

PRESBYCUSIS

A relaxed evening in the Bowie household in front of the TV

...

"What did she say?"

"I'm not sure."

"I'm missing half of what they're saying."

"It's their British accents."

"Can we turn it up?"

"It's up all the way."

"Maybe we should put on the closed captioning."

"I forget how to do that."

"It's one of those little buttons at the bottom."

"This one? ... No, that just made the screen smaller."

"We did it the other night."

"That was with Netflix. This is Apple Plus."

"We have so many of these things? Why do we need Apple Plus?"

"You wanted to watch Ted Lasso."

"Right. Let's cast it to the TV. Then maybe we can turn up the volume."

"We can't. We need the little Apple dongle thingy for that."

"So what's that thing? Dongling there?"

"That's the Chromecast dongle thingy."

"So we not only need Netflix and Crave and Amazon Prime and Acorn and HBO Max -"

"And Apple Plus -"

"But we also need a selection of dongles?"

"Well, two anyway."

"Didn't it work before? I'm sure we watched the first season on the TV. I can picture Ted with a bigger moustache. A bigger soccer ball."

"I don't remember. I think it's this button."

"Yes, there's a list of languages. Just scroll down ..."

"Oops"

"That looks like -- Latvian."

"I hit the wrong one. Wait. There they are - subtitles. In English."

"Hallelujah -- Except ..."

"What now?"

"I can't read them. Where are my glasses?"

This scene - or a version of it - plays itself out all too frequently at our house. Maybe it sounds familiar. And it's all caused by one simple word.

Presbycusis.

About one third of adults between the ages of 65 and 74 and almost half of those over 75 suffer from this thing they've probably never even heard of.

Presbycusis.

And no, in spite of how it sounds, it's not an affliction which affects Presbyterians, although that would be a reasonable guess if you were playing Balderdash. In fact, Presbycusis is strictly nonpartisan. It targets those of all faiths - and non-believers too - equally and indiscriminately.

It's led to what someone (Paul Newman?) famously called "a failure to communicate." It's broken up marriages. It's allowed prime ministers to get away with saying "fuddle duddle" in the House of Commons. It's caused international incidents. It may well have started wars. It's led to "What?" being the single most used word in the English language. (You can look it up.)

It's everywhere. It's insidious.

It's presbycusis.

So what is it? None other than the dreaded age-related hearing loss.

And sure, it's caused by aging (what isn't?) but the main cause of presbycusis is years of exposure to noise. Too much noise. Too much loud noise. Everywhere. And there's the paradox. Everything is either too low - British TV dialogue - or way too loud - almost everything else.

"... my words like silent raindrops fell ..." Great lyrics, Paul. But sorry, you're a poet not a meteorologist. There's no such thing as "silent raindrops". They register about 40 decibels (dB). In fact, there's no such thing as silence in the modern world. The sound of "silence" is actually about 25dB, and since the human ear detects anything above zero dB we're always hearing *something*, whether we like it or not. But don't blame Paul Simon. "The Sounds of Something" doesn't make for a great song title. I heard someone on the CBC describe these ever-present everyday sounds as a "symphony", but I'm more inclined to call them what they are - noise.

And there's just too much of it in the world. We're bathed in it, enveloped by it. It's like a London pea soup fog that never lifts. Sure, some of it is unavoidable unless we want to go back to horses and buggies and cave drawings - although scratching away on those rock walls was probably a pretty irritating sound in its day. But all this noise is one of the choices we make in the name of progress. And lots of it we inflict on ourselves for no good reason, other than to raise the general decibel level. And create a breeding ground for presbycusis.

Take background music, for example. Or as Henny Youngman would say - "Take background music -- please." Later patented as Muzak, background music first appeared in 1922. Its purpose? To

calm fearful passengers on that frightening new invention - the elevator. Hence the term "elevator music".

It's now something of a derogatory term, but one place I actually don't mind elevator music is on elevators. Striking up a conversation on an elevator is seldom comfortable; it's almost a minor social taboo. So that innocuous, syrupy music helps to fill a void while you spend a few mildly awkward moments avoiding eye contact with strangers in a cramped, moving cubicle. (Existential question. If an elevator falls in the shaft does the Muzak continue?)

