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The virtues of silence: amid the clatter of today's culture, quiet should be a reward, not a punishment

Author: Robert Newman

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Abstract:

One of the great benefits of visiting national parks and wilderness areas is to escape the noise of everyday life and experience silence. However, many tourists shatter this silence with incessant chatter. Parents should teach children to appreciate and value quiet moments.

Full Text:

Amid the clatter of today's culture, quiet should be a reward, not a punishment

VACATIONS OFTEN SEEM LIKE A RUSH TO ESCAPE anxiety, missions of restoration doomed to disappointment. Last summer my wife and I visited the Grand Teton and Yellowstone national parks and plan to do it again soon. Like thousands of vacationers, we hiked through spectacular forests to forget the stress of the panty-hosed, necktied, meeting-filled, claustrophobic work year.

Now middle-aged, we prefer a shower, a bed and a good dinner to trail dust, sleeping bags and packaged food after a day's hiking. But it's the ratcheting down of inner and outer noise we most seek, the chance to be alone with our thoughts and to embrace the steady rhythm of our steps along paths alive with brilliant wildflowers and scuttling chipmunks. At last we've left the dull hum of fluorescent lights, the blare of car horns, the numbing Muzak of supermarkets. Everything is put into perspective without distractions. We feel small but connected as we begin to discover what we almost forgot we were missing.

But these days, except for deep back-country hikes, I find it increasingly difficult to find quiet. I don't mind all the people visiting the parks. If temporary peace and an appreciation of nature can be restored to more lives, we'll all no doubt be better off. As Rob Smith of the Sierra Club said recently about the controversy over proposals to limit sightseeing flights over the Grand Canyon, "The one great value of national parks should be that visitors don't have to listen to the clatter of everyday life."

What bothers me is the incessant chatter of hikers, the insistence on posing and performing, the refusal to stop and take things in. I'm annoyed by their inability to leave the noise behind because it intrudes on my own attempts to do so. And, as a teacher, I'm particularly disturbed by their failure to educate their children about the virtues of silence.

On park trails my appreciation for the subtle shifts of color in a sunset was loudly interrupted by conversations between children and parents. The kids, indoctrinated by amusement parks, demanded to go on to the next attraction, while frustrated parents insisted they enjoy the beauty before them. At steaming algae pools of the purest cerulean blue or canyons with tumbling gradations of pinks and orange sliced by the roar of a foaming river, places where I might feel the holy hushing of my daily concerns, I listened instead to countless parents instructing their kids to have an educational experience. Fidgeting 8- and 10-year-olds were treated to Dad's stentorian recitation of a sign explaining the Continental Divide, which they could very well read silently themselves. Mom was then commanded to pose before the sign so the instructive event could be photographed for posterity. Jokes about flatulence punctuated commentary on the sulfuroms hot springs of Yellowstone, as if juniorhigh-school humor might make walking along the belching ground more palatable. More often than not some response was demanded, confirmation that learning was taking place.

While well-meaning, these parents do not allow their children the opportunity to make discoveries for themselves. Their attention is directed for them. Nature is not permitted to overwhelm; it must be packaged. Everything immediately translates into the familiar. The trail becomes an extension of the parking lot, the forest and animals of films like "Pocahontas," "The Lion King" and "The Jungle Book." A deer becomes Bambi, every moose a Bullwinkle and bears are Smokeys, all of them cute, cuddly animals ready for the photo shoot. Nature made familiar is nature safe.

Since my last hiking vacation, I've thought a lot about the ways schools also subvert the appeal of quiet. Silence is seldom taught as something positive. Often, it's used to punish, an instrument of authority and regulation. Students must sit still and not talk when they've misbehaved. Guilt, conformity, imprisonment, discomfort--from kindergarten on these are associated with silence.

Educators frequently read quiet as a sign of student maladjustment. The child who speaks up when the teacher requests a response is rewarded. The one who ponders is often considered withdrawn, problematic. The educational system appears to favor students who have the immediate, correct answers, not those who take the time to consider other questions. With the proliferation of TV and radio talk shows, portable phones and instantaneous feedback, we find ourselves networked in endless circuits of chatter. Conversations have invaded the movie theaters, concert auditoriums and lecture halls. Why should national park trails be the exception?

Our culture is committed to motion, enthralled by commotion and addicted to auditory accompaniment. Whether we work, exercise, drive, shop or recreate, sound propels us on our way. Seldom do we press the mute button as we channel-surf through daily routines. And when we do, usually accidentally, the result is often uncomfortable. Such pauses, after all, offer occasions to remove ourselves from the rush of what we do so we may take stock of who we are.

The piercing commentaries of my fellow hikers highlighted my sense of myself as an intruder. In a landscape where Native Americans once instructed their children about the connections between themselves and their surroundings, these park visitors complained about the lack of McDonald's. Instead of tribal rites of passage by which children entered the community of adults, many parents around me taught their kids by example that self-importance mattered, that it was all right to stomp wildflowers, brush by hikers or ignore trail markers if they were in your way.

I can't help feeling that we've lost something essential when we seem unable to participate in worshipful silence. I want to teach my students to listen to the rustle of aspen leaves rather than profane it with their noise. I'd like to encourage them to be quiet and pay attention as a reward rather than a punishment.

NEWMAN is chair of the English department at the University of South Carolina.

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