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On Temporarily Regaining a Measure of Well-Being

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Abstract

This paper is an exploration of the experience of re-gaining a measure of well-being. New hearing aids helped me recognize and elaborate anew aspects of the art of interpretation and how it relies on noticing the unnoticed. Gadamer's *The Enigma of Health* also provides hints as to the troubles with the idea of ecological well-being being unnoticeable.

Keywords

Hermeneutics, health, hearing-loss

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My grandson and I barefoot over them swept up on the deck. We'd be swept up in the crunch and toss and giggle. Ah, these leaves' sounds once again live up to their deep familiar smell. I can smell them more in this first fall of good ears in years. With the great aid, too, of [his] focussed abandon. Autumn. Inbreath. I can hear its scents. (Jardine, 2023)

I know only too well how illness can make us insistently aware of our bodily nature by creating a disturbance in something which normally, in its very freedom from disturbance, almost completely escapes our attention. Here it is a matter of the methodological primacy of illness over health. But of course, it is the state of being healthy which possesses ontological primacy, that natural condition of life which we term well-being, in so far as we register it at all. But what is well-being if it is not precisely this condition of not noticing, of being unhindered, of being ready for and open to everything? (Gadamer, 1996, p. 73)

This second passage is from Hans-Georg Gadamer's *The Enigma of Health* and, as per his example, I looked up the etymology of this word "enigma," a word easily used but full, as with all words, of secrets. "From Latin *aenigma*, 'riddle,' from Greek *ainigma*, 'a dark saying,' from *ainissesthai*, 'speak obscurely. . .', from *ainos*, 'tale, story, proverb'" (*Online Etymological Dictionary*, under **enigma** [n.]). Gadamer warned that such etymologies "are not proofs" (1989, p. 103), but they can help loosen up things that have become, as Edmund Husserl (one among many of Gadamer's teachers) described it "implications of meaning which are closed off through

sedimentation or traditionalization” (1970, p. 52) and “the sediments of passively accumulated experiential residues, analogies, etc.” (p. 303).

Thus, the core of interpretation to puzzle over such obviousnesses, things taken for granted, things that go without saying -- hidden, forgotten, unspeakable, commonplace, and so on, such that, when you try to write about it, words struggle and trip, because it is precisely a locale measured by no need for words. Health. Well-being.

“Freedom from disturbance.” I started wearing hearing aids for the first time on Friday, January 7, 2022. I re-gained a measure of “well-being,” a well-being whose gradual *loss* I had hardly registered till recently. I was thrust into a condition of noticing a well-being whose loss I hadn’t been noticing and whose characteristic seems to be precisely being in not being noticed. I suddenly experienced not only becoming (relatively) unhindered, but also experienced how I had become hindered *and* had not noticed. Trying to get these sentences to be properly fitting is a bit of an hilarious exercise which, in a way, proves Gadamer’s point, that well-being tends to escape notice, and registering its return is an odd thing, since something of it, he claims, not only lives in a condition of the unregistered, but has this as its defining characteristic. Health doesn’t exactly “register.” So arises old echoes of the task of interpretation itself: “the great problem here is to *understand* what is so obvious” (Husserl, 1970, p. 187), breaking the spell of the “tranquillizing self-assurance [of] ‘Being-at-home’ with all its obviousness (Heidegger, 1962, p. 237).

The amount of available literature on this subject of hearing loss and gain is utterly mind-boggling. I could make a list, here, but will leave that to others better qualified in judging this literature. For now, I will follow some experiential trails in hope of elaborating what has been a fascinating, frustrating, and occasionally joyous venture.

What follows are all caught up in the new glimmers of sound. What also follows are brief thoughts on the analogues between this temporary re-gain and noticing, and the nature of hermeneutics itself, along with parallels to the fleeting noticing of our current ecological circumstances and the often-accompanying tranquillizing self-assurance that comes from not noticing its increasing prevail.

