

The Leaf Blower Man Cometh!

Shôn Ellerton, September 5, 2023

Finding peace and quiet in a suburban neighbourhood with barking dogs and rampant leaf blowing men is not always easy.



The quest to find peace and serenity in an urban neighbourhood is one of the most challenging ones I have come to learn. And this is why. I've been spoiled in living in a very quiet neighbourhood, apart from the occasional helicopter which patrols the coastline and around the local suburb from time to time. I don't know what the helicopters do, but if you question as to what they are doing on the local social media feeds, you'll be inundated with a barrage of posturing nonces who rebuke your complaining by giving themselves the satisfaction of getting on their high horses to explain to you that they could be saving someone's life and how dare you question anyway! Human behaviour at its finest.

But enough of that. Early morning should be a time of peace and tranquillity in a nice suburb. And so, it should be. When I mean early morning, I'm talking about 7am in this case. The sun is up, the weather is fresh, the birds are out, and the soccer moms haven't got into their unfeasibly large SUVs to get their kids to school less than a mile down the road. And yes, this is a typical Californian suburb in the southwest corner of Silicon Valley.

I'm quite sensitive to noise, although paradoxically and according to my wife, I crank up my hi-fi at home to unbearably loud levels. Not sure what it is with women and loud music. They don't mix. Unless it's for a concert or going to the nightclub, in which case, they seem not to mind. Seems most women have the extraordinary ability to understand each other's dialogue in the presence of loud music. Maybe, perhaps, men are more guarded maintaining a little more distance

with each other, which simply means pushing up the ambient sound level to crazy levels because everyone ends up shouting. It's not that I'm showing my age. I was largely like this since I was a teenager. For me, all the noise floods into my ears unfiltered rendering any chance of picking up intelligible speech near impossible. However, when it comes to actively listening to music at home. I mean, not as background, but really getting into it, I like to be engulfed in the waves of sound, but I can only do this when alone.

Anyway. Walking down the suburban streets, the first thing I notice is simply how loud the noise of road tyres are. We have some pretty nifty technology in the world of automobiles these days, but we've not really made much of an effort to mitigate the incredibly loud white noise tyres generate along the surfaces of roads, particularly those made of concrete. Speaking of white noise, it is, perhaps, one of the most blanketing of all noises. Like the innocuous action of switching on an electric kettle to boil water creating a white noise in which speech, even if spoken nearby, is completely muffled. The intermittent noise of a noisy house air conditioner is another example. You're there watching some movie on TV. The bloody thing switches on, and you're there cranking up the volume, only to find that you get shouted at for making the TV too loud when the air conditioning turns off. Why is it that nearly everyone can hear the dialogue when the air conditioning turns on, but I can't? It's not like I'm deaf because I can often hear the very slightest of sounds which others fail to perceive.

My morning walk to the park in this American suburb is disturbed by a myriad of unwanted sounds. The reason being, is that I did not have my earphones and I was listening to a podcast on my phone using the speaker. There seemed to be no quiet route and as, if by conspiracy, all the local traffic came as soon as I was walking on it. Despite most of them being electric vehicles, the tyre noise was sufficiently loud enough for me to bring my phone right next to my ear to make any sense what they were speaking about on the podcast.

I finally reach the park which was blissfully away from the road with its ever continual procession of cars. I can hear people playing pickleball, a sport I never heard of before. It's a bit like playing tennis but on a much smaller court using what sounds to be like ping pong bats, although I didn't foster enough curiosity to look closely enough. That's fine. I've lived next to a basketball court as a child which I can attest to being a far more obtrusive and annoying sound than pickleball. Bounce. Thud. Bounce. Thud. Bounce. Thud. Boing! Spring! When the basketball hits the hoop. Over and over.

In the distance, one can hear the sound of jet aeroplanes high up in the sky. They were sufficiently high enough not to cause too much of a bother. The sprinklers in the lush green park were on reminding me of the title of one of Joni Mitchell's albums, *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*. Again, not really a problem sound. If anything, they seemed, somewhat, soothing.

But then we have lawnmower man who seemed intent on cutting the same bit of grass over and over again with one of those ride-on lawnmowers. I swear, if I had a conspiratorial streak in me, I'd say he was out there just to piss me off. He did finally bugger off, but then, as soon as the solitude of peace returned, a handyman starts cranking up his circular saw cutting endless planks of wood outside the front of a townhouse adjacent to the park. Now bear in mind, that this was on a Sunday morning around half past seven or so, and believe you me, I'd get lynched in my own neighbourhood should I dare mow the lawn early on a Sunday. I'll give the guy who did the circular sawing a break as he's clearly one of the many tens of thousands of tradesmen who have to travel from many miles out in the sticks to service the white-collar elite, most of which would struggle to hammer a nail into an interior drywall to hang up a picture frame.

