

New York noise. By Oliver Burkeman

The honking of horns, as anyone who has tried to get more than a few consecutive minutes of sleep in New York will tell you, is one of the city's most widely enjoyed communal pastimes. But Aaron Naparstek has had enough of it. On one occasion, the 31-year-old website developer approached the open window of a 4x4, waited for the driver to finish honking, offered a polite "excuse me" and then yelled "Ho-o-o-o-o-o-onk!" in his face. (The response was blind fury.) Then a few months ago he snapped and threw three eggs from the window of his Brooklyn apartment on to the windscreen of a car honking loudly below. But the driver threatened to kill him. So, nobly, he chose the path of non-violence. He started writing anti-honking haiku verses - honku, he called them - and taped them to local lampposts:

*Oh, forget Enron
The problem around here is
All the damn honking*

"Then this really weird thing started happening," Naparstek says. "All these other haiku started appearing that I hadn't written." Naparstek's section of Brooklyn is now covered in anti-honking poetry, written by everyone from scary environmental

activist types to militant revolutionaries:

*Patience slowly fades
Residents stock up their eggs
That day is coming soon.*

Inevitably Naparstek has started a website - www.honku.org - and now people from across the country send him news of their own anti-honking campaigns. Poetry, it turns out, can change the world after all (if you've got enough sellotape). Then, just recently, anti-anti-honking haiku started to appear, taped up by locals who thought Naparstek should stop worrying about honking and start worrying about starving children, say, or war in the Middle East instead. Naparstek has an answer for that. "Stop me if this is too tenuous," he says, "but they talk about the violence in the Middle East like it's a force of nature, like it's beyond our control. But actually it's kind of like the honking - the violence is man-made. If we can figure out how to stop honking on Clinton Street, I think we could learn some things that we could use on a macro level." He pauses for a moment. "I told you it was tenuous."

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Glossary

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| 4x4 = | a four wheel drive vehicle, like a jeep or land rover |
| haiku = | a style of three line poem, originally from Japan, in which the first line has five syllables, the second seven and the third five. |
| he snapped = | he lost his patience |
| Enron = | a major American company that recently caused a scandal by going bankrupt because of corrupt mismanagement |
| on a macro level = | on a large international scale |

1. Reading

Look at the questions below and answer them.

- 1 What sort of noise pollution does Aaron Naparstek object to?
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- 2 What does he do about it?
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- 3 How would you describe his response? (*reasonable, justified, weird, innovative, pointless*)
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.....
- 4 What do you think the writer of this article thinks of Naparstek?
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.....

2. Tone

The tone of the passage is humorous and ironic. Discuss the phrases from the passage below. In what way are they humorous or ironic? Refer to the context, and think about the words in *italics* in particular.

- 1 The honking of horns...is one of the city's *most widely enjoyed communal pastimes*.
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- 2 *nobly*, he chose the path of non-violence.
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- 3 written by *everyone from scary environmental activist types to militant revolutionaries*
.....
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- 4 *Inevitably* Naparstek has started a website
.....
.....
- 5 Poetry, it turns out, can change the world after all (if you've got enough sellotape)
.....
.....
- 6 Stop me if this is too *tenuous*
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3. Vocabulary in context

Look at these words from the passage. Which of these types of people are most likely to take direct, violent action, and which are more likely to be involved in non-violent protest?

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|--------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| militants | activists | revolutionaries |
| campaigners | environmentalists | |

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Look at the ways of taking action below. Which are likely to be done by militant extremists? Which are likely to be done by non-violent campaigners?

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|------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| sign a petition | take direct action | lobby the government |
| go on a demonstration | fire bomb the police | organise a |
| throw eggs | start a riot | peaceful protest |

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4. Follow-up

Think of something that you feel very strongly about and would like to change. *It could be something on an international level, like the destruction of the ozone layer or blood sports, or something more particular, like irregular buses, or noisy students in class.*

Write an article in order to tell people about the subject you feel strongly about. Think of at least five things you will do. Try to be creative rather than violent, like Aaron Naparstek.