



So...podcast – Episode 26 Christine Jackman

John: Greetings. John McKenna, So...podcast – Turning Down the Noise, not now, because I want you all to be a part of this conversation that I'm going to have with Christine Jackman.

Christine Jackman, thank you for coming on to So...podcast.

Christine: Thank you for finding me and inviting me, John.

John: *Turning Down the Noise* is a recent book you've written and it really caught my eye, which is really unusual because I don't read a lot of books, but I love the title: *Turning Down the Noise*. We live in a world right now, and it's becoming more, increasing, there's noises all round us. You've got technology noise, you've got nature noise, and you've also got our breathing noise. Christine, please, would you perhaps start with your self-intro on who you are?

Christine: Thanks John. I am a journalist by training and in many ways a very noisy journalist. I've worked mainly in print, but in some very noisy places. I was a foreign correspondent in New York. I worked in the Canberra Press Gallery for a while. I've done a lot of commentary and opinion which is another form of noise, I think, these days. I'm a mum. I was a single mum for quite a few years, of two teenage boys, and I'm – yes – a recovering political junkie and I'm rediscovering the value of quiet, myself.

John: Actually, as I was listening to you talking about noise and distractions, it just reminded a quote that I've been, from my jolly wife recently, who talks about noise pollution, and I like to talk [laughs], and it's interesting how talking can be like noise pollution, can't it?





Christine: Oh, absolutely, and it's fascinating that you immediately resonated and understood the title of the book, because a lot of people have really wrestled with it and some people think it just means that we have to be silent all the time. Some people have asked: are you talking about just audible noise, things that you can measure with decibels?

But what you've just gone to by saying, you know, talking can be a form of noise, absolutely. I think it's a reflection of a really misunderstood or unacknowledged version of noise which is the noise in our heads which we often sort of stoke by thinking that we have to talk about it all the time, non-stop, to make our imprint on the world around us.

John: Noise changes a lot. You can be submerged in water, swimming – noise is gone for a little while. You can have a challenge where you start to lose hearing so all of a sudden, noise alters then. I've recently lost a bit of hearing and using some hearing aids, which is great, because I'm hearing the birds now where I wasn't before. And of course, you've got people who are totally deaf, and that's another conversation, but noise itself, is there nice noise, from your perspective?

Christine: That's very subjective – isn't it? – in the same way that silence can be seen as a very subjective thing. If you have silence imposed on you, it's a negative thing, but if you choose silence, it can be an absolute balm and a relief and a rejuvenating experience and silence when you're listening to somebody else is a different thing to the silence when you're on your own, perhaps listening to the world around you.

Noise itself, interestingly, the genesis of the word is a bit disputed, but some say it comes from the root term that's shared with nausea. So, it's basically... sorry, go ahead.





John: I was just going to say, when you said: genesis of noise, what do you mean by that?

Christine: The genesis of the word, the root of that word: where did it come from and into the English language? And I believe – and I’m talking off the top of my head without my own notes here, but I believe – the Latin root of that word, the original form of it was the same word used, or a version of the word used to describe nausea, that sick feeling in your stomach. I think that gives us an insight. The idea of noise is something that can make you... either take you out of yourself, it’s something that can feel that it’s imposed on you, that can feel disturbing.

To go to your question – I think, yes – you can be in an environment of happy noise, you know, if you enjoy your child’s birthday party. It’s noisy, ostensibly, to be noisy objectively – if you’re looking at a decibel metre – to be next to the ocean, but if you like that environment, you’re not going to feel the nausea of imposed noise. And I think that’s an important idea to explore because what it does is it alerts us to the idea that it is a very subjective thing.

I got caught up – John – when I started this book, in thinking... I had a very busy job, I had what was considered in the mainstream as a very successful job, an executive position as a communications director in Sydney, so all the trappings of material success and yet I felt unwell all the time, and when I explored that, I kept finding myself saying, who turned up the noise? The volume... it just felt like somebody had pulled the volume switch up to 11 and broken it off [laughs].

So, I got very obsessed for a while with the idea that what I was looking for was quiet that could be measured. I got so obsessed that I had a decibel metre app on my phone. I was seeking out quiet places. That’s great – don’t get me wrong – that’s a





wonderful thing, and the book describes me going to places in nature, a place called One Square Inch of Silence in the United States which has been designated as one of the quietest remaining places in the US and seeking out quiet places, whether they be churches, chapels, natural bushland settings.