One news item talked about how the returning fish and animals felt wrong and also felt right. This sounds like new hearing aids sound. Bringing to notice their previous absence. There is much talk of ecological troubles, but we did have glimpses of the momentary return of a strange, distorted measure of forgotten well-being. Here:

‘Nature is taking back Venice’: Wildlife returns to tourist-free city.
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/mar/20/nature-is-taking-back-venice-wildlife-returns-to-tourist-free-city>

All this new onslaught of sounds at the same time as nebulous, wide-spread pandemic talk of wanting to “get back to normal” – these emerging fishes, read as signs of “not normal?” Or a notice of well-being that we can’t handle?

A Notice of Well-Being that We Can't Handle? An Anecdote to Start

First, an anecdote of how I just happened upon taking the step of getting my hearing tested. The anecdote itself is simple but was utterly disturbing. My partner and I were watching a DVD and I was, as per recent occasions, having trouble hearing the dialogue clearly. The voices seemed too wrapped up in the ambient noises of the scenes being played out. Sound had become two-dimensional, so to speak, without foregrounds and backgrounds, without a “field” in which things were sounding here and there. Flat. Singular.

As I expect might be commonplace, I've simply become less and less interested in even bothering with DVDs or CDs. So, I cupped my hands behind my ears and could hear a little bit better and make some better sense of what was going on. It worked a bit.

So far, so ordinary. I'm old enough to clearly find familiar the images that come up when you search for “ear horns” or “ear trumpets” in a simple online search. *Of course*, cupping your hands behind your ears will change the sound you hear, help you quite literally *gather* more of what is auditorily happening.

But here is the crux that made the difference in this case. Utter happenstance. I went out into the kitchen and for no reason I can remember, I cupped my ears and started talking out loud, basically to myself and about what I can't recall. Of course, what I heard sounded different because of the cupping,

However, my voice sounded, not strange but *shockingly familiar*. *It sounded like a voice I knew intimately but hadn't heard in years and years*. I *recognized* the voice I heard and *recognized* something hard to express accurately – I sounded like I used to sound. I blurted out [several expletives deleted]: “I sound like I'm 18 years old!” Frightening, comforting, not exactly either of those.

It was a sudden and utterly bright and disturbing looming up of something long-lost, long forgotten and *utterly, intimately, almost secretly familiar*: recognizing, right now, *my very own voice* from years ago suddenly appearing as if out of nowhere. Not new. But also, brand new. Enigmatic, this. I didn't know I hadn't been hearing it -- a slightly spooky, slightly dream-like experience.

And so, as happens with this sort of writing that I do, I went to find counsel and see if it might help me elaborate these dark sayings, this enigmatic uprising. Conversations with loved ones nearby, emails to friends and colleagues, reading and rereading old sources of consolation and clarification. The usual as happens when the urge to write arises as well, my own long-since refuge of trying to compose myself over experience and its wafflings. The very thing sought by hermeneutic work is the very thing often eluding notice:

We do not understand what recognition is in its profoundest nature if we only regard it as knowing something again that we already know. The joy of recognition is rather the joy

of knowing *more* than is already familiar. In recognition, what we know emerges, as if illuminated. (Gadamer 1989, p. 114)

I might say here, as if sounding and re-sounding.

Sounds and Openings

We went down the driveway with the dogs, down the road a bit where the fields open up. *I can hear them opening.*

This finally sounds like it looks.

I expect that anyone might be able to notice this, that fields *sound* wide? I don't know this for sure. To actually *explicitly* experience what it is that is so obviously experienced is not a trivial matter.

There is also a renewed *kinaesthesia* –hah, the aesthetics of movement -- to this shift because we carry hearing with us as we move, and it is one of the ways that our moving is measured –this over and above issues of balance and so on. *Hearing* turning the corner of the room, hearing the distance of things, hearing them nearing, me nearing them, and now, looking out the back door at the bitter cold spell finally broken for a bit, not just “seeing” out the door, but hearing its openness and anticipatorily hearing what is to come as I step out into the open, bare feet on the snow, open sky above, light just coming up.

