

Sounds of summer and silence

by BROCK WEIR

Nails on a chalkboard. The sound of an animal in pain. The voice of someone with whom you don't have a particularly warm relationship. All of us have certain sounds in our lives that we would rather not hear again, whether the very tone of them makes the hair on the back of your neck stand on end, or triggers a swell of emotion you'd prefer not to feel.

Most of us avoid them wherever we can. If we can't, and know that there's a good chance of catching that audible trigger somewhere on the wind, we brace ourselves as best we can.

Personally, I try to avoid them wherever I can. But, of course, that's not always possible.

In a previous job, one such audible trigger was the voice of a co-worker who I dealt with mostly over the phone, only having in-person dealings occasionally.

She was a lovely woman, as far as I know, but there was just a certain something about her voice, an element I've never been able to put my finger on despite nearly two decades of hindsight working in my favour, that set my teeth on edge.

More than that, no matter how pleasant our dealings may have appeared if a court stenographer was nearby providing a running written transcript, it was a voice that simply left me feeling depleted after every conversation and I'd need to take at least 15 minutes out of my day to decompress and move on with the rest of the tasks at hand.

Some sounds that make me grit my teeth have thankfully largely come and gone, but a few remain as potent as ever.

I still can't stand to be in the same room as someone filing their nails with an emery board, for example. The sound of the grit racing against the grain on the nail is one that not only makes those aforementioned hairs stand up and take notice, but leave my eyes darting to locate the nearest exit, just in case.

The sound of someone winding a jack-in-the-box? I don't really care whether the monkey or the weasel comes out on top in their race around that mulberry bush. No, thank you.

How about June bugs?

In the early days of my career before finding some semblance of work-life balance, I would sometimes pull near-all-nighters to get what needed to be done complete before the weekend. Sitting at my desk in the wee hours of the morning with only the mild buzz of the fluorescent light in my home office keeping me company ? along with the ratta-tat-tat of those brown beetles beating up against the glass of my window, drawn to light.

While I have no quarrel with the June bugs themselves, I always found the slightly hollow sound of that distinct ratta-tat-tat against the pane just a little bit unnerving ? and, if one happened to have the misfortune of finding one unexpectedly underfoot, so much the worse.

But there's truth in the adage of not knowing what you have until it's gone.

While I am sure this is not the case for everybody ? depending, of course, on where you happen to live, the amount of light coming out through your windows at night, or the environmental conditions on your property ? I realized the other day that this was the first summer in as long as I can remember where I didn't once hear that ratta-tat-tat against the window.

I might be alone in this, but its absence, as much as I bemoaned it when it was a near-constant in summers past, is almost as unsettling as the ratta-tat-tat that was part and parcel of their busy season.

It's recent absence ? or, perhaps, rather, my own antennae finally picking up on their absence ? made me sit up and think about what else we might be missing, or losing, as the world around us changes.

I was lucky enough to grow up on a home that had a couple of acres to explore. The soundtrack to my summer days, if I was feeling especially outdoorsy, was a near endless playlist of birdsong, the buzzing of bees, and the general hum of other critters adding to the symphony. I write this not out of any misplaced nostalgia, but simply to say that whether I am walking through my current neighbourhood or revisiting some of my old stomping grounds, what was once a rich natural orchestra has dwindled to minimalist Muzak.

Of course, outside of our insect cousins, whether they're part of a creepy-crawly equivalent of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir or closer to the one-man-band offered by Dick Van Dyke at the start of Mary Poppins, there are other benchmarks that we subconsciously use to mark the change of seasons.

Not too long ago, there was a general window in time where it was safe to pack away your winter woollies and bring out some of your lighter gear for the spring and summer. Now, doing that is simply a matter of tempting fate.

Given the volatility of the weather, it's getting harder and harder to leave the house with a safe outfit choice that will get you through the whole day. In fact, I've now taken to keeping a couple of changes of clothes in the office, along with an ?emergency? pair of boots, just in case any beachy weather in the morning gives way to wind and hail a few hours later.

Heck, even if you're in the comfort of your own home and have no intention of going out for the day, you only have to look at the microburst that hit northwest Aurora a couple of months ago, leaving a trail of destruction behind it, as just one example on how so much can turn on a dime ? and how off-guard we can all be caught.

Whether it is the volatility in our weather or the once-cacophonous medley of our insect brethren winding down to a Billie Eilish-like whisper, it's getting harder and harder to ignore ? and deny ? the rapid environmental changes happening in the world around us.

By the same token, it's also getting harder and harder to allocate patience for those who choose bury their heads in the sand, and either pretend it's not happening, refuse to look at the big picture, or, worse, resign themselves to the idea that there is nothing we can do here at home because other far-flung populations and governments are doing far more to exacerbate the problem.

While I'd still be hard-pressed to be in the same room as someone filing their nails with reckless abandon, take a stress-free phone call from a past-co-worker, or show any kind of interest waiting for the top to fly off a jack-in-the-box, I have a new appreciation for that hollow ratta-tat-tat against the window.

Is it something I'd seek out? Probably not, but if they came tapping again, I'd welcome them with open arms (not open windows) and hope some other signs of natural healing aren't too far behind.