But what that helped me discover in the end, or realise, is you can be in the quietest place you can possibly find and yet if the noise in your head is still going on, you're not going to feel peaceful, and a great example I use is you can put yourself in the middle of the desert or in a cave or in a temple or in the quiet carriage of the Sydney trains, but if you have a phone, even if it's switched on silent, and you're scrolling, it's not going to feel... you're not going to feel quiet, are you?

John: I'd almost call it visual noise.

Christine: Absolutely, and I think you can call it visual. Where I found myself going with it is digital noise, and I think that was a real light bulb moment for me. Things started to make a lot more sense because what we've seen in the last 10 to 20 years is an absolute explosion in the amount of stimuli, digital noise, that's going into our brains because it's worth reminding ourselves that it's only – what? – 13 years, 2007 when the first iPhone was unveiled, and that's revolutionised the amount of, basically the infinite amount of, digital content and noise and inputs that walk around with us wherever we are.

And I contend that our poor brains – the human brain – just hasn't been able, can't possibly have evolved to manage that, and as a result, we are seeing through various measures of science and social reporting growing reported rates of things like anxiety, depression, insomnia, which are probably in my view all signs of something's not right for us human animals living in an increasingly noisy world.





John: For sure. To combat noise, obviously, and distraction, a very common one of course is meditation and it's another journey that people that quite often take and find quite successful. You've got other factors where people might say, I'm going to change the noise by adding music in the background to help you refocus. So, meditation, additional noise which is purely to help people relax more, any other strategies?

Going back to your earlier point, you're talking about noise reduction and I quickly had that memory of going into podcast studios, into a studio, it is really, really quiet and it's eerie but it's a lovely feeling, but going back to my thought around what are other ways apart from meditation and apart from playing music in the background to help chill, based on your book and even your time you might like to share, in Tasmania, with different types of retreats: what are some strategies that people can use to reduce and calmness?

Christine: Yeah, that's a great question. I really appreciate you asking it because it gives me the opportunity first to just emphasise... When I started this journey, I thought most of us aren't going to be able to escape permanently from the noise of the modern world. I don't want to make people think that, because we live in a world where we're encouraged to be perfectionists or encouraged to be... you're going to be a failure unless, if you're going to run, for example, you have to run a marathon, you have to do everything to the nth degree and I didn't want people to think, oh here's another book that tells me that to live better and to live well, I have to meditate for two hours a day or go on retreat and things like that. They're all good things and I talk about that, but I'm also aware, I mean, as I said earlier, I was a working single mum for about 10 years. I'm now happily in a relationship, but still, we all have busy lives and most of us can't escape all of the noise.





What I try to do with the book, and I've got a chapter at the end where I break up, I recognise that the 10-day meditation retreat that I went on, and I can talk further about that, that that took me 10 years to plan, to get the time away, get care for the kids, get the time away from work requirements and so forth, that's not doable regularly for somebody like me and for most of us, so I thought what I want is what I eventually called things like slivers of silence, slices of silence, and big slabs of silence, so different practices that you can build into your day, recognising that maybe just a minute where you can grab at a sliver of a silent practice is going to help you.

John: I'll stop you there for a minute. Hang on a sec. I just want to talk more about the word: slither, because I know there are people listening around the world thinking, what is she talking about: a slither? We're talking about a very small piece. Is that right?

Christine: That's right. Yes, a sliver. Thank you for picking that up.

John: No, that's fine. I'm loving what you're saying, but I'm thinking for people to really get involved in this, because a slither is when you cut something. It's a very small piece.

Christine: That's right.

John: And you also used the word slab.

Christine: Mmmmm.

John: And you said a really big piece. Sorry to distract you but go back to, you say little bits of noise, a lot of noise and a huge lot of noise. Is that right?

Christine: No, I was talking more about the quiet practices that you can build in, so a sliver of silence, a slice of silence, or a big slab, and what I





mean in those, and they were my recommendations about practices that you can achieve.

So, the slabs of silence may be things like a 10-day retreat. It might be something that you might not be able to do more often than every couple of years.

