

## Listening for The Quiet

The quiet is always there. If you listen, if people listen, you and they will perhaps hear the quiet. At first, the quiet will appear as if it's an indistinct part of your surroundings, but you will quickly recognize it because the quiet is the only complete absence of noise. It's like when young children suddenly go quiet, and you think, "Now, what are they up to?" The more you listen, the more you will hear the quiet. Many have never heard the sound of total quiet, but for those who haven't, I highly recommend you listen for it.

From my earliest memories, when I was barely a toddler, I remember being alone most of the time. I remembered much as I watched those memories. Most memories I recalled were happy and optimistic for me, even though I was often locked in a windowless room built in a basement. As I saw myself so young and alone, I appeared to be at peace and safe. I never saw toys, stuffed animals, or anything in that locked room besides myself and the bed. There was no dresser for clothes, and my pajama bottoms were too small for me. I wasn't wearing a top, and that was when I noticed the dried tears and blood on my face and the blood that had soaked through my pajama bottoms that were stuck to my bottom. It was impossible not to notice the swelling and bruising all over my young body from the many beatings I endured as I was being raped. Perhaps those were the first times I ever heard the quiet. Perhaps after all my screaming from fear and pain, after my futile attempts to ward off my predator, and after everything was done and I was finally alone, perhaps then was when I found my sanctuary because I could again hear the quiet. The quiet afforded me safety, and safety allowed me to have happiness. The quiet also allowed me to monitor my surroundings because, as my predator descended the wooden stairs toward the room I was locked in, his weight caused the steps to squeak loudly, which

served as an alarm. Occasionally, he brought food and water, or different pajamas, and sometimes a large bowl of water and a dry towel so I could clean myself.

Many decades have passed for that toddler. I am the man the toddler grew into, and we haven't been afraid of that predator for a long time.

It's now late October and the weather is turning from Indian Summer, when late fall weather is warmer and lasts longer than one might expect, to winter. I was personally enjoying that weather because I knew, or I thought I knew, what was coming. Even though I expected a weather change, the change came suddenly and unexpectedly. The temperature dropped precipitously as a weather system swooped down from the north, and cold rain and hail drenched the area for days at a time. Following that storm, another storm developed, dropping several feet of snow, which surprised everyone here. During the snowstorm, a grey, long-haired cat, made its initial appearance at my place early one morning. The cat, I could see, was cold and wet, and it was hungry. It appeared to me that it wanted to come closer to get food, but its feral instincts demanded it move away from the human. So, it was trying to move in two directions at once. Of course, I laughed at the silliness of the cat and went inside to prepare some food. As I came back out, the cat jumped off my deck and ran away, so I left the food on a bin outside. The cat returned some time later and wolfed down the food before scampering off and disappearing again.

Weeks went by, and the cat, while still visiting each day, never relented from its feral, antisocial behavior. It never succumbed to friendship, even when it injured its right front paw and limped badly for several days. It would come to see if there was any food, and when I saw the cat, I'd say hi and tell it to wait. But the cat had typically already scampered away. I would prepare a meal, leave it outside, and, at some later time, it would come back to eat, but only if I wasn't

around. The cat's hair was so long I couldn't visually sex it, and as more time went by, and the cat was still around, I decided to give it a name. Finding a pronoun for a feral cat whose sex you cannot identify is tricky, so I decided on Sam because that was short for Samantha or Samuel. Whenever I fed the cat, I would call out its name even when it wasn't visible. Days turned into weeks, and eventually, Sam started coming soon after I called out its name. It would still wait on my driveway until I went indoors, but occasionally, instead of jumping off the deck and fleeing as if its life depended on it, it would sit at a safe distance, watching me intently with its yellow eyes., until I went in and shut the door. Sam eventually felt safe enough to lie in the sun on my deck, but never if I was on the deck at the same time. Sam was the definition of a feral cat, and Sam used me for what it wanted from me. Sam killed and ate many of the other critters who visited my deck or lived in my woodpile. Birds, squirrels, mice, and chipmunks were all eaten by Sam. I was only happy about the mice being gone. But I liked Sam, and while I mourned my other little buddy's demises, I let nature be what it is.

One of my dear little buddies is a pine squirrel who befriended me. This little pine squirrel, six inches long and weighing probably four ounces, will run to me and take a peanut from between my fingers. Sam hasn't got that pine squirrel, but the pine squirrel's tail was only half as long one day and then half that soon after. During the extended times Sam is away, the pine squirrel once again comes to me for peanuts, and the raccoons once again visit at night looking for food. But once Sam returns, the others disappear.

Then, after eleven months or so, Sam disappeared. His food went uneaten, and days turned into a week. I asked the neighbors if they had seen him and one neighbor had, so at least I knew he was okay. Every morning and evening, I would go out with his food and call him, but to no avail. And once the raccoons found his uneaten food, I could no longer leave it out, as they

would start visiting every night. I was sure Sam had found a mate, and I was now sure Sam was a male.

