

NOISE - OR THE LACK THEREOF

A few nights ago, a little after midnight, the power went out. It happens sometimes when you're at the end of a twenty-mile-long extension cord. I woke up because the widget (called a recloser) at the substation detected a fault on the line and it tried to reset the circuit breaker a few times before giving up. Since I was awake, I wandered out into the rest of the house.

As you can probably guess, without my computer, I'm like a stock trader watching their favorite stock tank and not be able to do anything to stop it. I just don't know what else to do. I know, find a flashlight and a book - sorry, it just ain't the same.

What it did do was got me to thinking about noise. Not sound, which is always with us, but noise.

With the power gone, the house was silent. I mean it's normally quiet, and you can hear a lot of the outside sounds, but without power it's silent. The same is for all the electrical 'vampires' of little indicator lights that are on a multitude of devices that you never realize are there until you don't see them any more. But it was silent.

Gone was the quiet whoosh of the fans in my computer. Gone was the noise of the refrigerator keeping things cool. Gone was the sound of the chest freezer doing the same but colder. It was silent. The only things arriving at my eardrums was the intermittent drum of the rain showers as they went through and the murmur of the creek as it travels past.

When the power came back on, all the vampires came back to life and the house came alive again. But I still remembered the silence.

Even with all the sounds here in the wilderness, it was still better than what I put up with for eighteen years in San Francisco. The only time it got even remotely quiet was when the power went off during the '87 earthquake, and then it wasn't really quiet.

Normally, there was always traffic on the street outside. There was usually people conversing in the parking lot of the shopping center across the street. Most times at night the tenant downstairs was screaming at his wife in Farsi, and while I didn't understand a word, it had to be bad news. Later in the evening, the tenant upstairs would 'know' his wife/girlfriend/whatever and there would be a half-hour of creaking bedsprings and thumping floorboards. Next door, the tenant put the headboard of his bed too close to the wall, and I was occasionally treated to some rather loud thuds as the action on the bed translated to the wall adjoining us.

Even at three in the morning, with no distinct noise, the city was still talking. There was always a hum about it that never went away, even after the earthquake power loss. At those early morning hours, if you stepped outside, the city hummed from every direction. No specific direction, and no specific sound ... just the hum.

That stuff is noise. I eventually learned to just tune it out. It was only when something changed that you took notice. I have heard that the coal stokers on the early steamships never heard the noise of the boilers and could carry on normal conversations without a problem. It's what you become immune to.

Here, the only 'noise' other than the house sounds are the rumble of the creek, the occasional car going by on the road a hundred yards away, and the occasional jet cruising by going to somewhere I hope never to see again.

Noise. It's kindof like porn ... I may not be able to define it exactly, but I know it when I see it.

Noise isn't confined to just the ears, though. Every time we turn on the television we are bombarded with visual noise. Boardwalk pitchmen trying to get you to buy everything from health insurance and pharmaceuticals to gutter sealants and rotisserie ovens. And that's just the ads. The program 'content' if you're a sitcom junkie, is half-hours of inane comedy lines. If you're a drama queen, it's soap opera-like stuff that is tough for me to watch. The 'news' channels have become noisy with commentators that provide slanted views of the days events from both sides of the political spectrum.

I, for one, would be grateful if CNN Headline news went back to what their title purports them to be, and just give me straight, unvarnished news. Unfortunately, that template for cable news has succumbed to the bombast of Sean Hannity and Judge Jeannine Pirro, or 'entertainment' which features the stomach-wrenching likes of Judge Judy, The Voice, Dancing with the Stars, and Survivor.

The noise of AM radio with the likes of Rush Limbaugh and any number of sound-alikes is just as bad. I seldom turn on the babble-box in the car any more.

Let's face it, we're surrounded by noise. And we're so used to it that we just tune it out. I had almost forgotten how noisy my life had gotten until the power went out and I was sitting in the darkness and the noise had gone away. Maybe I'll just throw the master switch on the power to off sometimes to remind myself how great it can be.