



Journal 16

October 2009

The Journal is published by

InnerPeace/WorldPeace
319 South Harvey Avenue
Oak Park, Illinois 60302

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A JOURNAL OF INNERPEACE/WORLDPEACE

Siren Songs

—*Bud Hayes*

Have you ever thought about all the sounds we hear in urban settings every day of our lives and the variety of messages they send? Most of the time we are barely aware of them, but they are there, lodged in our memories, a firm part of the backdrop of our lives. They constitute what I like to think of as a great urban conversation which goes on day and night, year in and year out, sometimes more intense, at the forefront of our awareness, other times more remote and hushed. Some of the sounds are shrill, harsh and quite unwanted. Others are soothing or, if nothing else, comforting in their familiarity, so familiar, so basic to our way of life that we do not stop to think how much we might miss them if they were gone. Some are representative of urban forces that build up, others that tear down.

Sirens are perhaps the signature sound of city life. Many times each day where there is any kind of urban density, they wail and scream. Usually they wander and crisscross somewhere in the distance but occasionally one finds its way into my neighborhood, getting louder and louder until it comes to an abrupt halt. Sometimes there is a whole armada of sirens, police cars, fire engines, and paramedics called forth by a major accident or a fire. With a little imagination one can regard sirens, not just as part of the urban conversation, but as the city singing to itself songs of crisis and distress.

Another family of sounds belongs to trains, also an urban fixture. Dozing off or coming awake I often hear a lone train whistle somewhere in the distance. It is a mournful sound but also deeply reassuring. It tells me that the world goes on about its business whether I am idle or engaged. I live three blocks from the Lake Street "EL." All day and much of the night trains come and go and the sound of them is like waves washing up on shore.

Air traffic is a major voice in the urban conversation. The steady swoosh of jets is a near constant. Occasionally there is the drone of a stray prop plane. During rush hour, morning and evening, there is the clatter and thump of low-flying helicopters. Sound plays tricks with the big jets. Sometimes the sky is filled with their thunder. Other times they seem to glide noiselessly.

There are the random sounds associated with city life. Were those gun shots or fireworks that just went off? I hear the sudden screeching of brakes, the peel and whine of a motorcycle, shouts. A gaggle of teenagers passes by, each trying to outtalk the others. Dogs bark. A radio plays. A car pulls up next to me, its sound system strained to the max, all windows down, the whole vehicle throbbing to a heathen beat, anger on remote. Outside my bedroom window or down the alley there is a piercing beep, beep, beep of a utility vehicle backing up, its signal a reminder of past mishaps and a plea for there to be no more.

Above all else there are the bells and the chimes. The bell in the tower of First United Church in Oak Park tolls at the beginning and the end of the prayer vigil each Friday night. Sandy Jefferson writes about the vigil in another part of this edition. Bells are the classical sounds of civilized life where humans have gathered from time immemorial, preceding the industrial age by centuries. They were there in the Middle Ages, in the ancient world, to celebrate, to warn, to mourn, to summon, to mark the hours, to highlight special days, to call to prayer, to remind people of the centrality of their common life. The ability to respond to the tolling of the bells is part of what makes us human.

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