

QUIET PEOPLE In a NOISY WORLD



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Description and Samples

In a series of short essays, *Quiet People in a Noisy World* chronicles our family's adventures in rural living as caretakers of a hay and cattle ranch in the Blue Mountains of northeastern Oregon, then as caretakers of the water inlets and the watershed for the city of Bend, Oregon, then as caretakers of a Girl Scout ranch in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado.

We observed wildlife in natural habitat and gardened in adverse climates. We lived part of the time without electricity or plumbing, saw the changes of seasons in mountain forests and meadows, and strove toward values higher than merely material values. It was a fulfilling existence for all four of us. *Quiet People in a Noisy World* shows that there still is rewarding existence outside of cities and outside the madly material consumer culture.

Fifty-four of the seventy-two essays included in *Quiet People in a Noisy World* have been published in *Back Home*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Denver Post*, *The Doula*, *Home Educator's Family Times*, *Men's Fitness*, *Northwest*, *Summit*, and *The Sun*, a magazine of ideas.

Below, I have included four essays from the book as a sample. *Quiet People in a Noisy World* is 307 pages long in six by nine format.

Quiet People in a Noisy World

Book One

In the Beginning

Soaking Wet in the Sierras

Laura and I lived in Toadtown then, in the foothills of the Sierras, west of the Sacramento Valley, before we had children, a car, or many material possessions. We did own an aluminum frame, nylon backpack that carried groceries and laundry well.

Now, because of dangerous experiences, I won't hitchhike. Then, however, we did hitchhike, because it was the only way we had to travel distances beyond what we could walk. Early that day, we hitched a ride down the mountain, visited friends, bought essential groceries, and laundered at the laundromat. When we headed back up the road, dusk descended, hastened by heavy clouds gathered close against the mountain.

With our thumbs in the air, we hiked about three miles of a necessary ten, and rain began to pour down. We didn't own rain clothes, but the rain was bearably warm, and we kept walking. Our clothes soon soaked through. Water ran off our hair, noses, and fingertips and into our shoes. Laura said, "Why won't anyone give us a ride?"

"We're soaking wet. We would get their upholstery wet. Besides that, anyone who would walk in a downpour like this has to be crazy, and people shouldn't pick up crazy hitchhikers."

The rain began to erode Laura's spirit. I realized I could easily become discouraged. Then we would be two wet, discouraged walkers with a long way to go in a rainstorm. I sang, songs I already knew, and songs I never heard before but pulled out of the dark rainstorm around us. I sang upbeat, even crazy songs. I danced. I blessed the rain and praised the clouds. I found reservoirs of energy that fired me with warm

enthusiasm.

Laura's beginning descent of spirit stopped, then reversed. She kept walking. She cheered up. She laughed and realized good still surrounded us. I couldn't think of anything I'd rather do than walk with a heavy pack on my back, Laura by my side, singing in pouring rain as cars sped by, spraying water from their tires and soaking us more, if we could be more soaked.

Laura said, "All those people are in their warm, dry cars, with the windows rolled up."

"I know. Think of what they're missing. All the great outdoors. This wonderful rain. What do they have? A tiny, isolated little place, rolling along too fast, cut off from everything real. They're missing out on this once-in-a-lifetime experience. Think of how boring their lives must be."

Years later, tonight in fact, Laura told me I rekindled her energy and helped her appreciate the rain, the clouds above us, the water running off us, and the earth running with water under our feet, but she wondered if I was crazier than she had ever realized and if the dark, wet night might never end.

I thought her descent into discouragement might begin again, and I said, "We'll get home in good shape, in good time, and we'll look back on our rainstorm hike with appreciation." The time had come, in her book, for that promise to develop.

A pickup passed us, and the brake lights came on. The pickup stopped on the shoulder of the road. A voice floated through the dark rain, "Jon, Laura, is that you?" and since it was us, and the driver was Pike and his passenger was Shirley, and they were our neighbors in Toadtown, we ran, put the pack in the back and crowded in front with them, because they said they didn't mind if we were wet. They delivered us right

to our front door.

We built a roaring fire in the stove. We discovered the backpack was, as advertised, waterproof, and while our clothes weren't, our skin was, and our hair soon dried. We had carried home freshly laundered clothing, and we put some of it on after we hung what we had been wearing to dry.