A sliver, on the other hand, is something that, little practices that you can have that you're aware of that you can grab that might be a minute each day and so some of those outlined in my book are things like I've got one there called a 'Half Moon Meditation', which sounds weird, and frankly, you look a bit weird doing it, but you can do it when you're stopped at a red light if you're driving to work and you just half smile, so that's the half moon, and that releases a lot of nice endorphins and things, and just three big, deep belly breaths. Now, you can do that and it's regrounding, quieten the mind. I say stare at that red light so you don't miss [laughs] the queue to go and that's just a tiny little practice that you can do.

Another little sliver would be something like... My book has a chapter about work and how noisy our common workplaces have become and our tendency to jump between tasks and there's some good research in there that shows that the brain, a lot of us are aware of the Stanford research that came out in 2009 that completely debunked the idea that we can multitask.

So, anybody who's encouraged to multitask so that you can be a better, more productive citizen, be assured that there's great research out there that says the human brain just can't do it and it's actually shown to decrease your ability to be productive, to be creative, to generate good quality work or thought or creativity.

What we can do in a day when we're moving between tasks and what the brain actually benefits from is to give yourself a little





punctuation mark before you, for example, if you move from one task and you have to go to a meeting. John, I know from what you ran me through before, you sound like you're making about – what? – 10 different podcasts [laughs] and an ever-evolving number of roles in your world.

John: Thank God for the calendar, yes, I need the calendar.

Christine: So, this would be a good one for, I guess, somebody like yourself. Before you switch off from that task and then you go to write an email or you go to make a phone call or move onto the next one is again, giving your brain that little, I can't quote the amount of time but say 30 seconds to a minute according to the research, to just mentally note what you've just done and then move on.

What some of the research I look into in the book shows is otherwise your brain is constantly a bit like the computer with multiple tabs open. Your brain's constantly going, but you've got that tab open – what are we doing about that, John? – in the background, and you're draining your own energy, and what I say: that contributes to the noise that you've got loaded in that human computer that is the brain.

John: Yeah, I totally agree with you.

Christine: Yeah, so I could go through... Another great way of engaging with silence or quiet practices, particularly for people who may not feel comfortable with traditional forms of meditation, is just going out into nature and going out, here's the [0:17:47.2] without ear pods, without your phone on, and just being present, allowing your senses to absorb what's around you. Now, I'm not a nature girl. I was much more comfortable with the idea of sitting on a meditation stool. I wasn't brought up camping, I wasn't brought up hiking. It just took me a while to be comfortable with the idea





of what am I supposed to just like, walk around these trees?
What's the go here?

But again, when you think about it, for most of human history, this body we live in has spent most of that time, really up until the industrial revolution, in time and in synch with the seasons and the sunrise and sunset and attuned to the natural elements. It's only been a relatively short time that we've been, most of us, living in built structures with light bulbs and so forth and able to work longer hours in our heads and then it's only been a fraction of a blink of an eye that we've been walking around or engaging with these brightly coloured screens and screens in our pockets. When I go into nature now, I'm very aware that what happens, I feel like my senses are unfurling. They're actually, and when you realise, this is what an animal does, doesn't it?

John: Unfurls, would you say unfurling?

Christine: Unfurl.

John: Yeah, it has to focus.

Christin: Yeah, it unfurl as in like a flag rolling out into the wind: unfurls, and what I mean by that is you feel your senses – your sight, your smell, your hearing, the feeling, actually stretching out to engage with the world around you, and I now realise, I describe it as like a bit of a brain rinse, because your intellectual brain feels like it's having a nice bath. It's just being gently, all those boring, un-useful loud thoughts, they're not helping you out there anyway. Just go out and listen to the wind in the trees, the smells and so forth, and your body will respond to that because your body, as I said, as an animal that has spent most of its evolutionary history in that environment, there's a very primal reaction to it.





John: It's interesting. We're talking a lot about little small steps and slithers and what we can all do and I'm really mindful of people who live in the city who don't get the opportunity to go out to the bush and whatever. I've got a very close friend and her strategy, we go travelling in Melbourne and different places, and even on a train, I'll notice she just closes her eyes, and I'm saying, are you tired? And about two seconds later, she'll answer: no, I'm just relaxing.

