

Although this is a very challenging book, it has personally inspired me enough to spend many days copying it as an act of service to Life. Read, think, talk and act.

You are not alone.

A Language Older Than Words

By Derrick Jensen

Chapter 1

Silencing



“Our behavior is a function of our experience. We act according to the way we see things. If our experience is destroyed, our behavior will be destructive. If our experience is destroyed we have lost our own selves.” R.D. Laing

THERE IS A LANGUAGE older by far and deeper than words. It is the language of bodies, of body on body, wind on snow, rain on trees, wave on stone. It is the language of dream, gesture, symbol, memory. We have forgotten this language. We do not even remember that it exists.

In order for us to maintain our way of living, we must, in a broad sense, tell lies to each other, and especially to ourselves. It is not necessary that the lies be particularly believable. The lies act as barriers to truth. These barriers to truth are necessary because without them many deplorable acts would become impossibilities. Truth must at all costs be avoided. When we do allow self-evident truths to percolate past our defenses and into our consciousness, they are

treated like so many hand grenades rolling across the dance floor of an improbably macabre party. We try to stay out of harm's way, afraid they will go off, shatter our delusions, and leave us exposed to what we have done to the world and to ourselves, exposed as the hollow people we have become. And so we avoid these truths, these self-evident truths, and continue the dance of world destruction.

As is true for most children, when I was young I heard the world speak. Stars sang. Stones had preferences. Trees had bad days. Toads held lively discussions, crowded over a good day's catch. Like static on a radio, schooling and other forms of socialization began to interfere with my perception of the animate world, and for a number of years I almost believed that only humans spoke. The gap between what I experienced and what I almost believed confused me deeply. It wasn't until later that I began to understand the personal, political, social, ecological and economic implications of living in a silenced world.

This silencing is central to the workings of our culture. The staunch refusal to hear the voices of those we exploit is crucial to our domination of them. Religion, science, philosophy, politics, education, psychology, medicine, literature, linguistics, and art have all been pressed into service as tools to rationalize the silencing and degradation of women, children, other races, other cultures, the natural world and its members, our emotions, our consciences, our experiences, and our cultural and personal histories.

My own introduction to this silencing—and this is similarly true for a great percentage of children as well within many families—came at the hands (and genitals) of my father, who beat my mother, my brothers, and my sisters, and who raped my mother, my sister, and me.

I can only speculate that because I was the youngest, my father somehow thought it best that instead of beating me, he would force me to watch, and listen. I remember scenes—vaguely, as from a dream or a movie—of arms flailing, of my father chasing my brother Rob around and around the house. I remember my mother pulling my father into their bedroom to absorb blows that may have otherwise landed on her children. We sat stone-faced in the kitchen, captive audience to stifled groans that escaped through walls that were just too thin.

The vagueness with which I recollect these formative images is the point here, because the worst thing my father did went beyond the hitting and the raping to the denial *that any of it ever occurred*. Not only bodies were broken, but broken also was the bedrock connection between memory and experience, between psyche and reality. His denial made sense, not only because an admission of violence would have harmed his image as a socially respected, wealthy, and deeply religious attorney, but more simply because the man who would beat his children could not speak about it honestly and continue to do it.

We became a family of amnesiacs. There's no place in the mind to sufficiently contain these experiences, and as there was effectively no way out, it would have served no purpose for us to consciously remember the atrocities. So we learned, day after day, that we could not trust our perceptions, and that we were better off not listening to our emotions. Daily we forgot, and if a memory pushed its way to the surface we forgot again. There'd be a beating, followed by brief contrition and my father asking, "Why did you make me do it?" And then? Nothing, save the inconvenient evidence: a broken door, urine-soaked underwear, a wooden room divider my brother repeatedly tore from the wall trying to pick up speed around the corner. Once these were fixed, there was nothing left to remember. So we "forgot," and the pattern continued.

This willingness to forget is the essence of silencing. When I realized that, I began to pay more attention to the "how" and the "why" of forgetting—and thus began a journey back to

remembering.

