

SIS: DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY + VIDEO

PARSONS THE NEW SCHOOL FOR DESIGN

★ **TONY HISS** ★

One spring morning, with nothing on my mind while I was walking home on East 16th Street, a quiet New York residential block near Union Square Park in Manhattan, after dropping my son off at school, I saw three people staring wide-eyed at an apartment building fire escape overhead. Blue and white feathers drifted slowly toward the sidewalk. A peregrine falcon — the cliff-dwelling hawk known to birders as the "embodiment of freedom" — was plucking and eating a pigeon. Peregrines, with fierce black eyes, blue-gray backs, and white bellies, can fly 200 miles an hour when swooping to kill. They are crow-sized; this one looked enormous.

Above the fire escape I could see puffy white clouds and a pale blue sky, as I had a minute before. When I looked down again, however, the concrete sidewalk and the asphalt street looked suddenly insubstantial, no more than a paper-thin, makeshift, temporary cover — like a throw rug, almost, or a picnic blanket — hiding the island's original underpinnings, dirt and boulders, that have been a continuing presence at least since the last glaciers retreated. I seemed connected to a bird I saw probably lived near the top of the 700-foot-tall Met Life Tower on 23rd Street; the pigeon it ate probably came from Union Square Park.

My expression for moments like this is deep travel. In an instant, our sense of the here and now that we're a part of expands exponentially, and everything around us is so vivid and intensely experienced that it's like waking up while already awake. Deep travel has a distinctive taste, and people who like it tend to look for ways of getting more of it. It often surprises us, stealing over us unawares. But it can be sought out, chosen, practiced, remembered, returned to. That's because, as I've come to realize, it's an ancient though underappreciated human ability built into all of us, one of the bedrock components of human intelligence. In my own deep travel, I've found that, once I reactivate it, even a long-familiar route — like a walk-through of nearby streets — exists within such a fullness of brand-new or never-before considered details and questions that I wonder how I ever had the capacity to exclude this information from consideration.

Many who write about travel have noticed that the word itself, in its original Old French form, *travailliez* had only harsh meanings, such as toil, trouble, and torment, and seems to trace back to an even older Latin word, *tripalium*, the name of a three-staked Roman instrument of torture. Modern travel, the movements of hundreds of millions of people day by day, also includes the extraordinary, often tortuous circumstances of millions of migrants and refugees, many of whom are in motion only involuntarily, fearing for their lives. Ordinary 21st-century travel itself has been accompanied by an undercurrent of fear since its first year, when 9/11 forced us to realize that any vehicle at all, even a passenger plane, can be used as a bomb. Sometimes the feeling of vulnerability fades, but its vibration is never quite stilled; and there are times when, even without a headline, we can feel it stealing back over us like some thickening of the air, a small, dark cloud or a patch of fog or mist, shifting, changeable, and capable, even when not directly overhead, of shadowing landscape and landmarks, draining off light and color, blurring clarity.

These ugly realities add to the difficulty of the urgency of getting it right. Travel already confers so many blessings — moving goods and foods around and spreading ideas and innovations, lightening our load, extending humanity's reach, bringing people together who might never otherwise meet, challenging stay-at-home thinking. As we set our sights even higher and restore travel's extra, innermost dimension, we will welcome it, seek it out, rely on it at any moment of any day, confidently, routinely, implicitly, as an ever-present opportunity, a built-in launch pad and catapult for lifting the wings of the human spirit.

What are the pathways that lead back into deep travel? I've been exploring a few of them. Wonder, it's frequently said, is a feeling that is alive in children but has dried up in adults. There are famous sayings about wonder — Descartes called it "the first of the passions"; Plato celebrated it as "the only beginning of philosophy"; Ralph Waldo

Emerson saw it leading to a different passion — "Men love to wonder, and that is the seed of science." But how do you isolate or amplify the flavor of it? A friend suggested looking at a small book on the subject by Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder*. Carson, now revered as a founder of modern environmentalism, brought out only four books in her short lifetime — three about the sea and *Silent Spring*, the famous bestseller about the dangers of DDT and other pesticides. She died at the age of 56, and *The Sense of Wonder*, originally a magazine article titled "Helping Your Child to Wonder," was published posthumously.

Carson agrees with the widespread and almost despairing assumption that wonder is perishable and too easily outgrown:

A child's world is fresh and new and beautiful, full of wonder and excitement. It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood. If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children I should ask that her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength.

