walking on water

READING, WRITING, AND REVOLUTION

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Also by Derrick Jensen

Railroads and Clearcuts
Listening to the Land
A Language Older Than Words
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The Culture of Make Believe
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Strangely Like War

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who are you?

There's really only one question in life, and only one lesson. This question is whispered endlessly to us from all directions. The moon asks it each night, as do the stars. It's asked by drops of rain that cling to the soft ends of cedar branches, and by teardrops that cluster at the fold of your nose or the edge of your mouth. Frogs, flowers, stones, pieces of broken plastic, all ask this of each other, of themselves, and of you. The question: Who are you? The lesson: We're born or sprouted or hatched or congealed or we fall from the sky, we live, and then we die or are worn away or broken or disperse into a river, lake, or sea, ripples flowing outward to bounce back from the far shore. And in the meantime, in that middle, what are you going to do? How are you going to find, and *be*, who you are? Who are you, and what are you going to do about it?

If modern industrial education—and more broadly industrial civilization—requires "the subsumption of the individual," that is, the conversion of vibrant human beings into "automata," that is, into a pliant workforce, then the most revolutionary thing we can do is follow our hearts, to manifest who we really are. And we are in desperate need of revolution, on all scales and in all ways, from the most personal to the most global, from the most serene to the most wrenching. We're killing the planet, we're killing each other, and we're killing ourselves.

And still our neighbors—hummingbirds, craneflies, huckleberries, the sharp cracking report of the earthquake that shakes you awake in your bed—ask us, who are you, who are you in relation to each of us, and to yourself?

Our current system divorces us from our hearts and bodies and neighbors, from humanity and animality and embeddedness in the world we inhabit, from decency and even the most rudimentary intelligence. (How smart is it to destroy your own habitat? Who was the genius who came up with the idea of poisoning our own food, water, and air?) I've heard defenders of this system say that following one's heart is not a good enough moral compass, that Hitler was following his heart when he tried to conquer the world, tried to rid the world of those he deemed unworthy. But Hitler was no more following his heart than are any of the rest of us who blindly contribute to a culture that is accomplishing what Hitler desired but could not himself bring to completion. The truth is—as I have shown elsewhere, exhaustively and exhaustingly—that it is only through the most outrageous violations of our hearts and minds and bodies that we are inculcated into a system where it can be made to make sense to some part of our twisted and torn psyches to perpetuate a way of being based on the exploitation, immiseration, and elimination of everyone and everything we can get our hands on.

Within this context, the question the whole world asks at every moment cannot help but also be the most dangerous: Who are you? Who are you, really? Beneath the trappings and traumas that clutter and characterize our lives, who are you, and what do you want to do with the so-short life you've been given? We could not live the way we do unless we avoided that question, trained ourselves and others to avoid that question, forced others to avoid placing that question in front of us, and in fact attempted to destroy those who do.

As we see.

It is nearing the end of the first week of class, and I have a question. "If you were suddenly given more money than you could imagine, say a million dollars, would you stay in school?"

Someone says, "I can imagine a lot more than a million."

"Okay, three."

"More."

"Don't get greedy. Now the question: Would you stay in school?"

"You must be crazy." Someone else asks what I've been smoking. Nobody in the class would stay in school. I've asked this question for several years now, and maybe five or six students total have said they would stay.

We talk about what they would do instead. Many would travel. Some would stay home and watch television. Some would throw elaborate parties. Many would make sure their parents, siblings, and friends never have to enter the wage economy. Many would buy their parents a house. A few—especially older, returning students—say that with the exception of quitting school, they wouldn't change much about their lives.

"Would you get or keep a job?"

They laugh. No one says *yes*.

"Okay, you've got all this money, and the next day you go to the doctor for a regular checkup. You discover you have the dreaded *Love Story* disease, which means you'll live for a year with no symptoms of illness—looking great all the time, by the way—but at the end of that time you'll suddenly die. What will you do?"

"Get a second opinion."

I laugh. "It's the same as the first."

They think about it.

"Would you stay in school?"

Of course not.

"If you only had a limited amount of time to live—which is of course the case—would you get a job?"

Of course not. Again, many would travel. Many would spend time with families. Several say they'd have lots of sex. One woman says she'd have a child. Some think that because the child would soon be motherless she's not acting in the child's interest, but others support her decision. A few would learn how to skydive (and on day 366 would skip the parachute). One says that on the final day he'd walk into the (moving) propeller of an airplane, just so he'd have a dramatic exit. A couple would spend the year at hospitals searching for a cure.

When the responses begin to slow, a student asks, thoughtfully, "What's the point of doing this exercise here in class?"

I think a moment, shrug, and say, "To have fun."

He seems to accept that. Someone else asks what I would do differently, if I had the money but no disease.

"Not a damn thing," I say.

"Nothing?"

"Maybe I'd go out to eat more; I'm a wretched cook. And if I had enough money I'd buy land and set it aside so it can recover."

