

Appalachia to Africa and Back: A Mennonite Soundscape Remembered

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In the beginning there was silence. Profound. Complete. And then sound began, as my tiny ears slowly became sensitive enough to detect the noises of my watery world—the steady, constant beat of my mother’s heart, the whoosh of blood in her veins, and the bubbles and gurgles of food traveling through her digestive tract. I began to hear my parents’ voices, the clicking of typewriter keys, the clanking of kitchen pots, 78 rpm records playing *Messiah* choruses over and over again. Beneath and around those sounds was silence, a silence that contained me, and, like a ground bass, created a structure on which all the sonority of my life would be built. This silence, as eloquent as words, as rich as four-part harmony, as empty as velvet blackness, called to me from earliest childhood to listen at a deeper level. It drew me toward the sound of sheer silence—the silence that Elijah heard. It invited me into a Presence beyond words.

This I could not articulate at two-and-a-half years old, but its calling attends my first memory. We lived in a remote, narrow Kentucky valley. One evening I sat on a wooden stool on our screened-in back porch with Mama beside me. No one spoke, but we listened intently for the distant, dull clank of the cow bell which would signal Papa’s return with its vagrant wearer. I don’t remember hearing the bell, only the pregnant silence, the waiting, the expectation, the complete trust and peace in that silence.

Kentucky nights contained more than silent epiphanies. The darkness carried sounds of impending violence—hollow baying of hunting hounds as they closed in on a hapless possum somewhere off in the hills. That deep canine chorus of disembodied danger filled me with breathless emptiness. But I was inside, warmed by the kerosene stove, surrounded by the peaceful safety of my parents’ voices, like roosting hens clucking softly. Then we moved from Kentucky to the Shenandoah Valley—Park View, Virginia, to be exact, the small community clustered around Eastern Mennonite College

(EMC), now a university, a community steeped in Mennonite values and saturated with Mennonites. It was a less exotic, more homogeneous world that folded me in. I was one of them.

It was here that I first learned the silence of absence, a silence different from beneficence. This was the silence of my father's airplane that did not return, the silent spaces his voice no longer filled, the silent emptiness of my heart. I also learned that emptiness and fullness can coexist. Park View filled me as well. Some nights, four handsome young men serenaded me and my sisters. They stood on the landing of the enclosed stairway at Grandpa's house where we lived, pausing in their practice to sing a song especially for me. I was the Kentucky Babe of their song, born in the small Paintsville hospital where Loretta Lynn had her babies. They didn't sound like Loretta Lynn with the nasal, diphthonged-vowels of Eastern Kentucky. These four were the Park View Melodians. Their harmonies were good, four-part men's arrangements suitable for any Mennonite church. It was singing as it should be. No fancy vibrato, no instruments, no jazzy riffs, nothing that made you want to dance.

Early in the morning, Blue Jays in the maple trees outside my attic bedroom window woke me with their raucous debates, the kind of loud arguing we sisters were not to do. Since they were birds and not expected to act like us, I didn't judge them, but their sounds were discordant, unsettling to me. I preferred early morning quiet or at least the more decorous, perhaps more Mennonite, singing of robins and cardinals who also visited our trees.

If I ventured outside in the early mornings, I heard the scratchy sound of Grandma's hoe striking the hard Virginia clay, and the metallic ring when she hit a stone as she worked around beans or potatoes. The sound of her methodical work let me know that life was in order. Summer held many other sounds—the crisp snap of fat pea pods, and the almost musical plunk, plunk, as shelled peas fell into my pan, the miniature thunder crack of a ripe watermelon splitting open. There was the squeak of husks being pulled back from perfect ears of corn, and the bubble of boiling water as beans were blanched.

Summer rain played on the tin roof under which we slept—our attic bedroom the perfect sound chamber for every passing storm. Soft drops hit individually, surrounded by a fuzzy silence, but when it poured there was a

continuous drum roll, wave after wave, causing me to burrow down under the covers, even on hot summer nights. Sometimes the drops hit with such force I was convinced that the roof had come off at the edges and rain was actually falling into the closets under the eaves.

Not all sounds came from nature. Glass milk bottles clinked on the front porch. An occasional car passed on the street. The telephone rang. The refrigerator hummed. Dishes clinked in soapy dishwater. Sheets snapped on the clothesline. In winter the furnace thrummed in the basement, radiators pinged, tire chains crunched and jangled in the snow, and shovels grated on sidewalks. In the spring, I heard the high-pitched, tinny clatter of Uncle Daniel's tractor-pulled disk driving down College Avenue. Summer afternoons included the uneven put-put-put of the garden tiller, and the loose, rattly fit-fit-fit of the hand-pushed lawn mower. Screen doors banged. Virginia Ann clopped by on her horse. Ice crunched and the handle creaked as we took turns cranking the ice cream freezer. Water splashed into the claw-foot tub at the end of a day. All these sounds evidenced normal, ordinary life being lived.

The spaces between contained silences—a smooth, ripe tomato sitting on the window sill, noiseless, unless red itself is a sound; a perfect fuzzy peach in my hand waiting to be eaten; the quiet in the kitchen after jars had been removed from the canner and the dishes all washed—quiet punctuated by the satisfying metallic click of jar lids sealing; the voiceless night stars, looking cold and far away as we slept between dew-dampened blankets on the back porch balcony.

