

# *On the Path*

## *A Book About Noise*

By Keith Hammer

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The line between sound and noise may appear to be a fine one, at first blush a bit like "one man's garbage is another man's treasure." In his book "The Unwanted Sound of Everything We Want," however, Garret Keizer shows not all noise is equal nor is there an equitable relationship between the producer and the receiver of it. Importantly, Keizer examines the issue within the context of noise being used to exert dominance.

At the root of our struggle with noise, Keizer writes, lies a cultural contempt "for anything we regard as weaker or smaller than ourselves . . . for 'harmless' pleasures that do not involve consumption and speed, a regulation outfit and a blood-curdling whoop." Given our global preoccupation with NASCAR, Formula One auto racing, pro-football, soccer, and other rowdy sports, Keizer's premise seems plausible enough.

But he also writes about the more subtle domination of nature and our predisposition to dismiss concerns for it. Industrial noise disrupts not just the essential mating calls of birds and the songs that are essential communication between whales, it also effects our health and that of our dogs and cats. Yet, in a debate about the construction of a big box store or a power plant, the needs of birds and the quiet required for people to hear them are given short shrift.

"The dismissal of the small pleasure in the small sound," Keizer writes, "ends inevitably in the dismissal of life, or the way of life, producing that sound." He challenges us to make a list of the loudest or most prevalent noise sources in the world, such as airplanes, automobile traffic, weaponry, power tools, and thrillcraft. "Almost every one of them has to do with reducing or killing time, space, or labor," he observes.

The noise of industry and transportation affects we humans every bit as much as it does our pets, the birds, and other wildlife. Studies have shown "the reading scores of students on the train-track side of a public school were as much as a year behind those taught in classes on the quieter side of the building." And so starts a downward spiral of social disadvantage spawned by noise. "What wakes people from their sleep and halts their conversations reverberates in their health, their education, and, ultimately, their prospects for ever living further from the tracks," Keizer concludes.

He cuts to the chase when discussing the debate about a person's right to make noise. "To prattle about your 'right' to make noise while you force sound pressure into another person's ears or living space is the ultimate self-contradiction, an appeal to 'rights' that undermines the very basis of right," he reasons. "A person who says 'My noise is my right' basically means 'Your ear is my hole.'"

Keizer provides examples of how thrillcraft noise "gives disproportionate power to those with the ability to make it." He reports that off-road-vehicle users account for only 5-7% of public land use, but generate far greater impacts on other users and the land itself. "As most of us know from experience," he notes, "a speedboat on a small lake basically owns the lake, both spatially and acoustically."

Keizer does not simply nag on the noise made by others while discounting his own, especially as a writer who spends considerable time traveling by airplane and car. And he concludes his book with a list of things we can all do to lessen the amount of noise we are responsible for. I offer an abridged version here:

1. Express an awareness that others exist by making less noise in public places.
2. Do physical chores with bodily powered tools whenever possible.
3. Play music and make conversation with intention, attention, hospitality, and a sense of pleasure – rather than filling space or killing time.
4. Walk or bike whenever you can, favor public transportation, and minimize flying.
5. Vote for political candidates who support quiet diplomacy. Insist that blowing apart human beings shall be the option of last resort, or no option at all.
6. In your social and political interactions, recognize and value your fellow citizens so they need not make noise in order to gain attention.
7. Do not take the sounds you love for granted. Cherish them, protect them, and try to listen to them.

Indeed, Keizer notes that quiet places of natural beauty help restore our health, be they parks or our own back yards. He encourages everyone to be a NIMBY (not in my back yard) and to make what are often minor sacrifices for a quieter, more sustainable world. “In the quiet version of sacrifice, a neighbor says to another neighbor, perhaps not even aloud because the neighbor might not have been born yet, ‘This is something I can do without.’”

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A quiet and serene stretch of the Swan River above Bigfork. Keith Hammer Photo.