

Soundwalk from Home Covid19 Version, April 2020

Considerations before the walk

We are in the midst of a pandemic and news of the tragedies, hardships and worries that this crisis brings with it, tend to dominate our daily lives. But like in any crisis, we are also in the middle of an opportunity, a new learning: to experience another type of listening, reflecting in new ways about what is important, what is essential. The changed environmental, social, and economic circumstances cause many of us to reconsider our habits, behaviour and actions, our social and ecological attitudes; to reflect on what may be required of us to deal with climate change; and finally to face the fact that we must take responsibility for rectifying the ecological imbalances we have caused. We are given a chance to make changes on a large scale – locally and worldwide.

Locally, the soundwalks organized by Vancouver New Music and the Vancouver Soundwalk Collective, have offered frameworks for new ways of listening since 2003. They have encouraged a shifting of our relationship to the acoustic, social, ecological and cultural environment in which we live. This way of listening in the safe context of group soundwalks carries within it seeds for change.

Now a much larger framework has been set for us through the pandemic, in which our movements are restricted and we cannot walk together in groups. This offers new opportunities, one of which is a simple but profound one: to go on a 1-person soundwalk, to listen to what we hear *now* in our homes and neighbourhoods. The general urban rumble has been reduced significantly in all urban centres of the world, including Vancouver. The inner urban spaces have opened up acoustically. Sounds that were normally masked by traffic sound, can now be heard in their entirety, including their reverberance or even their echoes. The acoustic space of a street is now fully audible, that is, we can trace aurally how a sound travels through this space, how it bounces off or gets absorbed by the various surfaces.

Our ears can reach out into further distances and connect with life beyond our immediate surroundings. We can hear our neighbourhoods a bit like one would hear life in a village located away from major traffic arteries. Also, our bodies, ears, our nervous systems, our psyches are receiving fewer soundwaves. We are literally given a break from hearing too much, too loudly and too closely. As a result our ears, our whole being, may be in a healthier state and perceive sounds more acutely.

How much are our responses shaped by our environmental awareness, our economic and social standing, by our health condition, our age, and our cultural and political leanings? What did we use to hear? What sounds have we never noticed before? What will we hear after the lockdown and how will we respond to it? What would we like to preserve, what would we like to change?

This *Soundwalk from Home* originally was written in 1997, when no one had yet experienced such a drastic change in city soundscapes, as we are experiencing right now. Intentionally I have not changed the text in any significant way, and am acutely aware that the word meanings and listening suggestions ring differently in our ears nowadays than they would have done at any time prior to this unusual situation.

Breathe and...

Listen.
Words on this printed page (on this screen),
are sound.
Listen.
Thoughts in your head
are sound.
Listen.
Life in your home, in your neighbourhood
is sound.
Listen.

Put aside one hour and go for a walk from your home. Do nothing but listen.
If you are walking with someone, make sure to stay at a safe distance from each other,
and refrain from talking.
Listen to everything,
to the sounds around you,
to the thought-voices inside you,
Listen in silence.

Open the door of the building in which you live.
Listen as you step out. Walk and listen. Stop and listen. Go around the next corner and listen.
Find a favourite spot in your neighbourhood and listen. Don't speak to anyone.
Walk on and listen.

Listen
for voices
while walking.
Listen
for pauses.
Listen.

There are sounds because it is this time of day.
Stop and listen

Listen for hums and motors
for birdcalls
and for pauses between the birdcalls.

Listen for echoes.
Make sounds to find echoes.

Hear your breath
and its rhythm
your footsteps
and their rhythm.

Stop for a moment and listen to your thoughts. Let them pass like the sound of a car.
Follow them until you cannot hear them any longer.

Hear
the pauses
between sirens and horns and airplanes

The sounds of this season.

of clothes
and of wind.

Listen
into the distance

Stop
listening
for a moment.

If you walked with a friend,
find a place and sit at a safe distance.
Share and discuss your experiences and impressions, your thoughts.

If you walked by yourself,
write down your impressions and experiences in a sound journal,
and perhaps tell your housemates or friends about it.

Return home

Did you hear the sounds
of this place
of this time
in your life?

Put aside another hour
on another day
and go for a walk in your neighbourhood
do nothing but
listen

Hildegard Westerkamp (February 1997 / April 2020)