And just when the handyman starts to pack up and leave, some fucker with a leaf blower starts to blow leaves from there to another point, not far from there. Probably a grand total distance of three feet. God, how I hate these machines! Americans seem to love them to pieces. Especially those with big two-stroke engines. It's basically the chainsaw equivalent for the mealy man who's not man enough to operate a chainsaw but wants to prove that he can make an excessive amount of noise by doing what he makes out to be the most manly of things. Make a lot of noise. And why not make a noise with such a 'dangerous' device such as a leaf blower? Believe me, I've heard plenty of chainsaws in my lifetime in wooded areas, but they are essential, albeit, highly dangerous toys to play with. As for leaf blowers, they are mind-blowingly non-essential irritants.

In a similar vein to how I described the tradies with their circular saws, many front gardens in those more affluent of suburbs are given the green equivalent of a manicure on obsessively frequent occasions. Grass one inch too long! Oh my god! Let's bring in the platoon of minimum-wage Mexicans along with their pickup tricks, lawnmowers, gas-powered trimmers and, of course, leaf blowers to get everything back into tip top shape. The occupant won't be disturbed because they will probably choose that day they must physically go to the office rather

than work from home. As for other occupants nearby who *are* working from home, they will get all the noise instead.

Speaking of leaf blowers, they also have their aficionados in England too I was interested to learn. Next to where my late father lived is a chap, apparently, not to be trifled with. Indeed, my stepmother warned me never to talk about him within earshot over the boundary fence under pain of death. Not literally, of course. However, this guy, I was told, was some sort of nutter who worked with special forces and was deemed a tough guy of unimaginable proportions. My father called him 'Sudden Death'. I'm sure much of this was hyperbole and grossly exaggerated, but they seemed genuinely fearful of him as he had 'certain contacts', whatever that meant. Anyway, this prick frequently used his leaf blower and if the slightest bit of leaf landed onto his backyard patio, out comes the wretched machine. You have probably gathered by now that I am not particularly fond of leaf blowers!

I will, however, defend the leaf blower for one reason, and one reason alone. By reversing the engine to suck up leaves from gravel or stones, an activity nigh on impossible using other traditional methods. I have to do this myself from time to time in my front yard, but I choose an appropriate time to do so, and I'm not a lazy fuck by choosing to blow them away rather than fitting on a bag and sucking them up. If I had my way, I'd round up every guy using a leaf blower unnecessarily blowing leaves onto someone else's property or onto the street. And then I'd proceed to stick it up their arses, reverse the engine, and then switch it back on. And yes. Guys, not gals. Because it is only guys who seem to like making an excessive and unnecessary amount of noise and then feel empowered by toting a device that resembles a bazooka or a flamethrower. Go figure.

The other real pet peeve, no pun intended, I have is that of barking dogs in the neighbourhood. One of our nearby neighbours has a dog that *will not* stop barking. It's one of those nervous little terrier type dogs. The sad thing, it's not the fault of the dog, but of the neighbour who's never ever home. Or seemingly so. I have not a shadow of doubt that those dogs that bark incessantly are those dogs which are ignored and not played with. Unfortunately, there are so many dog owners out there who either don't care about their dogs barking all day, or those who buy a dog for Christmas and then kind of forget about them. I would consider barking dogs an environmental nuisance, but oddly, so many people seem to accept it, and yet, if you launch the occasional firecracker during festive times, you'll likely receive a barrage of complaints from crusty dog owners that you're freaking out

their dogs. Oh! My precious dogs! But seriously, well-trained *and* well-loved dogs are highly resilient creatures which are great for many families. They are not prone to having mental breakdowns.

Ultimately, for those living in suburbia, we adapt to a variety of often annoying noises. The bass thumping from some hoon's car sound system while they drive by your house. The occasional house party that goes on a little later than planned, although, it must be said that the courteous neighbour usually sends a little note to their neighbour's mailboxes alerting them to the planned event. Overhead helicopters and planes. Delivery trucks and service vehicles. All these things one can't really avoid. However, at least I don't have some prick using a leaf blower each morning in my neighbourhood!