A woman shyly raises her hand. I look at her and nod. She says, softly, "Don't you think you could buy a new jacket, one that fits?"

Someone else says, "And do something about those shirts. Where do you shop, Value Village?"

"Well, actually . . ."

Many of them agree that even if *they* were to win this money and not I, that they would buy me stylin' clothes. They give great detail. When they finally have me properly outfitted, someone asks, "And what if you had only a year to live?"

"I'd write nonstop. I've got a list of books in me, and I don't want to die with a couple of them still there."

"Would you do anything special on the last day?"

"Yeah," I reply. "I'd strap on explosives and head to the nearest dam. That would be the least I could do for the river, and for the salmon."

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At a talk I gave recently a woman asked what she should say to her fifteen-year-old son, who, although he's very loving (or perhaps *because* he's very loving) hates school, hates the wage economy, hates the culture. She didn't want to tell him to get a job, and was having a hard time convincing herself to tell him to stay in school. I flailed, and my mind began to lock up. I could manage nothing better than, "It's a difficult situation. You want to teach children responsibility but within our culture responsibility has been defined as going to school, as getting a job. As being a slave. Given these constraints, how do you teach responsibility? I don't know."

I took a breath, and before I could continue, another woman in the audience, my old friend Carolyn Raffensperger, a wonderful activist and thinker, asked if she could give a try. I nodded, and she said, "One of the most important things we can do is help young people find their way to be in service to something larger than themselves. Normally the only reason kids go to college or graduate school—and, in Wes Jackson's words, the only real major offered—is upward mobility. But we fail to teach our children that service to something greater than themselves is far more likely to lead to a joyful and satisfying life, and one that is environmentally rich."

The woman looked at her intently, as did most of the other people in the room.

Carolyn continued, "It all starts with the question: 'What's the

biggest and most important problem I can solve with my gifts and skills?' Even to form a preliminary answer to that question is to begin to define an appropriate—and fun—path."

This made me think of what some of the ancient Greek philosophers called the point of life: *eudaimonia*. It's commonly translated as *happiness*, but I believe a more accurate translation would be *fittingness:* how well your actions match your gifts, match who you are. My understanding of it is that after we die, we spend a hundred lifetimes being treated how we treated others here on earth, after which we go back into the pool of those to be reborn. When our turn comes we decide who will be our parents and what will be our gifts, our purpose. Just before hopping back to this side we drink something that causes us to forget. And here we are. It becomes our task in this world to remember our gifts, our task, and to realize them, with the help of guiding spirits, or daimons. Thus *eudaimonia*, which literally means "having a good guardian spirit."

Carolyn continued, "After college and graduate school I didn't know what else to do with my life, so I thought I'd go to law school. Basically more upward mobility. I took the LSAT, and scored rock bottom. That's probably a good thing, because if I'd gone, I probably would've been a perfect subject for lawyer jokes. But later I got this sense that I *had* to go to law school so I could work for environmental protection. This time I scored in the upper 3 percent. I was the same person, but now it was the right thing for me to do. I had the right motivation. When people know what problem they can solve using the gifts that are unique to them in all the world, they often know what they need to do next."

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I was asked to give a talk to the students at a boys boarding school, grades eight to twelve. I was scared, far moreso than at

prison. I told the boys that, and I told them why: When I was in junior high or high school and was forced to attend all-school assemblies, I would sit in the back of the auditorium, hands in my pockets flipping off whomever was giving the talk, just on principle. I asked them to show me their hands. They did and laughed.

I had long agonized over what I should say to them—how I could manifest the first rule of writing or speaking, and especially what gifts I could give to them that would be worth the honor of their time—and finally decided that as usual, when all else fails I should tell the truth. I said I was going to tell them some things I wish someone would have told me when I was their age.

"I guess the first thing I wish someone would have told me is that it's okay to hate school, that it's really crazy to expect people to sit motionless and to pretend to be interested as you bore them out of their skulls, and it's even more crazy to expect them to like it." The boys perked up. So did the administrators, but I suspect for different reasons.

"The only thing that got me through school was daydreaming. I spent all of eighth grade in the batter's box in the seventh game of the World Series. Two outs, bottom of the ninth, down by two, runners on first and second, the count is 0-2. The pitcher hangs a curveball over the plate and BAM! There it goes over the left field fence. Okay, so that got rid of about fifteen seconds. Again, it's game seven of the World Series. Two outs, bottom of the ninth. . . . I spent ninth grade repeatedly winning the NBA championship with a turnaround fadeway at the buzzer. You may have heard of me. In tenth grade it was a fingertip catch in the endzone to win the Super Bowl. I never did sink as low as hockey." (A few years ago I forgot where I was and told that joke in Wisconsin; I was at a Buddhist retreat center, and I don't think you can say you've lived until you've been chased down the street by a bunch of pacifists waving

hockey sticks.) "After football, I cut right to the chase and spent my junior and senior years of high school and all of college fantasizing about putting plastic explosives under teachers' desks, as well as the desk of anyone who committed that most unpardonable of all sins, asking a question with less than three minutes left in class."