And there was music. We sang—at home, at church, at many social events. We attended afternoon choral programs at EMC. Even when we didn't go, the programs came to our house through the loudspeaker,¹ accompanied by occasional crackly static. During ministers' sessions of Virginia Conference, the singing from the speaker was heavily tenor and bass, with only a few brave pastors willing to sing the melody in this men-only gathering. But whatever the setting, our singing was always a cappella,

¹ The loudspeaker allowed every event in the EMC chapel that used the microphone system to be heard in the homes of seven or eight faculty members. A wire from an amplifier in the chapel basement, connected to the microphone system, was strung along public utility poles and run to faculty dwellings.

usually four-part harmony. It marked us as Mennonites. To me, unison singing sounded thin and poverty-stricken, something only for children or adults who “didn’t know any better.” We, being Mennonites, knew how to sing. Words figured large in our soundscape—lots of conversation and teaching and explaining, poems recited, stories told, family letters read out loud at the lunch table, more sermons than I care to count.

Almost every summer we traveled to my other grandparents’ Iowa farm. There I woke to the squeak of the water pump outside the back door, a sound that carried clearly through the fresh morning air. Downstairs were voices—Grandma’s soft, velvety one, Grandpa’s tenor tone that always sounded to me like it needed oiling, the aunts’ strong, lively voices, milk buckets clanking, pans and dishes clattering. A rooster crowed, cows bawled, pigs squealed. Apple trees were silent unless a breeze stirred their leaves. The hollyhocks next to the outhouse were silent too, but if I stood there quietly in the mid-day heat I could hear bees buzzing and maybe a few flies. An occasional car drove by, splatting out gravel from the dirt road. Marbles clattered down the wooden shoot of the marble roller. The telephone rang *long-short-short-long*, and whoever answered had to yell to be heard.

And always there was laughter, teasing, happy voices. In this lay the deepest meaning, although I didn’t understand it then. The love and joy carried in those voices came from deep springs of faith in the face of repeated loss and heartbreak—four children gone in early adulthood. I was hearing a credo, a song of joy for the overwhelming goodness of life, even in the face of tragedy.

The clock on Grandma’s dining room shelf, steady as a heartbeat, ticked the seconds and chimed the hours of those Iowa summer days. I add to it a list of other clocks of my life—the Regulator clock that marked the time, second by second, through every church service of my youth, often accompanied by the staccato of flies hitting the ceiling and lights; the jarring electronic jangle that marked the beginning and ending of classes in high school, the harsh buzz of time clocks at basketball games; the melodic tenor of the EMC bell tolling the hour on cricket-laced summer nights.

During the three years that Botswana in southern Africa was my home, I encountered sounds both new and old. The mournful cooing of Cape Turtle Doves sounded familiar, as did crowing roosters and barking dogs. I

was back sleeping under a tin roof—not much rain to hear. But the new sounds of hot cats on a tin roof, produced by visiting neighborhood toms and accompanied by yawls and rumbling tin as they chased each other, were an equal to any thunderstorm. And there were thunderstorms that teased us, rumbling in the distance for days, building tension higher and higher until finally pounding rain came, breaking the dry season.

On desert trips I remember the silence of vast stretches where nothing grew tall enough to offer shade from the parching, mid-day sun. In some places grasses whispered in the wind, and in others blowing sand made even softer sibilant sounds. At night we heard the distant, high-pitched, complaining call of jackals and the deep roar of lions. Walking to school in the village had its own set of sounds—full-throated greetings from open courtyards, goats bleating, children’s voices drifting from the schoolyard. I could measure the progress of the school day audibly: the bell ringing, singing, voices reciting lessons together, the clank of enamel lunch bowls, happy voices at recess, the swish of grass brooms sweeping the classroom at day’s end. Back at my house the church choir practiced next door, learning songs by tonic sol-fa just like my mother had done. They sang in four-part harmony and a cappella. Nights were mostly quiet except for the occasional running of the generator at the South Africa border post. Sometimes there was distant singing or drumming, but mostly there was silence to go with the vast starry sky.

I am now far from Kentucky hills, the Park View of my childhood, and African village life. My suburban northern Virginia community is a noisy place. Commuter and freight train whistles mark the hours. Garbage and recycling trucks bump, bang, and clash. A street sweeper swishes by. I hear the shrill arcs of fire and police sirens. Planes rumble overhead on their landing pattern to Dulles International. Cars pass in a steady stream, sometimes with subwoofers so loud they vibrate our whole house. Lawns are noisy with machines—mowers, blowers, whackers, edgers, sometimes even a chainsaw. Inside, the air conditioner mutes the songs of birds and cicadas. The clothes dryer thumps and bumps, the blender squeals, and legions of electronic beeps and bleats demand my attention.

But there is continuity in sounds—the refrigerator hums, the tiller puts in our small garden, cardinals and robins sing. Ripe tomatoes proclaim

their silent redness on my windowsill. Bumble bees visit flowers, and crickets fill the night with their pulsing chorus. When it is quiet I can hear our garden fountain, and with every breeze I hear our wind chimes, remarkably similar to the college bell ringing out over Park View. And there is silence. I have to wait for it, listen for it, make space for it in my busyness, but it is still there—waiting under every other sound. As I settle into it, my heartbeat emerges like a faithful clock marking each moment of my life. And beneath it is deeper silence, a Fullness, a Presence, a Goodness much larger than myself. It surrounds me; it holds me; it calls me to keep listening to Life.

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