

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: Robert Newman is a professor of English at the University of Utah. The following passage is adapted from an essay he published in 1997.

THE VALUE OF SILENCE

Last summer my wife and I visited the Grand Teton and Yellowstone national parks, and we plan to do so again soon. Like thousands of other vacationers, we hiked through spectacular forests to forget the stress of the meeting-filled, claustrophobic work year. We also left behind the dull hum of the fluorescent lights, the blare of the car horns, the numbing Muzak of supermarkets, and we find that the silence we experience on these trips puts everything in our lives back into perspective. It's the ratcheting down of inner and outer noise we most seek in the national parks, the chance to be alone with our thoughts and to embrace the steady rhythm of our steps along paths alive with brilliant wildflowers and scuttling chipmunks. We feel small but connected to everything around us as we begin to discover the healing quiet that we'd almost forgot we were missing.

But these days, except for deep back-country hikes, I find it increasingly difficult to find quiet. I don't mind that so many people visit the parks. If temporary peace and an appreciation of nature can be restored to more lives, we'll all no doubt be better off. But, as Rob Smith of the Sierra Club said recently about the controversy over proposals to limit sightseeing flights over the Grand Canyon, "The one great value of national parks should be that visitors don't have to listen to the clatter of everyday life." What bothers me, therefore, is the incessant chatter of hikers, their insistence on posing and performing, their refusal to stop and take things in. I'm annoyed by their inability to leave the noise of everyday life behind because it intrudes on my own attempts to do so. And, as a teacher, I'm particularly disturbed by their failure to educate their children about the virtues of silence.

On park trails my appreciation for the subtle shifts of color in a sunset was loudly interrupted by conversations between children and parents. The kids, indoctrinated by amusement parks, demanded to go on to the next attraction, while frustrated parents insisted they enjoy the beauty before them. At steaming algae pools of the purest cerulean blue or canyons with tumbling gradations of pinks and orange, places where I wanted to feel the holy hushing of my daily concerns, I listened instead to countless parents instructing their kids to have an educational experience. Fidgeting 8- and 10-year-olds were treated to Dad's stentorian recitation of a sign explaining the Continental Divide, which they could very well have read silently themselves. More often than not some response was demanded, confirmation that learning was taking place. While well-meaning, these parents did not allow their children the opportunity to make discoveries for themselves.

Since my last hiking vacation, I've thought a lot about the ways schools also subvert the appeal of quiet. Silence is seldom taught as something positive. Often it's used to punish, an instrument of authority and regulation. Students must sit still and not talk when they've misbehaved. Guilt, conformity, imprisonment, discomfort--from kindergarten on these are associated with silence. Educators frequently read quiet as a sign of student maladjustment. The child who speaks up when the teacher requests a response is rewarded. The one who ponders is often considered withdrawn, problematic. The educational system appears to favor

students who have the immediate, correct answers, not those who take the time to consider other questions.

With the proliferation of TV and radio talk shows, portable phones and instantaneous feedback, we find ourselves networked in endless circuits of chatter. Conversations have invaded movie theaters, concert auditoriums and lecture halls. Why should national-park trails be the exception? Our culture is committed to motion, enthralled by commotion, and addicted to auditory accompaniment. Whether we work, exercise, drive, shop or recreate, sound propels us on our way. Seldom do we press the mute button as we channel-surf through daily routines. And when we do, usually accidentally, the result is often uncomfortable. Such pauses, after all, offer occasions to remove ourselves from the rush of what we do so we may take stock of who we are.

I can't help feeling that we've lost something essential when we seem unable to participate in worshipful silence. I want to teach my students to listen to the rustle of aspen leaves rather than profane it with their noise. I'd like to encourage them to be quiet and pay attention as a reward rather than a punishment.

ESSAY TOPIC

According to Newman, in what ways is silence valuable? What do you think of his views? Write an essay responding to these two questions. To develop your own position, be sure to discuss specific examples; those examples can be drawn from anything you've read, as well as from your observation and experience.