Christine: Oh, that's beautiful.

John: Isn't it? And I've learned a lot from that, and also to say to somebody, even a close friend or, it's okay to daydream. I think that's another skill.

Christine: Yes.

John: To just zone out.

Christine: Yes.

John: And obviously, don't do it when you're about to cross the road, but on a train or waiting for a bus, I think we've got to be big enough and brave enough to say I am going to zone out right now and look blank or close my eyes, and this is where we have the brain rinsing, recharging, recalibrating – whatever you want to call it. I love the conversation, Christine, about what can others do to rinse? I love the word 'rinse', rinse the brain [laughs].

Christine: Yeah, that's funny. I'm glad that resonates with you because it came to me out of nowhere and I thought wow, that's a really weird concept, but it feels, it's a cleansing, right? So, it's a washing away all that extra mess, and it gives you clarity at the end. Your brain and your energy feels a bit cleaner, but you know, yeah, and I love the idea...





I was a very, as I said earlier, I was a little bit of a purist at first. I thought, well I'm going to have to meditate for two hours and do this, that and the other thing, and then I realised life is inherently messy and it's more important that one, you become, rather than impose rules upon yourself because we've got enough rules as it is, it's a process of learning, self-knowledge, learning what you need, recognising, getting into the habit of just checking in with yourself, where am I at? How busy and jumbled is my head right now? And meditation – by the way – is a nice training for that, but you don't have to do it that way.

Knowing yourself and just checking in and thinking, am I really rushing and feeling a bit overwhelmed? And then knowing, okay, if I am, what can I do about that? And there's nothing wrong, John, with actually having some fun with it, as radical as that sounds. It certainly sounded radical to me because Little Miss Perfectionist here felt that it had to be very serious. I've said to people, this was particularly when I was in the big executive Sydney job, if you're in a big city and you think, well I can't go bushwalking right now and I can't meditate: what can I do? One of the things that I actually created for myself was just a little quest to find quiet places, right? And making it a bit, it almost became like a little personal scavenger hunt.

I'd go out in my lunch hour, and rather than go and end up in the food court, the nearest food court, get the take away salad or whatever and eat it at my desk, it would just become a little challenge for me: where in a 20-minute walking radius can I walk to that is a quiet place, and you can do this anywhere. You find amazing places – you know, libraries.

The State Library here in Brisbane is just the most gorgeous architecturally beautiful environment, sitting on Brisbane River, full of sunlit places and little nooks and crannies. In Sydney, around





that area, there were little churches. I'm not telling you to go in and pray, but you can go in and sit in a church and just, you're immediately in another world.

John: For sure.

Christine: Do the radical thing of sitting on the grass in the sun and maybe eating your lunch there with your phone off for once, giving yourself the break of a few minutes of not taking calls, or the library or galleries, and again, I don't mean you have to go into the gallery and look at the pictures or go into the library and sit at the desk. In those sorts of public places, there are often beautiful little, again – nooks and crannies where you can just sit and it becomes quite good fun to just go and discover those places.

John: I want to throw another challenge out to people about looking for a quiet place: go to the toilet without taking your phone.

Christine: [Laughs] I'm so glad you went there, John, because I've been thinking that recently. It's just like this guilty little thing that everybody seems to do and when did we all start having to sit in a cubicle because the act of going to the toilet is so incredibly challenging or dull that we have to have a phone to scroll on?

John: That's right. Christine, the book is called *Turning Down the Noise*. Have you had the opportunity – I know you've just recently launched it – to hear people that have read it, any feedback you can share?

Christine: Yeah, it's been just the most amazing and beautiful thing and unfortunately with COVID it's prevented what I normally love doing when I've written something which is engaging with readers. That's the huge reward, because most of us aren't going to make money and die rich by writing books or writing feature articles. The real reward is having somebody want to talk to you about the





idea because it's resonated and what I've been really just stunned and surprised and I've loved is that yes, different people have had such different experiences.

I'll give you one example. I did an FM radio discussion up here and I didn't expect that FM radio, morning radio, would be a place to be discussing quiet practices [laughs].

John: Exactly.