So if elevator music would just stay where it belongs - on elevators - I'd be OK with it. But pretty much everywhere else I'd rather do without it. I suppose it doesn't do much harm in, say, a shopping mall, but isn't playing relentless music 24/7 a form of torture, right up there with waterboarding? And Christmas music seems to start in malls the day after Thanksgiving and continue until about April - but that's another topic.

Apparently there was also a theory that background music helped factory workers to be more productive. Whistle while you work sort of thing. Possibly. But I really don't understand it in places like restaurants and bars unless it's turned so low you can't hear it - in which case why not just turn it off entirely? I've probably asked for music to be turned down in restaurants as often as I've asked for a jiggling table to be fixed - which is pretty often. Nothing like a wobbly, rattling table to detract from a nice, relaxed meal. But I digress ...

Getting back to noise, in a perverse sort of way it seems to me that the louder the conversation gets in a bar the louder they crank up the music - as if it's a contest, as if they're trying to outdo the human voices. So the louder it gets - the louder it gets - until you end up with a cacophonous din. This

makes no sense to me. If you want to go out to listen to music - fine. If you want to go out to talk to friends - great. But why would you want to do both at the same time and place? Has anyone in the history of the world ever said "let's go out for a drink and shout at each other, scream at each other, BELLOW at each other"?

A few years ago, a play of mine, *Goodbye, Piccadilly*, was on in Ottawa. I grew up in Ottawa but one of my plays had never been done there so it was a bit of an occasion for me. My oldest friend, Bruce, rounded up a bunch of our high school friends, some of whom I hadn't seen in years, to come and see it. He'd booked a couple of big tables at a nearby pub for us to gather at afterwards. It would be a welcome chance to catch up with everyone and maybe even bask in a few words of praise for my play, which people seemed to like. But as soon as I walked in I was hit with a wall of noise - music blasting, people shouting over it. It could have been a punk rock concert!

Bruce asked for the music to be turned down but there was no audible improvement. People bore it for a while, doing their best to talk. But the evening wrapped up earlier than it might have otherwise, and there was almost a palpable sense of relief when we emerged into the (relatively) quiet street. Finally able to hear each other, we stood around talking for another 20 minutes. I won't say all that noise ruined the evening, but it certainly didn't help.

So why the need for all this noise? There are perfectly good restaurants in Kingston (no names!) which we won't go to any more for the sole reason that they're too loud. And one night one of our favourite bands was playing at a local spot. We had prime seats right up front - *too* up front as it turned out. The performers were great. But it was just too loud. We slipped out at intermission, something we never used to do.

There's that saying - "I can't hear myself think." But in my case it's true. I know some writers actually listen to the radio while they're writing but I can't imagine doing that. I need silence to be able to think. I even bought a pair of noise-blocking plastic earmuff things. But I never got used to them. Paradoxically, I didn't like not being able to hear anything at all. It felt artificial, unnatural. Is it possible that we've become so used to a certain base level of noise that its absence is unsettling?

Or maybe it's just me. Call me overly sensitive, but I'm convinced the world isn't just getting hotter. It's getting louder. I'm certainly not making light of climate change, but noise pollution may actually have more effect on our everyday lives by virtue of its very ubiquity.

So what's the solution? Some of our friends have moved to bucolic country retreats. But silent? Hardly. Leaves rustling (35dB). Pines whispering (40dB). Brook babbling (50dB). Cows mooing (65dB). Birds chirping - at 6am!(75dB). Traffic humming - on 401 five miles away (80dB). Those places are cacophonous! No way I'm doing that.

So, fed by the toxic combination of noise and presbycusis, our house will continue to reverberate to a regular refrain of:

"Sorry. I can't hear you when the water's running (70dB)

...

Or when the Queen's students behind us are blasting music. Again (100dB) ...

Or when a car's going by (75dB) ...

Or when the radio's on (60dB) ...

Or when the kettle's boiling (50dB) ...

Or when the dishwasher's running (40dB) ...

Or when I'm breathing (20dB)...

Oh wait. I've stopped.

What did you say?"

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PROFILE KINGSTON

(Upcoming) January, 2022