I peeled and sliced apples while Laura made a pie crust, and the odor of baking apples and cinnamon soon filled the small cabin, already full of the sound of rain drumming hard on the tin roof and the sound of Laura singing of the joy of rainstorms and the joy of living.

Zinnias for Laura and Juniper

When we were two and one just beginning to expand Laura's waist, Laura stood by the front steps in sunshine. She said, "I'd like to have a flower garden right here. I want to grow zinnias for the birth. Will you get the ground ready for me and get me some seeds?"

I said, "I don't think there's enough sun here. It needs to be farther from the house, so the house doesn't shade it."

"It gets the sun all morning. It'll work."

I worked manure and dolomite into the ground. I told Laura, "Water it heavily. I'll work it again in a few days, and you can plant it."

I brought home a book, and we read and exercised together from the book. The fourth day, Laura said, "I don't want to do it this way. A lot of this book is written to overcome fear, because fear makes birth more difficult. But, Jon, I have no fear. It isn't necessary for me to overcome fear, because I know God takes care of me. This child is part of God's plan, so there doesn't need to be any fear, and there can't be pain or problems."

"Oh. Okay. But what about the exercises? Shouldn't you get muscles built up for the hard work ahead?"

"I should be strong and in good physical condition, but if I rehearse it too much and exercise specifically for the birth, I'm taking the plan into my own hands and not trusting God to take care of me and this baby and this birth. I trust God to provide me with the knowledge and the strength and the stamina He gives woman for birth. I can't do it part one way and part

another.”

I read the book through that night. Laura was right; a lot of it had been written to overcome an expectant mother’s fear. Some of it meant to get the husband involved, and I was already involved without reservation. Still, I studied the book and understood why shallow, fast breathing worked best at times, and deeper breathing worked best at other times. I understood how to avoid working too hard at the wrong time, and I remembered everything I thought might be useful information.

I worked for a nearby farmer. I drove home late afternoons. Wednesday evening, late in September, when I came out of the bathroom after showering, Laura said, “This baby is getting ready. I’ve had three contractions.”

I threw the towel on the bed and started dressing. Laura laughed and said, “I think there’s plenty of time. They’re a long way apart and not very hard yet. But I’m going to call Chas and Loretta.”

I cleaned house and washed dishes. I picked large, beautiful zinnias of several colors from Laura’s garden by the front step and I brought them in and put them in a vase. Chas and Loretta got there at nine that evening. I arranged pillows behind Laura to support her. She panted and strained and pushed, sweating, skin flushed red. She didn’t make much noise. She said, “This is awkward. I can’t push very well in this position.” I crouched beside her and picked her up and held her.

I said, “You’re going to have to make some noise. Quit thinking about the neighbors. They’ll live through this in good shape. Getting this baby born

takes first priority.” I led her, “Come on. Do it like this,” and I panted and took long, deep breaths and hollered out loud, as if I worked the hardest work in existence, and Laura followed my lead. She grunted with the work and hollered with exertion.

A contraction of her uterus started again. She breathed long and deep. She raised her voice from deep grunting to a shout, exultation and the beginning of pain from extreme effort, bordering on tearing muscles and ligaments. “Ease up, relax, catch up on breathing. Rest for a minute.” She panted. Loretta wiped away Laura’s sweat with a damp towel. I said, “Don’t push yet. Pant. Let your muscles get started. Wait. Now breath deep and push hard.”

Laura breathed, stretched back to loosen muscles and shifted position. I moved to accommodate her, holding her in the curve of my arms. Laura straightened and pushed with strength and determination, and her voice filled the small apartment.

Loretta said, “The baby is stretched out straight now. The baby is doing some hard work, too. Come on everybody, some more hard work now.”

Chas supported the perineum. Laura hollered and pushed hard, and the baby emerged to the shoulders, face down, and then rotated so she faced up. She blinked her eyes open, found my face, and focused on my eyes. I thought my smile might crack my face.

I said, “Let’s do it again.” Laura pushed, and the baby reached for the world and emerged in one long, smooth motion. Chas caught her and lifted her up and laid her face down on Laura’s abdomen. The baby raised her head and studied her mother’s face.

Laura talked quietly to her. She said, "You're beautiful. You're really beautiful. We've really looked forward to this moment." Then the baby looked at everyone there, one person at a time. Loretta and Chas patted her with towels to dry her, and we tied and cut the umbilical cord.