Those small blinks of snow crystals melting underfoot. The cascades of small energies upwards, seems a different pleasure, but the same, now. *Aletheia*.

The word “splash” is onomatopoeic. Of course, it was before when I heard the soft roundness of water filling a tall glass and said the rounded word. And now, the word hisses and sparkles and glistens as does the sound of filling water. The empty neck smalls, slowly up-pitches, just like it looks.

So, a bit of *synaesthesia* as well, that the light has a sounding bristle to it – as if the increasing visibility is trying to stimulate my hearing as well, showing my eyes what I'm hearing full well already. Or the new ability to hear is expecting sound from brilliant sights? Hearing the wind in the distance – hearing that there is a distance which is plainly visible. Hearing, not just wind but its *approaching*.

Almost like these new-old sounds are themselves doing the sketching and I'm just trying to keep up, name, gather, embrace...even the audible slitting sound of a sharp knife through a red pepper. The slit sounds sharp. Can humans “hear” knives being sharp? Of course.

So wonderfully mundane, that cascade upwards of sound when filling a glass with water, poured from a height just for fun, just for the sound of it.

It really is a complex thing – the rising pitch of sound, the rising water. So very ordinary, like the face of an old acquaintance or some such thing? That none of this is exactly a brand-new thing being experienced (I've walked roads, filled glasses, and cut vegetables, after all, for years), but is a brand-new noticing of the unnoticed. So, the hermeneutic point: the joy of recognition is coming to know more than what is familiar. This sentence is getting more and more enigmatic *and* more illuminated.

Ah, of course: *Aletheia*

“The Lean Towards Noticing”: Warns of The Overwhelm and Further Signs of Dis-Ease

The effect does leak ‘sideways’ into other senses. Coming down the darkened stairs to the basement office, the light was left on in the bathroom and the light it cast ahead of the bottom of the stairs – not that it was literally brighter than before, but its notice-ability [?] was brighter? Huh? A result, I think, of the hearing aids increasing the lean towards noticing more generally than just noticing hearing. “Health does not actually present itself to us” (Gadamer, 1996, p.107).

It may be, too, that if health suddenly *does* present itself to us, we may, in a way, we may withdraw.

Suddenly having hearing aids can involve, to coin a phrase, the fright of hearing but *not* recognizing. On the first day of having hearing-aids, I could *hear* that the hallway was narrow. Hearing that and not knowing what it was, at first, troubling.

Right here is a grand hermeneutic analogue of the summoning of the desire to interpret which can get scared off if the “address” is too much to take, too unfamiliar, too loud, too hardened to budge under consideration.

I'm remembering graduate classes from years ago when the idea of the interpretability of things started to settle in on us all, that one person said: “I took the C-train home and I looked at the sign above the person's head across from me and it *meant something* stranger than I'd noticed before. Everything started to mean something.” We laughed in recognition and commiseration, and also over pleas, in another class, of “How do you get it to stop?” once the interpretive uprising starts to gain notice. In analogue, I've talked with many folks over the past months about how they've simply shelved their hearing aids. Lots of reason for this, of course. This be its own myriad of inquiry.

One thread, then another. This overwhelm of hearing aids is somewhat like the experience of hearing a noise or maybe thinking that you may or may not have heard a noise outside in the dark of night and not knowing what is happening or what to do or whether anything needs to be done.

To ‘decode’ this strange plenitude...and I can easily imagine what might happen if one couldn't exactly do this... I can see why some people might profit from a guide of some sort who can take them for hearing walks, rolls, and enjoy the joys of recognition, help stop over and name what

they are hearing, sometimes for the first time in decades...how all this incoming, with an incommensurate amount of stilling oneself over it, could easily be mistaken for madness or demons everywhere.

