

Canyons and Echos

My little yard in the city is quiet, thanks in part to the house that lies between my home and the main road. My neighbor's house is nearly invisible because of numerous huge trees and overgrown shrubs. The lady who owns the house is in her 90s, and I dream that one day, when she gets ready to sell the house and move to a nice senior citizen's apartment, that I will be able to buy it. I'd like to take the old house down piece by piece, give bricks and other usable parts to some charity and let the land go back to nature, perhaps even filling in the old basement to make a huge pond.

But that is a dream. In reality what will probably happen is that the house will be sold to someone who wants a fixer-upper. The new owner will probably consider the trees a nuisance and an eyesore as I sometimes do, and cut most of them down. Then my own yard won't seem quite as quiet. Echoes of passing cars on the nearby roads will reach my ears and I will be more aware of the noisy world around me.

Echoes, it seems, only like open spaces. In the city, things like bricks and mortar make sounds bounce around again and again, creating a constant buzz. In the wilderness, canyon walls reflect even the smallest sound and allow it to roll around and around with a more languid tone. The city echoes seem frantic. Wilderness echoes are more lonely and haunting. But both can be tempered by the presence of growing things.

In my lifetime I've been fortunate to view two canyons, the Grand Canyon in Arizona, and Waimea Canyon on the Hawaii island of Kauai (which is often called the Grand Canyon of the Pacific). Each has its own echo, but while the sound of the Grand Canyon is a lonely roar. The greener Waimea with its rolling hills seems to whisper. Vegetation makes difference for certain, for although the desert flora of Arizona brings the Grand Canyon to life in many places, the lush vegetation of Hawaii is far more evident. There, the moisture and sunlight can coax green life from even the tiniest crack. Even newly formed earth from the active volcano bears the rudiments of a jungle.

But is the greenery the only thing that makes their echoes different? Perhaps their origins play a part as well. Both canyons had turbulent beginnings, but the forces that shaped them -- wind and water, eruptions and earthquakes -- are quite different. And so their echoes reflect the differences.

What all echoes have in common is that they can be modified by placing things in the path of sound. We humans do this in our own minds and lives, and in our homes. Some people cushion themselves with carpeting, draperies and upholstered furniture. They collect objects that will absorb sound, like pillows and soft toys, perhaps even stacks of magazines or newspapers.

Some people also try to cushion their lives by keeping busy. An active life may not block out unpleasant echoes, but the busyness of many thoughts can crowd out the echoes that should be there. They create a buzz like the echoes of a city. Surrounding ourselves with lots of stuff, or keeping our minds occupied with lots of activities doesn't make the noises go away, but in a way it protects us from them.

Perhaps like the echoes of a voice in a canyon, some of the echoes inside our heads will go away if we stop giving them more things to bang around on and bounce off of.

I find that when I try to block out my own echoes by creating activity around me, I wind up feeling a bit dazed. It's as if I'm trying to plant my own vegetation in a canyon where it doesn't belong. And I realize that only true growth and a sustaining environment can muffle the echoes of a turbulent past.