What else do we forget? Do we think about nuclear devastation, or the wisdom of producing tons of plutonium, which is lethal even in microscopic doses for well over 250,000 years? Does global warming invade our dreams? In our most serious moments do we consider that industrial civilization has initiated the greatest mass extinction in the history of the planet? How often do we consider that our culture commits genocide against every indigenous culture it encounters? As one consumes the products manufactured by our culture, is s/he concerned about the atrocities that make them possible?

We don't stop these atrocities, because we don't talk about them. We don't talk about them, because we don't think about them. We don't think about them, because they're too horrific to comprehend. As trauma expert Judith Herman writes, "The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*."

As the ecological fabric of the natural world unravels around us, perhaps it is time that we begin to speak of the unspeakable, and to listen to that which we have deemed unhearable.

A grenade rolls across the floor. Look. It won't go away.

Here's what I've heard about your typical slaughterhouse.

The room sounds for all the world like a factory. You hear the clang of steam in pipes and the hiss of its release, the clank of steel on steel as chains pull taut, the whirr of rolling wheels on metal runners, all punctuated every thirty seconds or so by the pop of the stunner.

The rooms are always humid, and smell of grease as much as blood. The walls are often pale, the floor usually concrete. I have a picture from a slaughterhouse that will forever be etched in my mind. No matter how I try to look elsewhere, my eyes return to the newly painted chute that leads in from outside, not only because of the chute's contents, but because the color—electric blue—contrasts almost painfully with the drabness of the rest of the room.

Inside the chute, facing a blank wall stands a steer. Until the last moment he does not seem to notice when a worker places a steam-driven stunner at the ridge of his forehead. I do not know what the steer feels in those last moments, or what he thinks. The pressure of contact triggers the stunner, which shoots a retractable bolt into the brain of the steer. The steer falls, sometimes stunned, sometimes dead, sometimes screaming, and another worker climbs down to attach a chain to the creature's hind leg. Task completed, he nods, and the first worker—the one who applied the stunner—pushes a black button. There's the whine of a hoist, and the steer dangles from a suspended rail, blood dripping red to join the coagulating river on the floor.

The steer sways as wheels roll along the rail, causing the falling blood to describe a sinusoidal curve on the way to another worker, who slits his throat. There is barely time to follow his path before the chute door opens and another animal is pushed in. There goes the stunner again, the hoist, metal, steam, the grind of meshing gears. It happens again and again, like clockwork, every half-minute.

We live in a world of make-believe. Think of it as a little game—the only problem being that the repercussions are real. Bang! Bang! You're dead—only the other person doesn't get up. My father, in order to rationalize his behavior, had to live in a world of make-believe. He had to make *us* believe that the beatings and rapes made sense, that all was as it should, and must, be. Now, it will be obvious to everyone that my father's game of make-believe was far from

fun—it was destructive. My father rewrote the script on a day-to-day basis, thereby making everything right—he *created* the reality that he *required* in order to continue his behavior.

In attempting to describe the world in make-believe terms, we have forgotten what is real and what isn't. We pretend the world is silent, whereas in reality it is filled with conversations. We pretend we are not animals, whereas in reality the laws of ecology apply as much to us as the rest of "God's Creation." We pretend we are at the top of a great chain of being, although evolution is nonhierarchical.

Here's what I think: it's a sham. It's a giant game of make-believe. We pretend that animals feel no pain, and that we have no ethical responsibility toward them. But how do we know? We pretend that other humans—the women who are raped, for example (a full twenty-five percent of all women in this culture have been raped, and an additional nineteen percent have had to fend off rape attempts)—or the one hundred and fifty million children who are enslaved to make soccer balls, tennis shoes, Barbie dolls, and the like—are happy and unaffected by it all. We pretend all is well as we dissipate our lives in quiet desperation.

We pretend that death is an enemy although it is an integral part of life. We pretend we don't have to die, that modern medicine can cure what ails us, no matter what it is. But can modern medicine cure a dying soul?

We pretend that violence is inevitable, and in some ways it is. But can it be mitigated through better science? Rather than answer that question, most often we pretend, sheepishly, that violence doesn't exist.

Science, politics, economics, and everyday life do not exist separately' from ethics. But we act like they do.