Christine: I was almost resistant to the idea. I thought it wouldn't be a great idea, but they invited me in for a pre-record and they actually said to me later we were thinking we would do a 10-minute pre-record and cut it down to 4 minutes to go to air the next day. I'll say, you can edit out, I don't know how you feel about endorsing or acknowledging commercial entities, but it was Nova.

John: Go for it.

Christine: So, we know that sort of...

John: And they're a radio station in Australia, in Melbourne or Sydney, Nova?

Christine: All over?

John: It's national, is it - Nova? They've probably got a website too, have they?

Christine: Yes, I'm sure they have a website. And just by way of disclosure, a cousin of mine is one of the morning team. They have four people who do the morning radio slot up here and when he invited me, I thought he was just being nice. I thought, dude seriously – you don't need to promote the book on [laughs] FM radio, it's okay, but that team includes two people, and as I said, it's public, but it's





a team of four but it includes Susie O’Neill, the Olympic swimming champion, Australian Olympic swimming champion, and another member is a fellow named Ash Bradnam, like the racing driver.

Firstly, it was Susie O’Neill who really pushed to have the discussion and she said to me, you know, she still is very aware... She admitted that she becomes anxious. She’s the mum of a couple of kids, a couple of teenagers. She said she feels anxious sometimes and she’ll notice if she hasn’t got in the pool and swum, that she will become more anxious. She knows she needs it. It’s her time. It’s like a meditation, of course. It’s her time to just lose herself in the quiet of that pool and just follow – I assume, follow – the black line. I don’t know if she has a black line in the pool that she has at home but she swims and that’s her way of almost literally rinsing her brain.

So that was one, but then do an about face, Ash who was the other host that really engaged on this came out of the blue, John, and just said, are you talking about the noise in your head? And I said, yeah, that’s a big part of it. There’s external noise but I am really acknowledging that we all carry around a lot of noise in our head and we’re consuming more of it through the digital device we carry.

I said, that’s the real heart of the matter – noise in our head, and quietening that. He just said to me – he looked me in the eye and said – I was an alcoholic, or I am an alcoholic, and he said, when I was in rehab, every single person I met, whether they were a gambling addict or other forms of substances, we were all there because we were trying to, our addictions were fuelled by the need to quiet the noise in our head.

John:

Wow.





Christine: I'm getting goosebumps talking about that because I thought it was such a... It was so humbling to hear somebody who was so... That's such an honest and really valuable to share with people.

John: Let's talk about things like schizophrenia. We always hear that's a noise in, someone speaking to me – that's why I've got this behaviour right now. So interesting, isn't it? Fascinating.

Christine: Yeah, it really is, and in fact, I'm not a medical expert and I certainly haven't, for example, researched schizophrenia, but that is a very stark example of the power – negative or positive, but the power – of the noise that nobody else can hear, the noise in our head. And you know, it was again a very humbling moment for me when I started researching this back in the day when I thought it was just all about finding quiet places that were quiet in terms of decibels.

I went back and started researching and realised, hey, you know, I'm not doing anything new here. I'm not some genius who's just discovered this. You go back to the days of Ancient Rome, I think about 4 centuries BC, just before the fall of the Roman Empire, and Rome was the place to be, full of wine, women and song and everything exciting and far too noisy for a lot of people.

So, a group of men and women who became known as the Desert Mothers and Fathers fled Rome, decided you couldn't be a Christian, particularly living in Rome, and they moved to the desert, but very quickly their own writings reflected: you can be in the desert but you have to still the heart and the head, and they talk, there's great philosophical writings in the contemplative traditions about doing battle with the demons that are the noises in your head.

John: For sure.





Christine: So, schizophrenia, I don't feel qualified to comment except to say that we are all capable, none of us are immune, to the battle with the noises in our head, and it manifests in all sorts of different ways. I feel that that's a great, for me, I guess – what's the word for it? – a unifier rather than a, oh those people are different; I don't understand what they're going through.

Well, on one hand, I don't understand what somebody with schizophrenia is going through; I wouldn't claim to understand, but I can also certainly recognise that there are commonalities in the human condition too there – right? – that I can certainly feel the challenge, if that makes sense.