This is why I'm writing this, in part. To turn upside down ("English *whelmen* [OED]) is, to a certain degree, the clever and too-easily tossed about desire of hermeneutic work – the trickster opening closed doors, tripping you when you least expect it and so on, all on behalf of checking out the red ant colonies under the rocks near my mother's roses as a child, the bursty, lemony smells hidden underneath.

It can be fun. It can be joyous. And it can be terrifying, to be summoned to interpret an unexpected onslaught. It is important to avoid the sometimes off-handed, post-modern glibness of upsetting other peoples' applecarts, so to speak. I'm having enough to do with my own. My happenstance and practiced ability to hear *as well as* my practiced ability to write and ponder, has been helpful and have made the overwhelm more noticeable than it might have been, more bearable.

So, a second thread of other dis-eases muffled in hearing loss:

Today [3 days post -aids], the water-delivery-guy-dog-barking was just unpleasant. No startle at all, no panics and breathlessnesses. I got to say out loud to him that I'd got these hearing aids and he mentioned that he remembered, last time, how I had to leave when he arrived. Meanwhile, my partner woke up and came out for coffee and I mentioned all of this to her, and she said "Yes, I could hear it all out the window, your reactions were completely different. Calm. Well, calmer."

Coming into view in this yawning new gap are a myriad of dis-eases that accompanied my hearing lost: anxiety, impatience, and [low level] paranoia, anger, suspiciousness, the startle reflex that kept getting cued off by loud sounds, And, of course, how the whole matter got blurred and deferred by masks and plexiglass and muffled voices already muffled at the grocery store. Depression. Enclosure/enclosedness. Withdrawal. Distance. Retreat. Isolation. Masks. Plexiglass. Conditions arising from my hearing loss, from recent pandemics, from swathes of recent political rants and raves

My partner has mentioned more than once that it had become slightly frightening to be around me. That is making more and more sense. She wasn't alone in this. I had become frightened to be around myself, feeling out of control of these monstrous, sudden, violent, terrifying uprisings. Her beautiful patience (whose beauty is now radiantly clear).

How the illness was spread around, as illness will do. Not like others catching the same ailment, but others having to live in the wider orbit of someone with that ailment. This is not just "I have/had an ailment and they didn't. They just had to cope with me having/having had an ailment."

No. They were ailing in the orbit of my ailment. Family nursing. It is not just a matter of me becoming accustomed to hearing again, but how that accustom goes, must go, far beyond that.

All of us overwhelmed. And me properly single out as someone bearing part of this and, well, just not listening when encouraged to get tested. This is neither ironic nor a joke, but it is both.

Might be good to think of this as all one ailment and our locales in it being different? This line of thought needs its own meditations.

Even a spoon or pot lid dropped on the stone counter—I'd get set off, short of breath, having to retreat somewhere and settle back down. These were really like brain-stem bolts of energy, piercing, frightening. When I went to my doctor and we talked about the startling, he mentioned that part of it can be simply not being around loud sounds and losing a sense of proportion when one arrives out of the blue. All this, of course, is now wrapped up in how my hearing had become, for the most part, a huge, muffling cushion.

Too much and not enough reading online of the links of hearing loss to Alzheimer's. Me aging enough to have memory glitches becoming more common.

“As Before – and Yet Not Quite as Before”

For the life-world – the “world for us all” – is identical with the world that can be commonly talked about. Every new apperception leads . . . to a new typification of the surrounding world and in social intercourse to a naming which immediately flows into the common language. (Husserl, 1970, pp. 209-210)

Is it not an extraordinary thing that the lack of something, although we do not know precisely what it is that is lacking, can reveal the miraculous existence of health? It is only now, in its absence, that I notice not *what* was previously there but *that* it was there. (Gadamer, 1996, p. 74)

Gadamer speaks of the sometimes “violent estrangement from ourselves” (1996, p. 70) that can come from the sudden disappearance of well-being. It can also come from its reappearance. This blanket “world for us all” proves increasingly enigmatic, especially once disturbed, and this both through loss and/or gain.