The problem is not difficult to understand: we pretend that anything we do not understand—anything that cannot be measured, quantified, and controlled—does not exist. We pretend that animals are resources to be conserved or consumed, when, in reality they have purposes entirely independent of us. It is wrong to make believe that people are nothing more than "Human Resources" to be efficiently utilized, when they (we!) too have independent existences and preferences. And it is wrong to make believe that animals are not sentient, that they do not form social communities in which members nurture, love, sustain, and grieve for each other, that they do not manifest ethical behavior.

We act like these pretenses are reasonable, but none of them are intuitive or instinctual: nor are they logically, empirically, or ethically defensible. Taken together, a way of life based on these pretenses is destroying life on this planet.

But a real world still awaits us, one that is ready to speak to us if only we would remember how to listen.

When I was a child, the stars saved my life. I did not die because they spoke to me.

Between the ages of seven and nine, I often crept outside at night to lie on the grass and talk to the stars. Each night I gave them memories to hold for me—memories of beatings witnessed, of rapes endured. I gave them emotions too large and sharp for me to feel. In return the stars gave me understanding. They said to me, "This is not how it is supposed to be. This is not your fault. You will survive. *We* love you. You are good."

I cannot overstress the importance of this message. Had I never known an alternative

existed—had I believed that the cruelty I witnessed and suffered was natural or inevitable—I would have died.

My parents divorced during my early teens. It was a bitter divorce in which my father used judges, attorneys, psychologists, and most of all money, with the same fury and relentlessness with which he had once used fists, feet, and genitals. The stars continued to foster me, speaking softly whenever I chose to listen.

Time passed. I grew older. I went to college, received a degree in physics, and on my own read a fair amount of psychology. I came to a new understanding of my place in the world. It had not been the stars that saved me, but my own mind. My earlier thesis—that the stars cared for me, spoke to me, held me—made no physical sense. Stars are inanimate. They don't *say* anything. They can't, and they certainly couldn't care about me. And even if they had cared there remained the problem of distance. How could a star a thousand light-years away respond to my emotional needs in a timely fashion? It became clear that some part of my own psyche had known precisely the words I needed to hear in order to endure, and had projected those words onto the stars. It was a pretty neat trick on the part of my unconscious, and this projection business seemed a wonderful adaptive mechanism for surviving in a world that I had come to recognize as largely insensate, with the exception of its supreme tenant—humankind.

I've often wished that I could have been in the room when Descartes came up with his famous quip, "I think, therefore I am." I would have put my arm around his shoulder and gently tapped, or I would have punched him in the nose, or I might have taken his hands in mine, kissed him full on the lips, and said, "René, my friend, don't you *feel* anything?"

I used to believe that Descartes' most famous statement was arbitrary. Why hadn't he said, "I love, therefore I am," or "I breathe, therefore I have lungs," or "I defecate, therefore I must have eaten," or "I feel the weight of the quill on my fingers and rejoice in the fact that I am alive, therefore I must be" ? Later I grew to see even these statements as superfluous: for anyone living in the real world, life *is*, existence itself is wondrously sufficient proof of its own existence.

I no longer see Descartes' statement as arbitrary. It is representative of our culture's narcissism. This narcissism leads to a disturbing disrespect for direct experience and a negation of the body.

Descartes had been attempting to find one point of certainty in the universe, to find some piece of information he could trust. He stated, "I suppose, then, that all the things that I see are false: I persuade myself that nothing has ever existed of all that my fallacious memory represents to me. I consider that I possess no senses: I imagine that body, figure, extension, movement and place are but the fictions of my mind. What then can be esteemed as true ? I was persuaded that there was nothing in all the world." Estranged from all of life, Descartes thought that everything was a dream, and he the dreamer.

You may have played this game, too. During tenth grade I occasionally bedeviled a friend of mine by saying, "Jon, the entire world doesn't exist. You'll be glad to know that includes you. You are nothing more than a figment of my imagination. Because you don't exist, everything you do is a result of my having willed it." Since Jon was a good friend, and because we were high school sophomores, his response was a fairly straightforward sock in the arm. I then countered by smiling and saying, "I willed you to do that." He'd throw a couple more jabs for good measure, and then we'd go to the gym and shoot baskets.

