

From the Kitchen

11 April 2012



I am assaulted by noise everywhere – auditory and visual. It seems that everyone is clamouring for my attention. I am exhorted to buy and attend and save and sign and join. Almost everywhere I go and whatever I'm doing, there are people and their products trying to distract me.

In newspapers, magazines, journals and on web sites I have to navigate through acres of announcements and advertisements to read the material I'm interested in. I have trained my brain to ignore the extraneous, but the filtering still uses up energy.

The deliberate ignoring of distractions interests me. As a student, living with my parents, I found it easier to ignore whatever they had playing on the TV when I was sitting at the table in the same room, than when I was at the far end of the house in my bedroom and the TV provided a barely-audible backdrop. From my bedroom I found myself straining to pick out meaning.

I find the, to me, visually superfluous easier to ignore than the auditory. This is probably because our eyes have greater acuity in the centre than on the periphery and we can move our eyes around and focus them at different distances. Ears are different. All sound comes in through the same narrow channels and it is our brain that has to pick out the important. I find dialogue in films and commentary in documentaries (TV and radio) sometimes difficult to follow if overlaid with music. Can I train my brain to effectively filter out those sounds I want to ignore? When flying, my noise-cancelling ear-buds do a good job at just that.

The call for attention also comes from people: at home, at work and out in public. With family we usually have tacit agreements that allow us to call each other into action for minor and major things. At work such agreements may be anything but tacit, yet we can be called into action by others to assist with things we have no primary responsibility for and thus be distracted from what we are really there for.

As with TV, radio and music players, something can be a welcome sound or distracting noise. Another person's attention on their request for our attention can be welcome or distracting – it depends on our intention at the time.

How we deal with clamour and distractions depends on how we manage boundaries. We all have boundaries, but we often don't manage them well; we can easily allow others to define them for us and control them to their own advantage. Negotiating our way through the clamour requires us to define our boundaries clearly and to be willing to enforce them. The enforcement is, for many people, compromised by their need for recognition and acceptance by others – saying 'no' to a request could lead to rejection, to being ostracised and even to being disliked.

It boils down to becoming clear about what we want, what we want to achieve, and coming to a point where we do not need to define ourselves by how others see us.

It is remarkable how much we allow our boundaries to be pushed and pulled. Some of this flexibility is necessary to allow social interaction and cohesion; much of it does *not* serve us.

As with so much in modern life, we are manipulated by commercial enterprises vying for our attention. We have allowed businesses to impinge on our lives more and more; those barriers that were established to rein in corporate excess have been allowed to expand against such personal barriers as we may have set up.

There used to be more robust rules about the ‘noise’ that businesses could produce, but those rules seem to be progressively watered down in the interest of the businesses. This applies to the clamour on TV and radio, on billboards and on the burgeoning electronic roadside signs proclaiming special offers, openings, events and imminent road closures. Oh, I nearly missed that last one warning of a road hazard ahead – too much extraneous information.

When driving. Our brains have to pick out the speed limit signs, the road hazard signs, the school zone signs and the traffic lights from among the cacophony of other signs and advertisements and coloured flashing lights in the car dealerships and adverts on the sides and backs of trams and buses and the red-and-blue flashing lights in my mirror. Damn! What did I miss? The one-way sign? But officer, I’m only going one way.

The road through the day is far from straight and narrow and with all the devils trying to entice us to divert off it onto more treacherous paths, it’s a wonder we make it to bed-time still sane. Some people don’t.