

## **Disturbing the Peace, Peaceful Disturbances**

by Marshall Jon Fisher

On our first night after moving to the Berkshires four years ago, my wife and I lay in bed thrilling to the quiet outside our open windows. Instead of our Cambridge neighbors on one side screaming at each other, loud music from the other direction, and the din of traffic, all we could hear were the crickets. This wasn't the reason we had left the city--my wife's job offer had more to do with it--but like so many urbanites, we had long talked of leaving behind the noise and the hectic lifestyle. The tranquility this first night was eminently satisfying.

An hour later, we woke with a start. An eighteen-wheeler was barreling down Mass. Ave. No, can't be, that's our past life, I thought. The rumbling soon identified itself with a series of long, aggressive horn blasts. We had apparently bought a house without the knowledge that a freight railroad ran

through the neighborhood. All night long. Five times that night I woke in a rage at the engineer who felt that the earthshaking roar of his engine was not enough to scare away the odd deer or fox who might be loitering on the tracks in the middle of the night. He also had to lean on the horn for twenty seconds at a time.

The tracks turned out to be over a mile from our house, but that provided little solace each time I was jolted from a deep sleep. When I complained to old friends, they sighed, "Ah, I love the sound of a train passing by late at night." New neighbors just shrugged: "You get used to it." Was I the only person driven to murderous fantasies by the sound of a train whistle?

But my neighbors were right. After a couple weeks, my subconscious learned to ignore the regular disturbances to the peace. The train never wakes me anymore. And when I hear it roll by, if I'm lying awake in the middle of the night, I sometimes even smile wistfully.

Jet engines are another matter. Again, air traffic wasn't the reason we moved, but it made the decision easier. Our old Cambridge neighborhood had been victimized a year earlier by a drastic alteration in the takeoff patterns at Logan Airport. For years, I noticed when flying out of Boston that the plane would

take off over the ocean and then, on domestic flights, turn around and head inland. From my backyard I'd see jets on their ascending trajectories, but buffered by five or ten thousand feet of altitude. Then, one morning in the summer of 1998, I woke at six to the thunder of a jetliner taking off right over our house. From that day on, jets roared over our neighborhood on their way westward, clearing our homes and trees by only a few thousand feet. Clearly some regulation, hard won years before by the greater-Boston communities, had expired.

When I ran into neighbors, I tried in vain to rally some sort of communal indignation. Most people seemed completely unaware of the sonic cataclysm in our environment. Others replied, "Oh yeah, now that you mention it, I have noticed a lot of low-flying jets lately." But they hardly seemed ready to petition the mayor, or else abandon their homes, as I was. (I encountered similar obliviousness to the screeching of city-bus brakes, a ubiquitous source of noise pollution in greater Boston which is gradually depriving the population of the upper frequency range of their hearing.)

In fact, I was probably not alone. A government study found that 12 to 15 percent of an average airport's local population are highly annoyed by aircraft noise. Other recent research has shown, not surprisingly, that noise pollution causes stress. A loud environment seems to put the human body into a state of

alert: adrenaline and other hormones are released into the bloodstream, blood pressure rises, muscles become tense, and heart and breathing rates increase. People who live in noisy environments at work and at home suffer higher rates of heart attacks, circulatory problems, high blood pressure, and other heart-related problems. Some scientists even think that the body's automatic responses to noise can also lead to what they call "diseases of adaptation": ulcers, asthma, high blood pressure, headaches, and colitis.

Even if you're able to sleep through the offending noise, your body apparently still reacts to it and goes into emergency mode. Two German scientists showed that nocturnal traffic noise, even when it didn't preclude sleep, shortened the amount of the important, dream-filled, REM sleep, and encouraged psychosomatic illnesses and cardio-circulatory problems.

The average noise level in metropolitan areas can be a thousand times more intense than in the country. Luckily, the human brain perceives that as only an eightfold difference, and much noise can be gotten used to, like my rural railroad.

(Although the research cited above indicates that even while I sleep my autonomic nervous system might still be humming the freight-train blues.) The jet engines, however, never managed to assimilate at all with my sleeping unconscious; A 737 at close range is a blast of a different order of magnitude. So I

welcomed the chance to move to the western edge of the state. Here, the only presence of jetliners is at the muffling distance of tens of thousands of feet. I can point out stratospheric white contrails to my boys even while enjoying the squawking of low-flying geese on their way to nearby lakes.

There is audible human air traffic here, too, but it's the pleasant drone of single-engine prop planes approaching and departing the nearby private airport. The sight and sound of these small craft bring to my mind the spirit of Beryl Markham, or Antoine Saint Exupery, and inspired me to follow a long-standing inclination. Now that lone pilot soaring low over the hills is sometimes me.

A few days before our second Berkshire Halloween, we took our son out for a drive to find a pumpkin stand. As I was putting my money in the cash box, I was arrested by the sound of an enormous tractor apparently about to run us under. The tractor was nowhere to be seen, but then our eyes shot skyward as a large shape appeared from behind the roof of the barn. It was a Piper Supercub at about a hundred feet: I hadn't realized that our pumpkin search had touched down at a farmstand just behind the edge of the airfield.

We smiled and waved, thrilled to find ourselves under the takeoff route. The plane roared by, grew smaller and quieter,

and disappeared behind the bright yellow foliage of a sunlit elm.

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