I guess Descartes didn't have a close friend with Jon's good sensibilities. So, instead of going to play basketball, he found himself pushing his philosophy of narcissism to its logical, albeit empty, conclusion. He realized that since he was thinking his thoughts—because he was doubting the existence of the universe—then he must exist to be doing the doubting. “I think, therefore I am.” So far, so good. But as Descartes continued his line of reasoning, the world congealed for him into two groups, the thinker, in this case Descartes (or more precisely his disembodied thought processes), and that which he thought (i.e., everything and everyone else). He who matters, and that which doesn't.

Had Descartes stopped there, the response by other philosophers would probably have been similar to Jon's: a violent backlash at having been philosophized out of subjective existence. But he didn't. He and many other philosophers eventually agreed that subjective personhood should certainly be granted to all of them, as well as to others with political, economic, or military power, while they decided that just as certainly it should not be granted to those who could not speak, or at least those whose voices they chose not to hear.

The latter group of course included women: “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.” It also included Africans, because they were “extremely ugly and loathsome, if one may give the name of Men to such Animals,” and because “when they speak they fart with their tongues in their mouths.” But the bottom line was that these thinkers thought it was “a great pity that such creatures as they be should enjoy so sweet a country” The subjective persons—those who actually existed—set out immediately to rectify this situation by exterminating these “creatures” and appropriating their land. The same logic was used to deal with Native Americans, who also occupied land the Europeans wanted. It was ethical to steal their land because they were “animals who do not feel reason, but are ruled by their passions,” and who “were born for forced labor.” It included non-Christians, whose poor choice of religion meant they were not fully human, and so could be enslaved. It included children born to non-Christians, whose poor choice of parents meant they too were not fully human, and so too could be enslaved. The definition of those precluded from being fully subjective and rational beings included *anyone* whom those in power wished to exploit.

Regarding the world of nonhumans (i.e., “animals”) we find a contemporary of Descartes who reported that “scientists administered beatings to dogs with perfect indifference and made fun of those who pitied the creatures as if they felt pain. They said the animals were clocks: that the cries they emitted when struck were only the noise of a little spring that had been touched, but that the whole body was without feeling. They nailed the poor animals up on boards by their four paws to vivisect them to see the circulation of the blood, which was a great subject of controversy.

Searching for certainty René Descartes became the father of modern science and philosophy. Even if his philosophy were not such an easy justification for exploitation his search was fatally flawed before it began. Because life is uncertain, and because we die, the only way Descartes could gain the certainty he sought was in the world of abstraction. By substituting the illusion of disembodied thought for experience (disembodied thought being, of course, not possible for anyone with a body), by substituting mathematical equations for living relations, and most importantly by substituting control, or the attempt to control, for the full participation in the wild and unpredictable process of living, Descartes became the prototypical modern man. He also established the single most important rule of Western philosophy: if it doesn't fit the model, it doesn't exist.

Welcome to industrial civilization.

I do not know what my father was thinking or feeling during those days and nights of violence when I was young. I do not know what was in his heart or mind as he cocked his fist to strike my sister, or as he lunged across the table at my brother, or as he stood beside my bed and unzipped his pants. Throughout my childhood an unarticulated question hung in the air, then settled deep in my bones, not to be defined or spoken until it had worked its way back to the surface many years later: If his violence isn't making him happy, why is he doing it?

I will never know what my father was feeling or thinking during those moments. For him, at least consciously, the moments don't exist. To this day and despite all of the evidence, he continues to deny his acts of violence. This is often the first response to the undeniable evidence of an awful truth: one simply denies it. This is true whether the evidence pertains to a father's rape of his children, the murder of millions of Jews or scores of millions of indigenous peoples, or the destruction of life on the planet.

I would imagine this denial of evidence is often unconscious. My father is not the only person in my family whose recollection for those years is unaccountable. As he leapt across the table, do you know what I did? I continued eating, because that is what you do at the table, and because I did not want to be noticed. I ate, but I do not know what I felt or thought as I brought the sandwich to my mouth, or the spoonful of stew, or the bean soup.

I do not know how I arrived at it, but I do know that I had a deal with my unconscious, a deal that, as I hope will be clear by the end of this book, has been made in one form or another by nearly everyone living in our culture. Because I was spared the beatings, I pretended—pretended is not the right word, perhaps it would be more accurate to say I *made believe* because the process became in time virtually transparent—that if I did not consciously acknowledge the abuse, it would not be visited directly on me. I believed that if I focused on my own moment-to-moment survival—on remaining motionless on the couch, or forcing beans down a too-tight throat—then my already untenable situation would get no worse.