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In *The Sense of Wonder*, there's a quiet lament about neglecting nature, thoughts brought on by walking outside and seeing the stars one summer night in southern Maine. "If this were a sight that could be seen only once in a century," Carson writes, "this little headland would be thronged with spectators. But it can be seen many scores of nights in any year, and so the lights burned in the cottages and the inhabitants probably gave not a thought to the beauty overhead; and because they could see it almost any night perhaps they will never see it."

Here was an entrance I was looking for. It wasn't that the value of the stars had dimmed or that their supply had in any way diminished. It was that certainty had triumphed over scarcity. What had dried up and disappeared from the mind's riverbed was the flow of attention. Because with certainty can come the complacency of pseudo-certainty. It's a matter of confusing some that's with a what. Knowing from repeated experience that we can count on the stars to be there and that their continuing presence is not an immediate threat, we begin to think we can say with the same level of confidence that we know what they are. Attention is withdrawn and moves in a different course. Some people know a great deal about the stars, others next to nothing. There is always more to find out. But habituation not noticing something that seems unchanging and harmless — can cloak both knowledge and ignorance with the same mantle of indifference: "Oh, yes, the stars." Something we have a word for.

Bringing this one realization back into your mind, elementary as it is, I've since found, can bring you straightaway into deep travel. It could be called the "wonder induction" — a simple matter while you're moving around or looking at a scene or at anything at all, perhaps something as humble as a fire hydrant, and saying to yourself that, however many times you've seen it or one like it, you don't know exactly what it is. Or at least that there's a lot you haven't found out so far. Such as how it works, and what it's connected to, and where it came from, and who thought of it, and how many people are responsible for it, and when it might next be used, and why it looks the way it does, and how and when it got there. And having thought such thoughts, attention surges back, the world opens up again, and the immensity of the not-yet-known and the still-to-be-explored returns and beckons. Even after infrequent contact or what feels like a long absence, "wonder" hasn't vanished. It's constantly only a single thought away from making a fresh appearance.

When I told another old friend about the wonder bridge into deep travel, he said, "Oh, there's an even easier way than that. What you're calling deep travel brings with it, you say, a remembrance that you don't know nearly what you could about what you're passing through if you open yourself up to it. But what about those times when your

ignorance is total and you don't even know where you are? Those are the off-balance moments when I think everyone is projected headlong into deep travel. You slow down, you may stop altogether. You're lost. You've got to find, and soon, some way to proceed, and so your senses are wide open and, for the time being, everything and everyone is a potential source of information. But that's not what I'm suggesting — getting lost. That's the situation behind the idea I use."

This friend works at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. "I call it the 'Warsaw induction,' " he said. "All you have to do is look around you"- we were having a sandwich in a crowded coffee shop on Madison Avenue — "and say to yourself, 'What would I notice, what would I want to know more about, what would I find compelling and be fascinated by if we were having lunch in Warsaw right now, instead of New York?' I say 'Warsaw, of course, just to mean some place I've never been; if you've been to Warsaw, try Cairo instead, or Cape Town or Ulan Bator.

"Suddenly there is no way of knowing whether what you're seeing has been there for a long time or was only just put there, and you don't know, either, whether what's happening goes on all the time or is something brand new. Everything around you has a question inside it, and the answer may have something unusual or exceptional to tell you, not just about how to fit yourself into Warsaw patterns but about how to live your life anywhere, although if that's the case, you probably won't know about it until later. Why is there a picture of the Bay of Naples on the wall behind us? Why was there a bowl of pickles on the table before we even sat down? Does the noise in here mean that lunch is a celebration, the high point of a day? Or is it in hours the farthest away from home that people get, the other end of an orbit that's about to swing back?"

From Hiss, Tony. *In Motion: The Experience of Travel*. Chicago: American Planning Association, 2012.

Tony Hiss is an author, lecturer, and consultant on restoring America's cities and landscapes. In 1963, he became a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, and since 1994, he has been a visiting scholar at New York University, first at the Taub Urban Research Center, and now at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. He has contributed to a wide variety of transportation and environmental initiatives. Drawing on the insights of planners, ecologists, psychologists, and environmentalists, his work outlines a more experiential and place-based way of thinking about our physical environments, exploring the ways in which people experience public spaces differently.
<http://www.pps.org/reference/thiss/>

★ R. MURRAY SCHAFER ★

Geologists study landscape formations. Geographers study landscape in its relationship to society. Architects and engineers restructure landscapes, and painters have painted them. And since photography, we have all been introduced to the appearance of divergent landscapes from around the world.

But who had systematically studied the evolving soundscape? The answer was no one. Yes, of course, work has been done in building acoustics. And we can deduce some patterns of the acoustic environment from the history of music, since musicians have often imitated environmental sounds in their compositions and improvisations. But that is about all. So, I decided to try to develop projects that would analyze the evolution of the soundscape from past to present.