One night, I saw a video from my motion-detecting camera, taken at midnight, that showed Sam had come by looking for food. I prepared a meal that morning, took it outside, and called the cat.

A short time later, I was happy and relieved to see him on my deck, scarfing down his food.

Sam stayed about a week before disappearing again, and I fretted and worried again. This time, after Sam was gone for a week, I walked around the area where I live calling his name, and he reappeared some two hours later, looking well-fed and happy.

Now that Sam's disappearing happens with regularity, I don't worry. I think Sam has a girlfriend and he also has other people feeding him. I like that Sam has other food sources now that winter is approaching. I can leave for a few days without worrying because now he has other people feeding him.

Sam prefers fresh meat over anything I feed it, except for the one time I fed him rainbow trout I had caught that morning. I cut strips of belly meat into mouth-sized pieces, and that was also the one and only time Sam stayed within two feet of me on the deck as he got fed.

People who know me have remarked that Sam is part of my "free-spirit fur family" or that he and I are friends, and they have communicated many kind comments about our friendship. Sam has most certainly never learned that it can or should trust humans.

As I occasionally sit and think about Sam and his antics, I remember having done many of the same things as Sam. I have come into people's lives, taken their friendship, and left without a word or looking back. I prefer to be alone, as does Sam. I like to be left alone, as does Sam. I was never taught to trust people, nor was Sam. I recognize and applaud his ability not to compromise but to stay feral.

I often wonder if Sam and other animals listen to the quiet naturally. That would answer the question as to how they seem to know danger long before I am aware of it. My premise for this thought is if they're quiet and listening to the quiet, they will hear things I don't because my mind is typically not quiet because I think a lot. I get text messages, emails, and electronic alerts for this or that, plus my need to take care of my cooking, cleaning, friends' needs, and the myriad details of life in the twenty-first century, which keep my mind from hearing the quiet. I think animals visit here, from the pine squirrel who eats out of my hand to the two bucks and the young doe, because it is quiet. And by quiet, I also mean it is a happy and peaceful place. There are many deer that visit here and several who stay year-round. The ones that stay here year-round do so because their mother got hit by a car and died, so she could never teach her young about migrating. One unintended consequence was that the doe born to her before she died survived the winter by locals feeding her, and then she gave birth to several fawns over several years of her life. None of them ever learned about migrating for the winter, either. Some of her fawns were bucks, and one grew to have massive antlers. I trust him completely because I've known and interacted with this buck since he was a fawn, and I believe this is now his sixth year. The buck's huge antlers are so large that when he's eating from the tin I am holding, they extend beyond my ears, and if I look sideways, all I see are his antlers, and they're within inches of my eyes and ears.

I have had silver fox hanging out on my deck during bad snow storms, as well as visits from coyotes, raccoons, bears, skunks, and mountain lions. You name it, and if they're local, they visit here. Live and let live is my policy in life, which requires enforcement from time to time. Ground squirrels discovered my vegetable garden and began eating my potatoes, and despite chasing them off three times, the trespassing only stopped after I shot two of them. The two

ground squirrels were shot days apart, so I gave each one to Sam. It appeared that the other critters somehow got the message, and the trespassing stopped.

One evening, a younger buck I also know walked up my driveway; he walked within six feet of me, and I said hi. He then made a scrape about ten yards away and laid down, chewing his cud the entire time I sat outside. His act of friendship and trust was exemplary, and I loved it.

I have enjoyed being alone for as long as I can remember, and my enjoyment has increased exponentially since I discovered the quiet. The quiet happens naturally; for instance, when you try to listen to the wind blowing, your thoughts need to go silent to hear the wind better. Or if you've ever been on a boat on a rough ocean, and as you watch the waves, the wheeling and diving birds, and perhaps whales breaching, you try to take in all of your surroundings. It's as if your whole body and mind must go quiet to experience the totality of nature's colossal presentation to you.

The quiet I initially stumbled across as a toddler soon became a daily, yet still primarily subconscious, pursuit. I hiked and camped in designated Wilderness Areas because they were quiet places. I would take my thirty-foot ocean boat forty miles or more out past the continental shelf and then shut off the engine to experience the quiet.

I was still traveling to find the quiet because I had not yet learned that all I needed to do was listen for it. But I was learning. The more I nurtured my ability to listen for the quiet, the more I found myself able to be in the quiet.

The quiet is, for me, a destination that is now usually reachable. The quiet exists right next to every noise, and I get to choose what I listen to. For example, occasionally, I am watching television, but my anxiety begins to run amok, so I turn the television off or mute the sound. Then, I listen for the quiet, my body relaxes, and my mind becomes happy.

I still get frustrated, anxious, or angry at times, but remembering the quiet helps me calm down. The quiet permeates my entire world, yet the quiet never imposes itself into my life. The quiet and the air we breathe are similar in that we can count on them being there.

