

Noise level

by [Barbara Melosh](#) in the [October 3, 2012](#) issue

## In Review



## The Unwanted Sound of Everything We Want

By Garret Keizer  
PublicAffairs

I am cranky about noise. TVs blaring in waiting rooms, background music that drowns out conversation, earsplitting volume at the movies. On pastoral calls I appeal to mute the TV. At movie theaters I beg the manager for mercy.

My husband has begun to find my mounting zeal tiresome. “Why don’t you just stay home?” he challenges. But our home environment is noisy too. Traffic at the intersection, helicopters overhead, bar patrons laughing and arguing as they spill out into the street, maudlin confessions of cell phone users clearly audible in my bedroom late into the night.

“Noise is not the most important problem in the world,” Garret Keizer declares in the opening sentence of *The Unwanted Sound of Everything We Want*. It’s a surprising first move, this disarming demurrer, and it convicts my inner crank. But Keizer goes on to vindicate those bothered by noise, even as he reframes, broadens and refines the problem. The result is a wide-ranging, ambitious and strikingly original argument about the politics of sound.

Keizer acknowledges the subjective dimension of noise, which is sometimes defined as unwanted sound. What I deem noise may not be bothersome to someone else, and what bothers me in one context could be acceptable to me in another. Some of Keizer’s most provocative and challenging examples explore contestation over sound, including efforts to regulate street noise that historically set urban reformers against organ grinders and riverboat captains—and more recently, vendors in ice cream trucks.

But, he argues, noise has a much more significant objective dimension. High decibels, for example, can cause hearing loss and have other measurable physical and psychological effects. Here Keizer draws on studies such as George Michelsen Foy’s *Zero Decibels* and George Prochnik’s *In Pursuit of Silence*, and he adds a searching analysis of power and inequality, noting the disproportionate effect of noise on people on the margins. “Where there’s noise there’s often a complex of social, economic, and environmental disadvantages,” such as those experienced by people living in cheaper housing near railroad tracks and highways.

Other sources corroborate Keizer’s observations about the ubiquity of noise. In one arresting example, a project documenting the soundscape of Denali, a vast wilderness tract in Alaska, has since 2006 recorded only 36 full days with no sound from an internal combustion engine.

Many thoughtful books offer testimony about the individual pursuit of silence and the cultivation of spirituality through the *via negativa* of silence. Keizer emphasizes instead the social character of both noise and silence, and the web of human

community. As he wryly observes, the interiority of silent reading itself relies on a substrate of noisy technologies—the manufacture and transport of ink and paper, the racket of printing, the power plants that generate electricity to light the page or power the computer. On a larger scale, transportation accounts for much of the cacophony in our noisy world, and Keizer points out the irony of heading for an exotic destination in search of quiet by means of a shatteringly noisy jet.

Noise may not be the most important problem in the world, but Keizer makes a robust case for its far-reaching effects and often catastrophic consequences. In response, he argues for a renewed human community of civility and sustainability. “In the end,” he writes, “there are only two kinds of human noise in the world: the noise that says ‘The world is mine’ and the noise that says ‘It’s my world too.’ We need to quiet the first and make more of the second.”

To live more quietly, he asserts, we need to reduce fossil fuel consumption and commit to simplicity. He advocates a society transformed by people living closer together, embracing diversity and cultivating neighborliness. Several helpful appendices offer resources for activism, and a “personal noise code” invites readers to act locally through practices of hospitality and simplicity.

Keizer acknowledges the challenges of effecting broad cultural change, which includes our own internal struggles: “We are all conflicted, compromised, and confused.” This book offers a call to repentance and transformation that might well begin with the exhortation of a Dutch campaign to reduce noise: “Let’s be gentle with each other.”