My father's first visit to my bedroom did not abrogate the deal. It couldn't because without the deal I could not have survived the violence he did to me, just as I'm sure that without a similar deal, that removed *him* from *his* own experience, my father could not have perpetrated the violence. In order to maintain the illusion that if I ignored the abuse I would be spared the worst of it—in order to maintain the illusion of control in an uncontrollably painful situation, or simply to stay alive, even if I had to divorce myself from my emotions and bodily sensations—the events in my bedroom necessarily did not happen. His body behind mine, his penis between *my* legs, these sensations and images slipped in and out of my mind as easily and quickly as he slipped into and out of my room.

It's probably best if you don't believe a word I say.

What I wrote about my father beating and raping us simply isn't true. I was not only wrong, I was lying. My childhood was nothing like that, because if it had been, I couldn't have survived. No one could survive that. So the truth not only is, but especially *must be* that my father never chased Rob around the house, and my mother and sisters never threw pans and glasses of water on him trying to make him stop. That would all have been just too implausible. Oh, he may have gotten a little out of control when he spanked one or the other of us, but he never beat anyone to the ground, then kicked her again and again. And rape? Out of the question. The constant insomnia, the incessant nightmares, the painful and itching anus, all these had their origin in some source other than my father. The same was true for my nightly ritual of searching my room, and later, barricading my door. Doesn't every child have

a terror of someone catching him asleep?

I do not remember—I *specifically* do not remember—sitting at the table for dinner early one summer evening, and I do not remember my father asking my brother where he was the night before. I don't recollect if my brother said he went to an amusement park. But if my brother *had* said that, my father would never have asked him how much it cost to get in. And most certainly if my brother *had* said an amount, in response to this question that was never asked, my father would not have lunged at him across the table, not even if my brother's answer was incorrect, meaning my brother had not gone to the amusement park but instead perhaps to a bar. Food would not have scattered. My brother would not have made a break for the door, only to be cut off by the bottleneck at the refrigerator. My father would never have called him a cocksucking asshole stupid fuck, nor would he have begun to pummel him. My sisters would not have screamed, and my mother would not have clutched at my father's back. My brother would not have broken free only to stumble, fall, and get kicked in the kidneys. None of this happened. None of it could have happened. I swear to you. My brother could not have made it to his feet, and made it out the door and to his car, a pink Gamaro, if you can believe *that*. My brother would not have locked the doors, and even if he had it would never have occurred to my father to kick in the side of the car. And even if by some strange chance all this did happen, I can tell you for certain that I do not remember continuing to sit at the table, a seven-year-old trying desperately not to be noticed, trying to disappear.

I can tell you for certain also that I was never, even as a young child, awakened and summoned to the living room to watch someone get beaten. This did not happen daily, weekly, or even monthly. And even had the beatings occurred—which I need to reassure both you and me that they did not—they could never have been made into such a spectacle. Who could endure such a thing? And who could perpetrate it? I have no recollection of sitting frozen on the couch, eyes directly forward, feeling more than seeing my siblings near to me, none of us touching, none of us moving, none of us making a sound, each of us simultaneously absent and preternaturally present, hyperaware of every one of my father's movements. I do not remember my father's leg frozen in mid-kick, nor can I see his face closed off with fur. I recollect nothing of this. Because it didn't happen. My brother doesn't have epilepsy, and if he does it could not have been caused by blows to the head. My sister never wakes up screaming that someone is in her room, in her bed. She never fears that someone will step out from behind a door to hit her, or to push her onto a bed. The smell of alcohol on a lover's breath does not terrify me, because my father did not drink. And even if he had, he would never have become drunk. And even if he would have become drunk, he would never have entered *my* room.

And the worst of it all is that even if he would have, I would never have remembered a thing.

Do not believe a word that I write in this book, about my father, about the culture, about anything. It's much better that way.

