

Tinnitus Story

by John Olson

I went to see an audiologist this afternoon. He specialized in tinnitus. Good news for me. I've been plagued with tinnitus for 55 years. It started the morning after a catastrophic experience with LSD. It was there when I awoke in a padded room in a hospital in San José, California. It added to the feeling of anxiety and insecurity I was feeling after seeing everything I thought was real dissolve like a cube of sugar in a cup of scalding hot tea.

The audiologist entered the waiting room and invited Oriana and I into his office. He was a large man, chiefly in girth. He reminded me of the comic Louie Anderson who had passed away last January, just a few days before my brother died. He had a genteel, easy-going manner and I felt comfortable around him. He asked a few routine questions concerning my hearing, which Oriana helped corroborate, and the state and history of my tinnitus. After the questions and some further brief discussion he led me down the hall into a small room upholstered with soundproofing foam. The foam was contoured in egg-shaped indentations and bulges and was pleasing to look at. I thought of Proust and his efforts at mitigating the noises of Paris with sound-proofing cork. I told the doctor I'd long dreamed of having such a room.

I was given a set of earphones and the doctor seated himself at a desk in an adjoining room. I could see him through a small glass window. He provided me with a series of sounds, beeps and buzzes and pulses and signals and tones to which I would respond with a 'yes' or a 'no' or a raise of my hand. One exercise consisted of repeating short sentences as background noises slowly increased. I was worried more about remembering the sentence than hearing the sentence. If I didn't hear the sentence I didn't have to do anything but if I heard the sentence I had to repeat it. When we finished, we returned to his office where he showed me a line graph demonstrating that I did, indeed, have significant hearing loss.

The good news was that yes, a prescription hearing aid would indeed mitigate my tinnitus. He explained how that works: in its attempt to restore the missing input, the auditory neurons in the brain become hyperactive and misfire. This makes the brain become a bit hyperactive. Nerve cells in the dorsal cochlear nucleus go wild with activity. This mayhem of electrical signals may be misinterpreted as a sound, a hiss or whistle or hum. Maybe even music. Since hearing aids restore some of the stimulation that the brain has been missing, they may help reduce the tinnitus. I try to imagine the silence, a silence I've been imagining for 55 years, trying to remember what it sounded like, what it felt like. It was the closest I've been to a solution in many ringing jingling hissing humming years. I wanted badly to know what a quiet head would be like before I die. My head will be quiet when I die. But I won't be there to hear it.

I was hoping the doctor might have something on hand to let me see if my tinnitus responded, but he didn't. He went over several of the more helpful products. I was wearing a mask (medical offices still insist on them) so he didn't see the expression of shock on my face when he gave the cost of these items as \$5,000 to \$7,000 dollars. Oriana was similarly stunned. On the way home down dark, depressing Aurora — boarded up motels, used car lots, massage parlors, graffitied walls, sex workers, deserted strip malls - I told Oriana this world isn't for us. It's for the rich.

Hearing aids are gold. More than gold. More like diamond. A modern, RIC BTE (receiver in the canal, behind the ear) hearing aid weighs in at about 2 grams. It may wholesale for \$500 and resale for \$2,500. On a per-ounce basis, that's a staggering \$7,200 at wholesale and resale for \$2,500, and \$36,000 at resale. For comparison, gold is currently trading around \$1,600 an ounce. In other words, hearing aids cost twenty times their weight in gold.

They say silence is gold. I'd say it's worth more than that. It's hard to find silence in this world. When silence is denied due to a ringing in the head you have to look for it elsewhere. In the nails of an old mailbox. In the tread of a tractor that passed by yesterday. In

a poem. In the chill air under a dock. Silence becomes something imagined. Behind the ringing there's a silence. If you could hear it it wouldn't be silence. It would be ringing. Ringing isn't silence. Ringing is what makes silence silent. Ringing is the sound of silence. It isn't silence. It's the shadow of silence.