Loretta said, "She's really a big baby. I haven't seen newly-born babies raise their heads and look around like that. Baby, you're strong and big. Laura, now we need to get the placenta out. There's still work to do."

I held Juniper and talked to her. She studied me, and I studied her. It didn't matter much what I said. I told her everything that came into my mind. I said she would grow up, and maybe some day she would give birth to a child, and it would be very like this room the night of her birth, with people gathered, helping a child be born.

Loretta laughed and said, "She's only about fifteen minutes old. She'll have a few years to think about that yet."

Chas started cleaning up. Laura discharged the placenta. She said, "Give her to me," and I did. Laura held Juniper and talked to her.

We drank orange juice and put everything in order and talked with each other and with the baby. Chas and Loretta left at four a.m. Chas said, "The only thing I don't like about these parties of yours is they last so late."

Laura slept after they left. Juniper lay on Laura's abdomen and chest, also asleep. I put a blanket over them. I sat for a while and looked at them. I took the placenta out behind the garage at dawn and buried it.

The next spring, I would plant squash there, and the bushes would grow lush and deep green and bear many yellow crooknecks all summer.

Some of the people who came to see Laura and Juniper said the zinnias by the front steps and in the vase on the dining room table were the largest and most perfectly formed zinnias they'd ever seen. The zinnias I had picked for the birth lasted in the vase for more than three weeks, and the flowers still growing by the steps put on blossoms for more than a month.

Laura said the zinnias were a gift from God for the birth, for her and the baby. Laura was radiant, as if a light glowed from her for the next several weeks, that never did completely fade.

Bat and Seek

Since our children were quite small, we have lived rurally, first as caretakers of the ranch in Whitney Valley, then as caretakers, up on a mountain, of the water inlets for Bend. Because we have lived so far from schools, our children have been home-schooled. We have all had plenty of physical activity, just living, so we've never had sports in our school.

Juniper is thirteen now. She still doesn't lack exercise. She hikes the trails on this mountain with the family, with Amanda, by herself. My knee caused me pain recently, and Juniper took care of fire watch through the watershed for me. She packed the radio and her lunch, and she hiked up to the concrete diversion dam and read the water level marker. She hiked to all the high points in the watershed and looked for smoke. By the time she got back to the house, she had hiked eight to twelve miles through a hot summer day.

But she wants to learn sports so she can participate with other people when the opportunity arises. Amanda is eleven. She isn't as interested in sports, but she's interested enough to be a third member of a team. We haven't a t.v., to which I could turn and say, "See how those guys throw the ball? Watch them a while and see how they do it." Juniper and Amanda have never seen sports.

Juniper asked me, "Can you teach me what you do know about baseball?"

"Sure."

We bat, catch, throw. We don't run bases. We

don't have places for bases. The front lawn gives us our only level area. On the batter's close right stands a stone wall, two and a half feet tall. The ridge rises steeply above that wall. Sprinklers irrigate the slope above the rock wall, and the sprinkled ground grows lush with grass and clover, though deer keep the clover eaten down. A ball smacked up the hillside is easy to field, if someone on the lawn keeps an eye on where it went and guides the hillside climber to it.

The lawn lies in front of the batter, seventy feet long and twenty-five feet wide. The driveway is to the left of the lawn, bordered on its left by a low rock wall, and left of that, a steep drop into the ravine. Conifers, alders, willows, gooseberries, currants, thistles, nettles, and grass choke the ravine. The ravine swallows our ball. We hope the rock wall will stop what the fielder misses, but it often doesn't, and the search is on.

We tried to teach our dog to find the ball. Amanda says, "He finds it all the time, but he doesn't say anything about it. He doesn't see why it should be any more exciting than ground squirrel possibilities or the scents deer leave."

Down the driveway, which cuts across the head of the ravine, grows a bush with tiny, dark purple fruits. When Juniper slugs the ball past me, past Amanda, down the driveway, I say, "Let's all go get it. I want to show you something."

They are cautious, as we have taught them to be. "Are you sure it's a currant bush?"

"Yes. And this is my third day of eating them, and I feel fine." I grab my stomach and fall on the ground and writhe, but Juniper and Amanda aren't much impressed by my acting, and I get back up. We strip the

bush and eat the sweet fruit. We find the ball, and we climb out of the ravine to our practice area.