This summons up what happens when one starts stepping into the odd locale of an hermeneutic/phenomenological alertness to lived experience. Everything is *exactly like it used to be* and yet also, somehow “as if illuminated”:

With the break with naïveté [perhaps better to say “goes without saying-ness,” “unnoticedness”] brought by the transcendental-phenomenological reorientation, there occurs a significant transformation.... As a phenomenologist I can, of course, at any time go back into the natural attitude.

. . . .

As before – and yet not quite as before. For I can never again achieve the old naïveté; I can only understand it. (Husserl, 1970, p. 210)

There is an amazing parallel, I'm now seeing, between the effects of hearing loss and how it makes uprisings startling, and the effects of interpretive work and how, initially, uprisings can be startling, like too-loud sounds. With practice, the startling sort-of still happens with hearing aids, but they allow it to be located in a rich field that helps them seem less monstrous and dizzying. With interpretive work, becoming practiced in it has the same sort of effect, that there are still startling uprisings -- like these emails we're doing and me getting almost bowled over by this parallel itself -- and then...well, I'm used to then cutting and pasting it and seeing if I can compose it into the paper on hearing that I'm trying to write...this situating turns away from my own 'overwhelmedness' and towards the topic of hearing, of interpreting sounds, and my writing about it.

There is a layer in here that is vital: whatever my topic might be, my efforts are, in part, to find the verities of hermeneutics in it, to find its relations, threads, ancestors, familiarities, unspokennesses, what is at play, what is going on in it -- to find **its** "hermeneutic." This is why, with students starting out, the first question always is "what is your topic?" because that will help the rampant connectionism... slow down and sit somewhere --in a topic, in a field, over this, regarding that. This is where composure comes back in...it is not a general or empty category or practice. As per some forms of meditation, it is a meditation upon something from which one gains composure from its composition/composure -- e.g., loss of hearing and getting hearing aids. What its composition is, is where I get a source for my composing of myself over this new arrival.

One Last Speculative Exaggeration, For Now: "Sloping to Severe Loss"

Hearing-loss becomes downright Avatarial. Narrows. Suffocates. Barricades. Exhausts. Enrages. Harsh, echoey ping-pings with not enough space to calm and ameliorate themselves outwards into hearing the regard of trees off in the distance, and incoming winds, nearing. And Ravens overhead.

It may be that well-being is better located in the notice of it, that the non-notice *squanders* its being what it is. Squanders our relation to what is, weakens us into the numbing of everydayness. Noticing well-being, noticing the unspoken, is, in and of itself, a form of well-being that is deserving of some sort of attention. It is a noticing indigenous to hermeneutics and to never quite being able to go back. I can't go back to the "Don't worry. You'll get used to them" well-meant consolations about hearing aids, my ear-things, my earthings.

Hans-Georg is a bit correct, though, and I use his first name because of the intimacy of this last cluster of notice. He talks of the feeling of "weightlessness" that comes the equilibrium of well-being (1996, p. 113). Something *is* disappearing from notice. It is fading a bit. It feels like childhood having come back around and now having it slowly dissipate, dreamlike, as I re-gain my equilibrium, the not-notice of aided hearing.

And this feels anything but weightless.

The good news is that Hermes helps a bit. Having my grandson nearby also helps, him and I loving Barred Owl hoots in the grocery store. There is well-being to be had in being disturbed

out of not-noticing. Him and I all ears as the leaves crunch underfoot, as the snow crunches underfoot and the drainpipe water-melting rings inside the metal pipe and down and off down the driveway. You can *hear* that it is metal, there, waiting to be heard.

Water down the drive, out into the field that still sounds like it looks.

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