John: Absolutely. For sure. I want to backtrack a little bit because we're talking about reducing noise. You had a time at a retreat in Tasmania. We're going to come to a close soon but I do want to go back to that and then I'd like to talk about how people can get your book. So, let's talk about Tassie.

Christine: Very happy to do both. Okay, so Tasmania [laughs] was a 10-day Vipassana retreat. Good retreats won't take people on a 10-day silent retreat if they haven't had some experience. That's the first thing to say. I wouldn't recommend it to somebody to just try to go off on a 10-day silent retreat. It's important to have some experience beforehand, and I had done, I had stayed in both Buddhist silent retreats in a forest monastery in New South Wales and also with Benedictine monks, they're a Christian tradition, in both California and in Victoria, at Tarrawarra Abbey in Victoria, before I did the 10-day retreat.

The Vipassana tradition comes from one of the most ancient Buddhist canons, the Satipatthana Sutta, but the teachers don't proselytise. You don't have to sign up to any form of Buddhism, and they teach you the technique of basically breathing, silence, well you're not fighting to silence thoughts; they teach you to





become aware of senses, whether they're thoughts or physical sensations, and let them arise and pass. The challenge of it is you go in there and it's not only not speaking, it's no eye contact because they recognise that eye contact is a huge way that we communicate with each other, right?

John: Exactly.

Christine: The one that killed me was no books, no reading materials, no writing materials. Most of the retreats, at least here in Australia, are in bushland settings. So, you can walk during your rest periods, but you're not allowed to do running, yoga, things like that, because again, they recognise that we use all sorts of ways to escape just being present with ourselves. This is a very hardcore way. The first gong goes at 4 in the morning. You don't have to go to that one, although more hardcore retreats will expect you to be in the meditation hall for that one, and it's up to two-hour sessions of up to 8 to 10 hours a day – of sitting on a stool; you get taught in it – or on a cushion and meditating.

John: Wow.

Christine: Amazing, challenging. I'd make the observation that we live in one of the most – in some ways – narcissistic cultures in history, right? The era of the selfie, of the individual, and yet it's fascinating, and I think it does say something, that we're so averse to actually spending time with ourselves. I think it's really worth exploring, asking, why are so many people interested in curating themselves for the outside world but are terrified of being with themselves?

What I can say is yeah, very challenging, both physically – because your body doesn't like sitting still for that long – mentally: your brain will do all sorts of things to get you distracted, bring up emotions, bring up old stories, whether it's negative: fears, anger,





and positive things, but I will say is that I'm a long-term insomnia. I've struggled with insomnia most of my life, John.

John: And that's for people who can't sleep?

Christine: That's right. I had the best sleep, without a word of a lie, that I've slept in my adult life.

John: Afterwards.

Christine: Yep, absolutely. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done, but it's definitely changed my life and I will go back there again. I do, in great detail, there are lots of funny moments as well, I have to say [laughs], inadvertently. Nothing makes you appreciate reading the side of your toothpaste packet than not having anything else to read for 10 days [laughs]. I can tell you that much. Who knew? Who knew it whitens and brightens? That's great literature, right there [laughs].

John: [Laughs] I love it. Christine Jackman, thank you so much for talking with me. I was honest with you. I said it was all about the title of the book – *Turning Down the Noise* – that pricked my senses to say I want to meet the person behind this, and this is how So podcast works and how I work. I reach out to people to say, there's a story there, not that I read books but the conversation we've had today has been beautiful. You've given some lovely tactics for people who even live in busy times, busy places, how they can work with slithers, small pieces, baby steps – whatever you want to call it; it doesn't have to be full hog meditation or a lot of money invested, but we can all try to do it and even little things like going to the toilet without your phone.

Thank you so much. For people who want to get your book, where do they go?





- Christine: John, it's actually available very widely. All of the standard places, you know, all of the big ones: Amazon, Book Depository, Booktopia, but also, I know it's in independent bookstores locally in Australia, going into the UK early next year and also available as an audio book for those who prefer listening that way.
- John: Okay, being a journalist, I want to throw you one last one and that is: a piece of gold to the world if they want to practise how to turn down noise... Can you give us a one- or two-liner?
- Christine: Take a breath... Take another one, right into your belly, and release.
- John: Thanks for talking.
- Christine: [Laughs] Thanks for having me, John. Loved it.

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