 or Bibles to Habakkuk 3:11.

2. Create or join a support group to oppose offending instruments of sonic pain such as:

• leaf blowers, weed trimmers, motorized lawn mowers, or snow blowers used unnecessarily;

• all-terrain vehicles, skidoos, sea-doos used merely for sport;

• noisy street cleaning trucks when there is little or no debris;

• factories, breweries, and industries whose all-night motors or fans are widely audible;

• air-conditioners chilling one house while churning out noise for an entire block.

3. Lobby tirelessly and locally for:

• resurgence of the broom, the hand trimmer, the shovel. Every time a neighbor creates noise pollution, approach the person with these tools, offering to do the work. Appeal to their love of silence; they have it, they've just forgotten it;

• use of non-motorized tools, bicycles, devices whenever possible;

• return to use of functioning windows that provide cross ventilation.

4. Join international or online groups in order to:

• support the well-being of one endangered bird or animal;

- help establish or support one more nature reserve anywhere in the world;
- lobby for prosecution of poachers of rhinos, elephants, or lions;
- lobby for discontinuation of destruction of rainforest, whether for human habitation, coffee growing, or livestock farming;
- lobby for in-growth of cities (development of inner city densities) while opposing urban sprawl encroaching on farmland, meadows, wooded, or other natural areas.

5. Spend time every day—two minutes, twenty minutes or two hours—in a setting that contains nothing but natural sounds. Make this a necessity, like eating.

- listen to every sound—the wind in trees and grasses, birds, insects, squirrels, all forms of non-human life;
- allow the time to be meditative, reflective;
- allow these sounds to be healing, redemptive, and life-changing.

Many recent, inspiring rays of hope are provided by organizations such as the US-based Friends of the Monarch Facebook site, which follows butterflies from chrysalis to migration journey; a Namibian organization to save the cheetah within farming regions; "Song of the Carnivores" performances with Zimbabwean children; and Bird Studies Canada projects conserving Louisiana Water Thrush and other species at risk. If we are very quiet, maybe we can hear the beating of wings, the sound of animal calls, the patterns of bird songs.

In *The Tuning of the World*, the definitive work on sonic environment, Schafer contends that "all research into sound must conclude with silence—not the silence of negative vacuum, but the positive silence of perfection and fulfillment."[23] While we may not find perfect silence, we begin to build and

[23] R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 262.

discover safe spaces for silence that are relatively free of the sonic clutter of the 21st century, places where motors and radios are silenced, machines cannot be powered, and where Cage's sonic "affirmation of life"[24] can be heard with all its vibrant sounds and holy silences. As we discover these places, we can then listen more clearly to the music of our planet, and seek to create music that celebrates not only the sounds of the earth and the larger universe but the silences from which these sounds emerge.

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[24] Cage, *Silence*, 12.