A study of Holocaust survivors by the psychologists Allport, Bruner, and Jandorf revealed a pattern of active resistance to unpleasant ideas and an acute unwillingness to face the seriousness of the situation. As late as 1936, many Jews who had been fortunate enough to leave Germany continued to return on business trips. Others simply stayed at home, escaping on weekends into the countryside so they would not have to think about their experiences. One survivor recollected that his orchestra did not miss a *beat* in the Mozart piece they were playing as they pretended not to notice the smoke from the synagogue being burned next door.

And what do we make of the good German citizens who stood by? By what means did they suppress their own experiences and their own consciences in order to participate or (similarly) not resist? How did they distract themselves from the grenade that slowly rolled across the floor?

Think for a moment about the figure I gave earlier: twenty-five percent of all women in this culture are raped during their lifetimes. One out of four. Next, think for a moment about the number of children beaten, or of the one hundred and fifty million children—one *hundred and fifty million*—enslaved, carrying bricks, chained to looms, chained to beds. If you were not one of the women raped, if you were not one of the children beaten, if you were not one of the children enslaved, these numbers probably don't mean very much to you. This is understandable. Consider your own life, and the ways you deny your own experience, the ways you have to deaden your own empathies to get through the day.

We live our lives, grateful that things aren't worse than they are. But there has to be a threshold beyond which we can no longer ignore the destructiveness of our way of living. 'What is that threshold? One in two women raped? Every woman raped? 500 million children enslaved? 750 million? A billion? All of them? The disappearance of flocks of passenger pigeons so large they darkened the sky for days at a time? The death of salmon runs so thick that it was impossible to dip an oar without "striking a silvery back"? The collapse of earthworm populations?

This deal by which we adapt ourselves to the receiving, witnessing, and committing of violence by refusing to perceive its effects on ourselves and on others is ubiquitous. And it is a bad deal. As RD. Laing has written about our culture, "The condition of alienation, of being asleep, of being unconscious, of being out of one's mind, is the condition of the normal man. Society highly values its normal man. It educates children to lose themselves and to become absurd, and thus to be normal. Normal men have killed perhaps 100,000,000 of their fellow normal men in the last fifty years."

The question still hangs heavy in the air: If our behavior is not making us happy, why do we act this way?

The zoologist and philosopher Neil Evernden tells the familiar story of how we silence the world. During the nineteenth century, many vivisectionists routinely severed the vocal cords before operating on an animal. This meant that during the experiment the animals could not scream (referred to in the literature as emitting "high-pitched vocalization"). By cutting the vocal cords experimenters simultaneously denied reality—by pretending a silent animal feels no pain—and they affirmed it by implicitly acknowledging that the animal's cries would have told them what they already knew that the creature was a sentient, feeling (and, during the vivisection, tortured) being.

As Evernden comments, "The rite of passage into the scientific," or, I would add, modern, "way of being centered on the ability to apply the knife to the vocal cords, not just of the dog on the table, but of life itself. Inwardly he [the modern human being] must be able to sever the cords of his own consciousness. Outwardly, the effect must be the destruction of the larvae of the biosphere, an action essential to the transformation of the world into a material object." This is no less true for our relations with fellow humans.

If we are to survive, we must learn a new way to live, or relearn an old way. There have existed, and for the time being still exist, many cultures whose members refuse to cut the vocal cords of the planet, and refuse to enter into the deadening deal which we daily accept as

part of living. It is perhaps significant that prior to contact with Western Civilization many of these cultures did not have rape, nor did they have child abuse (the Okanagans of what is now British Columbia, to provide just one example, had neither word nor concept in their language corresponding to the abuse of a child. They did have a word corresponding to the violation of a woman: literally translated it means "someone looked at me in a way I don't like"). It is perhaps significant as well that these cultures did not drive the passenger pigeon to extinction, nor the salmon, the wood bison, the sea mink, the Labrador heath hen, the Eskimo curlew, the Taipei tree frog. Would that we could say the same. It is perhaps significant that members of these cultures listen attentively (as though their lives depend on it, which of course they do) to what plants, animals, rocks, rivers, and stars have to say, and that these cultures have been able to do what we can only dream of, which is to live in dynamic equilibrium with the rest of the world.

The task ahead of us is awesome, to meet human needs without imperiling life on the planet.