

25 October 2020

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

I miss bird song, the chorus of frogs croaking at night, the whisper of wind in the leaves, and the hypnotic cadence of water lapping on a shoreline. I live near the Thames River. I ought to be able to hear these things. But I don't.

Our little fifth floor apartment (in a building stupidly erected on an old creek bed) still has trees nearby, though some were cut down recently. Gazing out the window, I sometimes see a cardinal, a crow, or a hawk floating high overhead. Not very often, but sometimes.

But all I hear is noise. Loud, raucous, machine noise.

A Thundering Bellyache

I've lost count of the number of trees that have fallen to the roar of a chain saw in this coveted neighbourhood of the so-called 'Forest City'. The 'war on nature' is all too evident in London.

We no longer mark the changing of the seasons by the changes to foliage and the migrations of birds. We mark it by the change of machinery. Summer's ear-splitting leaf blowers, thunderous 'riding lawn mowers', and deafening motorcycles gradually give way to winter's roaring ploughs and snow-blowers. The high-pitched whine of the roving 'Sewer Vacuum Truck' fills the days between them, lest there be silence and sanity return. How else would we know what season we're in? Mind you, screaming sirens and the vexatious *beep-beep-beep* of trucks backing up are there for our enjoyment all year round.

I've a friend who's a landscape gardener. Except for the pick-up truck he gets around in, all his tools are hand-tools. If not for his sporadic, creative cursing when, say, he drops a paving stone on his foot, you'd never hear him at work in your garden. But he's an extremely rare exception. Almost no one uses rakes, shovels, or manual hedge clippers anymore. The same is true in carpentry and construction. The screech of the power saw has supplanted the gentle rhythms of a hand saw, and the explosive *kerpow* of pneumatic nail guns has displaced the milder 'thwack' of an old-fashioned hammer.

And yet, I get the feeling that few are as vexed by noise pollution as I am. Most seem oblivious. What's wrong with me? I can almost hear your eyes rolling at me; or I would do, but for the moaning of a chain saw one street over.

Perchance, gentle reader, you're a 'fellow sufferer who understands'; yet being more civil than I have it within me to be, you suffer this city's cacophony with calm and dignity...*in silence*. Being a preacher, though, I must needs bellyache, thunderously, thereby offending my own predilection for quiet, and possibly yours too. So, delete me now if you must. I'll not know if you do.

The excessive noise of internal combustion engines does us psycho-physical damage. The din of modern living has, after all, been linked to rises in depression and hypertension. But so what, right? Those leaves won't blow themselves away, will they?

Much more than this, though, internal combustion – the burning of fossil fuels – is changing the climate, swiftly, irreparably, and before our very eyes.

Humans are a menace to Nature and to other humans. We toxify ecosystems with industrial effluents for the sake of someone's affluence. We destroy the habitats of animals and plants, sterilise lakes and oceans, and drive many, many species of life into extinction. According to last year's U.N. report, we've put a million different species at severe risk.

Are we not driving ourselves into extinction too? It would seem so.

I know. I sound hopeless and helpless, don't I? Perhaps that's one of the roots of human complacency: the hopeless helplessness caused by our not knowing what to do about something we care about. (Complacency's other root, of course, is not 'giving a damn' in the first place.)

And yet, good happens when we finally say out loud what once seemed un-sayable, yet patently true, no matter how bleak. Israel's prophets knew this too. For one thing, It's a relief not unlike that which comes from putting down, at last, a back-breaking load. Something healing happens, already, when facades fall, false cheeriness fades, fake optimism fizzles, and we finally face Reality, eye to eye. It's a Christian intuition, deeply felt by faith, to know that, even when we're judged by it, 'truth' intends our *healing*.

Seen this way, the work of "The Friends of the Coves" is a little sanctuary of sanity. Do you know about it? Its headquarters, I'm proud to say, is housed right here at Elmwood. "The Coves" is a region of post-industrial 'wasteland' in our own little neighbourhood. "The Friends" want to reclaim it for Nature, so that Nature may reclaim it to its primal condition. Their work is noble.

Can you imagine a haven of wilderness within our noisy city? What could be more necessary and exciting than that? Birds could sing there, and frogs croak with abandon. This should be our human vocation now, not expanding our

presence, our economy, and spreading our affluent effluent over the face of the earth, but living smaller lives, shrinking our 'footprint', and giving what we've stolen from Nature *back* to Nature for its healing.

A wilderness haven and a Church sanctuary are rather alike, you know. (Bear with me, if you're still there; I have to get religious for a moment.) If we enter them with a humble heart and an open mind – something we moderns wrongly believe it's beneath our dignity to do – a wilderness haven and a Church sanctuary will make us aware of a Creative Power that is not ours to own and command, but to honour and love.

If we refuse this truth, we're doomed.

In other news...

The Board of Managers want to give us three cheers and a pat-on-the-back. So do I. The people of Elmwood continue to be generous when it comes to support for the Church's finances. We knew this would be a difficult year, not just financially, but in all the ways the pandemic has distorted our lives. Next year may be just as challenging.

We've had to bear extra costs this year too. A new wheelchair ramp and new doors on the west side of the Church were urgent necessities that simply couldn't be put off any longer. We knew there would be a big deficit this year – and there is, so far – but it's not as deep as we'd thought it could be, and seen in a larger context, it's really rather heartening to witness the outpouring of support for the life we share at Elmwood. So, a sincere thank you to one and all!

Yours in the faith,
Andrew