The first thing to realize is that the soundscape is dynamic. It is constantly changing both in time and place. And every sound commits suicide—it will never be heard again.

I asked "Where are the museums for disappearing sounds?" At that time, there were almost none. So I sent my students out to record the sounds of Vancouver, the city in which we lived. Every sound recorded was to be accompanied by a card indicating the time and place recorded, the history of the sound object, and any social observations that might be significant. From this research we produced our first document, *The Vancouver Soundscape*, comprised of two LP records and a book analyzing the recordings and providing historical context.

Recordings, however, tell us nothing about soundscapes before recording was possible. To know past soundscapes, we would have to study documents by a variety of observers: historians, writers, inventors, painters, photographers, commentators — ear-witness accounts by people who listened carefully.

This became the subject of my *Tuning of the World* (Knopf, 1977), which attempted to show, in general terms, the evolution of the soundscape from ancient to modern times. As the book is available in several languages, I don't need to describe it here, but I will mention how researching it affected my attitude to the acoustic environment and that of an increasing number of other interested individuals.

I imagined the soundscape as a huge musical concert that is running continuously. The tickets for this concert are free, and we are all listeners. But we are also performers because we make sounds. To a certain extent, we could also aspire to be composers and conductors, shaping and designing its events.

Since we are condemned to listen to it, why not try to improve it? It seemed inevitable to think this way because we are always at the center of the soundscape, listening out. That is exactly contrary to the visual environment of which we are always outside, looking in.

In short, visual awareness is not aural awareness. Visual awareness faces forward, while aural awareness is centered.

Come with me now and sit in the grandstand of life. The seats are free and entertainment is continuous. The world orchestra is always playing: we hear it inside and outside, from near and far. There is no silence for the living. We have no ear lids. We are condemned to listen.

Most of the sounds I hear are attached to things. I use sounds as clues to identify these things. When they are hidden, sounds will reveal them. I hear through the forest, around the corner, over the hill. Sound gets to places where sight cannot. It plunges below the surface. It penetrates to the heart of things. Everything in this world has its sound—even silent objects. We get to know silent objects by striking them. The box is empty, the glass is thin, the wall is hollow.

Here is a paradox: two things touch but only one sound is produced. A ball hits a wall, a drumstick strikes a drum, a bow scrapes a string. Two objects: one sound. Another case of one plus one equals one. Nor is it possible to join sounds without them changing character. Zeno's paradox: "If a bushel of corn turned out upon the floor makes a noise, each grain and each part of a grain must make a noise likewise: but, in fact, it is not so."

In acoustics, sums are differences.

Sounds tell me about spaces, whether small or large, narrow or broad, indoor or outdoor. Echoes and reverberation inform me about surfaces and obstructions. With practice, I can begin to hear "acoustic shadows," just like the blind.

In *Emile*, his book on education, Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote: "I would have plenty of games in the dark.... If you are shut up in a building at night, clap your hands. You will know from the sound whether the space is large or small, if you are in the middle or in one corner."

You cannot control or shape the acoustic universe. Rather the reverse. This is why aural societies are considered unprogressive, they don't see straight ahead. If I wish to order the world, I must become "visionary." Then I close my ears and create fences, property lines, straight roads, walls, maps and diagrams.

But everything ignored returns. The vehement obscurity of the soundscape pushes back to confront us as noise pollution. As an articulated problem, noise belongs exclusively to Western societies. It is the discord between visual and acoustic space.

Acoustic space remains askew because it can't be owned. It becomes disenfranchised—a sonic sewer. Today we view the world without listening to it, from high-rise apartments and glassed-in towers.

In an aural society, all sounds matter, even when they are casually overheard. Some sounds are so unique that once

heard they will never be forgotten: a wolf's howl, a loon's call, a steam locomotive, a machine gun. In an aural society, such sounds can be brought forward and mimicked in song and speech as easily as visual society can draw a picture or take a photograph.

Schafer, R. Murray, "I have never seen a sound," *Canadian Acoustics* 37, no. 3 (2009).

R. Murray Schafer has achieved an international reputation as a composer, an educator, environmentalist, scholar and visual artist. He is perhaps best known for his *World Soundscape Project*, concern for acoustic ecology, and his book *The Tuning of the World* (1977). He was notably the first recipient of the Jules Léger Prize in 1978. Besides his works as a composer, dramatist, music educator, music journalist, and in the new field of soundscape studies, Schafer has made significant contributions to the humanities as musicologist/literary scholar, creative writer, and visual artist.
<https://www.musiccentre.ca/node/37315/biography>