Juniper smacked the ball into the ravine. We looked for quite a while. We looked again the next morning. Nothing. When we went to town, we bought another ball. A dollar seventy-nine. It isn't a real softball, but it will do for practice. We come up with ideas. Amanda said, "We could put a beeper in the ball. Then we could follow the sound."

I said, "I don't think we could put that together just now. I think we just need a lot more practice at stopping the ball before it goes over the wall."

Juniper said, "Well, we don't have much time to practice, because we're always down in the brush looking for the ball."

I said, "We could quit trying."

Juniper said, "No. I like it. It's more exciting this way than just playing ball. You never know if you're going to find the ball or not. You don't know if you're going to get rubbed by nettles, or if you're going to grab one of the bushes with thorns."

Amanda said, "It's a good thing there aren't any poisonous snakes around here."

I said, "My thought exactly. Last time I reached down to move the brush around so I could see under it, I ran my face into the top of a small spruce tree hidden in thick growth. It gave me excruciating pain across my eyelid, the corner of my eye, and my cheek, briefly. Those needles are so sharp, and the pitchy exudation adds intensity to the pain. Now that the pain's behind me, I wouldn't choose to not have had that experience. It's part of the adventure."

Amanda smacks the ball. She gets better and

better at catching. More and more often, she throws accurately and powerfully.

Juniper asked me to teach her to throw overhand. I threw in slow motion, with exaggerated movements, to communicate what the motion is. "Throwing right handed, lean far back to your right, with your arm extended. Bring the ball in your hand in an arc from that low reach, up over your head and down, and release the ball about here, with your upper torso also moving through the arc with the ball, so you throw with your whole body."

She moves deliberately, with exaggerated motions, exactly as I have shown her. She arcs back and forth a dozen times without releasing the ball. She understands the arc and seeks its effective form. When she powers all the way through the arc and releases the ball, it steams through clear mountain air, just where she meant to put it.

Similarly, Amanda looks almost like she caricatures taking a batting stance. She goes through each step, places each finger, hand, wrist, shoulder, foot, individually, and when she's set, wham. Often. We're still pitching easy.

Juniper said it, when the ball disappeared down into the ravine again, and the three of us pawed and peered amongst trees, shrubs, wildflowers, nettles, and grasses. She said, "This isn't baseball we're playing. It's bat and seek."

"A dollar seventy-nine," I said. A dollar seventy-nine is something some-one has to say when the ball begins to seem unfindable. It renews determination in the searchers.

I teach them baseball. We all learn that

incorporating distractions and interruptions into the game bears good fruit. It expands into adventures I wouldn't have thought were included in baseball. Excuse me. I mean bat and seek.

Book Four
Colorado
Magic Sky Ranch
Family Cohesion on the Ranch

When Juniper reached the age when she would have started school, we took care of a remote ranch in northeastern Oregon. Getting to school on the rambling rural bus, being in school all day, and then getting home would have taken twelve hours. We weren't willing to commit her to that long a day.

We had already started her education ourselves. When she was six, Laura helped her learn to read, and Juniper launched into an avid reading career that has rarely slowed down since. Amanda, four then, listened in on the reading lessons and learned enough to read simple books. She expressed an intense desire to gain access to more difficult books. I worked with her, in between and during ranch work and garden work. Within a year, she could read almost anything she was interested in reading, and she had made a good start at writing.

Juniper and Amanda are sixteen and fourteen now. Tests required of home schoolers by the state show our approach to education has been academically successful. It has also helped build a firm foundation for a cohesive family. Our interests center around the home, the family, and the creative interests each of us pursues. We have no television. We pursue enough interests, writing (all of us), drawing and painting (some of us), music (all of us), reading (all of us), a deep and active interest in the outdoors and wildlife (all of us), that we never have time for television.

My jobs have not been full time, partly because I was severely injured in a highway accident, and it was many years before I recovered enough to work anywhere near full time.

When the owner of the ranch we took care of in northeastern Oregon died, the crew was laid off. We found a part time job caretaking the inlets of a water system for a central Oregon city. It was ideal. We were able to continue our home schooling and to have time together. I was able to complete a book about our ranch experience. After a year and a half at that job, we were offered a job as site managers of a Girl Scout ranch high in Colorado's Rocky Mountains. During our long time of working at jobs with low wages, more and more needs had come up that we had not been able to meet. We were ready for a full time job. I was ready physically, and we moved into the job with enthusiasm.