The boys were cheering. Judging from their faces, some of the administrators were wishing for some plastic explosives themselves.

"The next thing I wish someone would have said to me is that things will get better, especially if you take charge of your own life. At my high school graduation the valedictorian said we would someday look back on these days as the best of our lives. The first thing I thought was, *Boom, there goes the whole stage into a thousand pieces,* but right after that I thought, if this is really as good as it gets, I may as well kill myself right now. But things get better. Junior high stunk. High school stunk. College stunk. The twenties were hard, maybe as bad as school, because it took that long to recover from my earlier schooling and begin to see and think and feel for myself. To teach myself how to think, and how to *be* in the world. But the thirties were good, because by then I had an idea of who I actually am, and I began to live it. And so far the forties are grand. (Thank you very much, Derrick, you've just condemned us to at least fifteen more years of hell.) So don't give up. Things get better. So far as we know, you have only one life, and there's almost nothing more worth fighting for than to figure out what you want—not what you've been told you want by parents or teachers or pastors or advertisers or army recruiters or people who write books and then come sit on this stage and tell you their teenage fantasies about blowing up their schools, but what *you* want—and then pursuing that if it takes you to the ends of the earth and to the end of your own life.

"The third thing I wish someone would have said to me is that

I shouldn't be such a wimp, that I should go ahead and ask the other person out."

The looks on their faces told me this was advice they could use.

I told them that the last thing my mother said to me as I got on a plane to California for the summer between my junior and senior years in high school was, "Make sure she's eighteen," and I told them that was the best thing she could have said to a very shy, very unsure young man who had never been on a date (a description, by the way, that also fit nearly all of my friends). There's something else I wish I had told them, but I did not because the language didn't come to me until later, and that is that I regret my mistakes of timidity more than those of recklessness; actions undone more than actions done. Regrets have never come from following my heart into or out of intimacy, no matter the pain involved, but when, because of fear, I didn't enter or leave when I should have. Regrets have come when fear kept me from my heart. I wish I had told them that this has been true not just with women, but with everything.

I told them about high jumping. Although I've always loved high jumping, I was too afraid to jump competitively until I was a sophomore in college. That year, the coach discovered me messing around on the pit and convinced me to compete. I eventually broke the school record and won the conference championship, but then graduated and ran out of time. Because I'd been too fearful to begin jumping sooner, I'll never know, I told them, how good I could have been. I vowed not to allow that to happen with my life: When I run out of time, I want to have done what I wanted, and what I could.

I also told them, "I sometimes think timidity is destroying the planet as surely as are greed, militarism, and hatred; I now see these as aspects of the same problem. Those in power couldn't commit routine atrocities if the rest of us hadn't already been trained to

submit. The planet is being killed, and when it comes time for me to die, I don't want to look back and wish I'd done more, been more radical, more militant in its defense. I want to live my life as if it really matters, to live my life as if I'm alive, to live my life as if it's real."

I took a breath.

"And I want to apologize, just as people in the generation before mine should have apologized to me, for the wreckage of a world we're leaving you. The people of my generation are passing on to you the social patterns and structures, the ways of being and thinking, the physical artifacts themselves that are killing the planet. We're blowing it, badly, and you'll suffer for it. I'm so very sorry.

"Which brings me to the next thing I wish someone had told me. This one would have saved me years of distress. You're not crazy, the culture is crazy. If it seems insane to you that our culture is systematically dismantling the ecological infrastructure of the planet, yet we pay less attention to that than we do to professional sports (Go Mariners!), that's because it *is* insane. If it seems senseless to you that our culture values money and economic productivity over human and nonhuman lives, that's because it *is* senseless. If it seems crazy to you that most people spend most of their waking hours working jobs they'd rather not do, that's because it *is* crazy. There's nothing wrong with you for thinking these things. In fact it means you're still alive.

"I wish also that someone would have told me—one hundred times if that was what it took for me to hear it—that it's okay to be happy, it's okay to live your life exactly the way you want it. It's okay to not get a job. It's okay to *never* get a job. It's okay to find what makes you happy and then to fight for it. To dedicate your life to discovering who you are."

My time was up. The boys started yelling. Some rushed the

stage (I could tell that some administrators considered doing this, too, though once again I suspect for different reasons). A tall, slender boy asked, eagerly, "Does all of this mean we never have to do anything we don't want? Does it mean it will all be easy?"

"It will be very hard. You'll make a million mistakes, and you'll pay for them all, one way or another. That's the only way you learn, or at least it's the only way I learn. But the hard parts will be *your* hard parts, they won't be hard parts other people have imposed on you for their own reasons, or maybe for no reason at all. And your ownership of them—your responsibility to and for them—makes all the difference in the world."

For more on this author, see his web page here…

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