I have been lucky enough to have experienced, on multiple occasions, an entire forest going quiet. At first, I didn't understand why it happened; was there a predator? What caused the quiet? But then I learned that the forest went quiet because it could, and somehow, I was able to extrapolate what the forest taught me and learn to go quiet. Finding the quiet became easier as I used it more, and eventually, I learned I could easily switch to it when the noise of life became too bothersome.

What I found is that the quiet is always there. I never knew that before. The quiet is always there, and we and it are always waiting for each other.

Occasionally, I get upset by the incessant noise that people make, and I want to shout to the world, "Will you shut the fuck up?" I hear myself screaming, though the noise never escapes my mouth. I swallow instead, and the urge to scream passes. Except for not always, as I have been known to walk outside and simply scream out loud, "Shut the fuck up!"

But what do I feel when I'm quiet? I feel happiness. And I get that there is much competition for empathetic people to write about what and or how an individual can or should do to find their way home. Home is their safe place, inside themselves, where they can metaphorically take off their clothes, walk around naked, and be safe from worry and fear. Home is where everything is okay in your life and where the past and the future are not weighing on either side of your emotional seesaw. Your seesaw sits balanced. You have enough of everything when you're home, and your happiness is personal and springs from the depths of your inner well.

Many people use different words than I do to describe what I call the quiet and its subsequent secondary gain of happiness. They may call happiness love, or “the quiet” they may call peace or being one with the universe. “Being Zen,” they may call intuition. In my experience, it’s hard to get someone, even myself, to believe in love if love has ever wounded you.

Many people believe you must do certain things in very specific ways to achieve a goal. Some people and groups who seek to help others achieve a better life have set rules. For instance, in yoga, there are rules about breathing, sitting, and the position of one's legs, arms, and hands, even while meditating. I do not like rules, and I often break rules just because I can.

But in nature, all nature requires is to be left alone, and it will do just fine. The same is true inside us.

While speaking with an acquaintance recently, I mentioned having found the quiet and its secondary gain of happiness, and he immediately began telling me I needed to go to a zen monastery where they would teach me about that. I tried to explain that I had already found the quiet, but he wouldn’t accept that I, or anyone, could or would find an answer without it having been taught to me or them by a professional. Again, I tried to explain that life had already taught me, and I had passed the final exam on this one, but he scoffed at that idea. There was an unspoken pressure for me to succumb to his opinion since he was a highly educated doctor. He and I are survivors, and our lives have educated us highly. The doctor's education is not offered in the inner cities and rural places where I have lived. However, I have taken and passed classes and subjects that the colleges and universities he attended do not offer, nor do they even know those classes exist. One subject I took, and I graduated at the top of my class, was how to be homeless, happy, and optimistic while hitchhiking for four and a half years, through twenty-



five foreign countries with a Federal Warrant issued for my arrest, and without being killed or arrested.

I am not trying to be better than anyone else; all I'm trying to do and doing is trying to be better than I was before today.

Sam, the feral cat, visited daily for nearly one year. Then, one day, he left and was gone. I worried about him, called him every day for a week, and then he reappeared as if nothing had happened. He has begun doing this, disappearing and reappearing days or a week later, and I've learned to accept it. He's reminded me that I have done nearly the same thing for my entire adult life, except for the reappearing part.

I have written and read beautiful, optimistic stories and poems about finding love and all the happiness life can and will bring a person. And I know that, yes, definitely, there are people who are happy with their lives. Yes, and equally definite, are people whose lives have been squashed and who are then left to flounder in their now handicapped life until death parts them from their unhappiness.

The demands of life in the twenty-first century are, for many of us, at times overwhelming. I have become overwhelmed and sought quiet by walking, hiking, and avoiding interacting with people whenever possible. And while that helped, it only changed my life's algorithm because I wasn't changing myself. Instead, I was attempting to change my surroundings. Monasteries have people who can control the environment within the walls and grounds, and retreats aimed at holistic health also strictly manage the environment. But many people can't live in monasteries or go on regular retreats.

Outside of ourselves can be a very harsh environment to ask for anything, especially for those who have been abused. A person can have experienced a yard of abuse or an inch of abuse, but

abuse is abuse, and everyone handles it differently. If I slap a fly, I may kill it, but if I slap myself, I may barely feel it. The effects of abuse and the toll of just having lived for several or more decades cannot be measured by standard methods, and inside us can be a brutal place to ask for anything if our self-worth has been damaged or destroyed.

Of course, the quiet is no more a panacea than anything else we have tried. It's better than cigarettes, alcohol, and prescription drugs because there are no side effects. It's free and readily available, so there are no wait times. Also, there are no rules. All you have to do is listen for the quiet; once you hear it, you're there. As you experience the quiet, its secondary gain of happiness will envelop you and draw you back repeatedly because who doesn't like happiness?

The End

Written by Peter Skeels, © November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023