

Openings: Nature writer Cathy Johnson shares one of her perspectives on life in a very lucid and enjoyable way.

*"Being in possession of all the answers holds no appeal at all,
but owning a good pocketful of unanswered question is to me like bread to the starving."*

Spotlight: During the Renaissance, most choirs—even in the churches—sang with instrumental accompaniment, the exception being the choir of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican. That choir had the tradition of singing without accompaniment, *"in the manner of the chapel"*, giving rise to the term *a cappella*. Singing without instrumental accompaniment focuses the audience's attention upon the voices of the choir and deepens the listening experience. With fewer sounds present, what is heard carries greater impact.

The accompaniment present in any business can be orchestral. Most of this is classified as background noise and as such, falls below the threshold of conscious awareness. Walk through a workplace before or after hours and gain an appreciation of how quiet the space can be. Industrious people and their tools generate a considerable amount of sound and muffling that sound, even when possible, can detract for a person's effectiveness. Still, beyond the necessary sounds, there can be a suite of other sounds hindering a person's effectiveness. These sounds need not be loud or irritating to be problematic. Human sensual perception predates our modern work environments and while we may not hear the humming and buzzing that surrounds us, that sound energy presses on our delicate organs requiring a response. Responding to our environment takes a significant amount of effort even when the response is unconscious. Well before sound starts to do physical harm, it starts to affect our well being. Without sufficient quietude, the acuity of mental processes show marked reductions.

The influence of these unnecessary sounds extends beyond being a barrier to communications. Filtering out the sounds that interfere with our ability to concentrate—even the little sounds—takes energy making that energy unavailable for the task at hand. As the ambient sound level rises, we may not hear the increasing volume because we are skilled at focusing on the relevant sounds. This selective attention does carry a price, one we can be unaware we are paying.

The sound quality of the workplace is equally as important as any other environmental factor. The more beautiful the environment, the better people feel and the more effectively they perform. The absence of unnecessary sounds—noise—helps people focus on their undertakings and leads to more satisfying outcomes.

Just as a landscape has the potential to refresh those who view it, a soundscape can be an oasis to all who hear it. The over abundance of sounds present in any urban setting means that people are suffering from sound overload. By removing all but the most necessary sounds from your business setting, you are creating an inviting environment. People are attracted to sound sparse spaces and once within such a space, they tend to be a more receptive audience.

Musings: Much to my pleasure, I live in a very quiet environment. Not only is it rare for the bustle of the city to intrude upon my day, it is also rare for aircraft to pass overhead. On the occasions when an aircraft does pass within earshot, it tends to be one of two from de Havilland Canada: the Beaver (DHC-2) and the Dash 8 (DHC-8). Neither of these aircrafts is equipped with stealth technology so their presence is certainly noticed, but with differing results.

The Beaver predates the Dash 8 by three decades, carries at most, 1/6th the number of passengers, and in absolute terms, generates more sound pressure as it flies by. Still, to my ear, the sound of a Beaver is not noise while that of a Dash 8 certainly is. The roar of the Beaver's engine elicits a flood of pleasant memories while hearing a Dash 8 reminds me of queues, delays, and all the worst aspects of air travel. Travelling in these aircraft is even a more divergent aural experience. In a Dash 8 I can carry on a pleasant conversation with my cabin mates while in a Beaver, hand gestures or shouting are the only means of communicating. Once again, in spite of the contrary evidence, I rate the Dash 8 as the noisier aircraft.

Noise truly is in the ear of the audience. Even the drone of mechanical devices can be interpreted as either an irritant or a calming salve. I do prefer the absence of manmade sounds and when I must endure the sounds of modernity, they are only noise when I fail to hear the inherent music.

Quote: Making music is the antithesis of making noise. Plato gives us the following reason for practising our music making skills:

"Music training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the secret places of the soul."

Lexicon: In physics, noise is defined as a disturbance, especially a random and persistent disturbance, that obscures or reduces the clarity of a signal. This definition works equally as well in business providing a good tool for analysis. It prompts you to be aware of "disturbances" that keep your message from hitting its mark.