

The Fearless Spectator

Charles McCabe

Back to Time, Silence . . .

IT'S NICE to talk to somebody who agrees with you, and even reinforces your case. Late last year I wrote a piece about how the incessant hammering of the media was maybe beating our minds to death, and stilling our spirit to the point where we were becoming incapable of moral outrage. The other day I got some interesting feedback from Matt Herron, of Palo Alto.

"Two years ago," Matt Herron said, "I took my family out from under the word barrage and we all got on a 31-foot sailboat and went to West Africa. To my surprise a lot of people seemed intrigued by this gesture and when the writers and the interviewers appeared at dockside on departure day to find out, 'Why are you going?' I found myself saying (also to my surprise) that we were leaving to escape television.



"It seemed a superficial remark at the time and I was horrified and a little defensive to find it blown up to become the lead in numerous articles about our voyage. After all, there were lots of other equally valid if not better reasons for leaving.

"But my negative reply has stood the test of time. For 18 months no glowing screen intruded on our lives. My 13-year-old son who never read — even to peruse the directions for the complicated machines he likes to construct — turned at last to books. The hundred or so volumes in our ship's library developed thumb marks — everything from Animal Farm to Captains Hornblower and Nemo to Amazing Komix. I don't know how many books he devoured but their number is well over a hundred. And my 11-year old daughter read her way into the two hundreds.

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"BEST OF ALL, time and silence crept back into our lives. There was time to sit silently in the cockpit at night and gaze at the stars. There was time and space to reintroduce the flow of conversation, to look at the sea and SEE what was there.

"We're back now, back swimming in the word bath, and while some things are clearer, some are more puzzling. After some delay a television set crept back into our living room. I was struck by the stridency of the 'commercial messages.' I don't believe the tube is on nearly as much as it used to be, but a lot of crassness and jangle flow through that conduit to pollute the peacefulness of our home.

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"I GUESS the thing that puzzled me most, however, was last year's election. I just couldn't believe that the vast mass of the American people could absorb and understand such entertainment events as Watergate and ITT (and the polls indicate they did indeed absorb and understand) without rising up in wrathful and moral indignation to throw the rotters out of office. But they didn't rise up.

"I was wrong, dreadfully wrong, and in reflecting I finally realized that only a general anesthetizing of the country's moral nerve could account for it. I tended at first to ascribe it all to the deadening effect of the war. We've absorbed so many My Lais that we can now accept with equal indifference the outrageous violence of a film like 'The Godfather' or the political chicanery of a man like Nixon.

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"BUT WHILE the war has had a profound effect on our consciousness, I think I was more nearly wrong and you more nearly right on the root causes of the paralysis. It's the incessant mindless blather that has finally worn us down, chipped away at our indignation until nothing seems important anymore, so that we can turn over the priceless resources of our nation to a gang of thieves and murderers without even a shrug.

" . . . I really don't know an escape route. When I take my evening walk and see that eerie electronic blue light glowing without exception in the living room of every house I pass, I begin to fear for the mind of America with a chill fear that won't go away. I should go back to sea."