Our only transportation, a pickup, no longer comfortably contained the four of us, and it was more and more expensive to maintain. We sold the pickup and bought two older cars. We arranged for Juniper to continue with violin lessons in our new area. We helped Amanda buy a piano and get started on lessons. We caught up on buying clothing and other essentials.

We worked that job for twenty-one months. My working hours often far exceeded the scheduled forty per week winter and forty-eight summer. Laura worked twenty hours per week in the winter and ten in the summer. The higher wage was convenient and enjoyable, but we saw that the job cost us irretrievable time together and experiences that couldn't be replaced, once missed.

Our supervisor, aware of our interests and

priorities, offered us a position taking care of another ranch. We took the job and made the move, even though it cut our cash income to a third of what it had been, because it cut our hours to less than half of what they had been. We have been living and working here for seven months now. None of us regrets the change. Amanda said, "I feel like I have my parents back." Juniper agreed.

Our home education is going very well. I've gone fishing with Juniper. We have all worked together in the garden. Some afternoons, Amanda and Juniper and I get into the car, and Juniper drives, practicing for her driver's test. Amanda and I hiked up the ranch and found a dense area of wild columbines. Soon after, we took Laura up to show her the flowers.

We have time for leisurely mornings, when all of us work together to prepare breakfast, clean up afterward, and linger to talk about what we've dreamed or what we're thinking about. We sit around the table after dinner and talk. Juniper or Amanda reads to Laura as she works in the kitchen or Laura reads to them as they work.

Juniper, Amanda, and I take a volleyball out in the driveway and hit it back and forth, learning. Next time they go to a gathering of teens at the local church, when all play volleyball, they won't feel odd person out from no experience with the sport. Amanda and I work together with guitars. She's learning to play the instrument, and we sing together. We talk about going, taking Juniper with her violin, and Laura with her voice and singing in the old part of town in Fort Collins, with cases open on the sidewalk, for coins. We are saying it lightly, and yet it is an experience we would like to try,

and not just for the possible coins.

Juniper's and Amanda's creative efforts receive audience in the family, when they want them to, and they didn't, much, when we worked full time. Laura has begun to work on a long held ambition, writing, and has sold two essays since we moved. I've been able to continue writing essays and to sell some of them. I've organized and sent out a book of my short fiction. I've revised the book about our northeastern Oregon experience, and I've begun two other books. In shorter words, we are usually able to give the family and the individuals in the family priority over the need to make money.

Is our existence ideal? No. Sometimes financial pressure can be intense. When we decided to make the move, I had been selling enough writing regularly that we thought we could count on at least two hundred and fifty dollars a month additional income from writing. My average went up for a while after we moved. Then the car we use (the other is inactive, without insurance) suffered a series of mechanical problems that cost us a thousand dollars in less than two months. The washing machine quit. A newspaper that had been a dependable source of income had staff changes, and my publications there dwindled, which meant our income dwindled.

But we have what we really need. A house, with utilities paid, is furnished with the job. Our income takes care of food needs, music lessons, and other essentials.

We haven't given our daughters a rich environment in material terms. Most of our clothing is from second hand stores, and we are pleased with that.

None of us is caught up in style. Amanda likes pretty dresses, but she would rather have them cost four dollars from a second hand store than sixty dollars new, because she knows the difference in price can serve other needs better, including a small contribution to an effective environmental organization or a donation for people who need food.

When I think of enriching children's environment, I don't think of material enrichment. I think of enriching their environment with love, with the parents' support, teaching, revering the children and being there to help with their needs.

We haven't been able to give our children this and a wealth of material goods, so we chose this. Do we ever regret our choice? Was it too much of a sacrifice?

No. Far from it. We love our children, and love becomes the environment. We, children and adults, love and grow in love. We teach our children, and we learn so much ourselves, from what we must learn to teach, from what our children learn on their own and then teach us. When we help our children get out into the mountains to experience the wildlife, the flowers, the forests, the freedom of movement, we also have the experiences, and we experience the joy of having them together. Our experience together increases the depth of our experience and the openness with which we receive. There is no guide as effective as a child for bringing one into experience with openness.

Sacrifice? Far from it. It is not always the easiest way to live, but it is the most richly rewarding.