

LEVEL 3

Winner: Lucia Hadella

Title: *A Language Older than Words*

Author: Derrick Jensen

Dear Derrick Jensen,

After reading your book *A Language Older than Words*, I had to write you and ask: Am I putting myself on a path I was never meant to walk? You see, I leave home next fall to begin studying environmental science at Oregon State University, and I would like to think that researching endangered species and promoting the rise of organic farming will put me in a position to save the planet. (Or at least help people reconnect with nature to the point where it no longer appeals to them as an exploitable commodity, but rather as a beauty worth preserving.) Your book, however, led me to question whether intuition is more important than science.

In science class, I often peer through the bright lens of a microscope to examine the behavior of freshwater plankton, or to search for organisms within a sample of soil removed from my garden at home. I think of the microscope as a window, allowing me to admire and understand aspects of nature I never knew existed. Next year, I suspect I'll be looking through this window as much as through the window of my dormitory on many a rainy Oregon day, but it is only after reading your book that I have begun to wonder whether a microscopic lens is really the window I should be using.

Derrick, when intuition and a few prophetic dreams sent you glancing out of your bedroom window time and again to witness the resident coyote disappearing into the forest with another one of your chickens you were observing nature from behind the glass of a window not in existing in science. Science leaves no room for making deals with coyotes, as you did, and for receiving consolation from the “voices” of stars. Science would apply logic to these touching experiences of yours and conclude that you spent too much time alone—that the duck you claim offered himself to the blade of your axe was the product of an isolated writer’s imagination, and that coyotes, just like most predators, cause less trouble to humans when they are no longer threatened by hunger. Science will make sense of your supposed “truce” with the coyotes through one logical explanation or another, until every ounce of the mystery which made your accounts so intriguing has received the same treatment as a cancer cell undergoing radiation treatment. The window of a microscope will never reveal the type of nature-human interaction permitted by a view through the glass squares in your bedroom.

I’m a fiction writer, Derrick, and a poet, who founded a writing group at my high school. Am I kidding myself by thinking I belong in science? I analyze literature for pleasure, but I also love scientific articles about honeybee research and the discovery of new planets. I’m choosing to contact you not only because your book has been a pothole in my road towards developing a firm truth in science, but also because I relate to you. In college, you pursued a Bachelor’s of Science

in mineral engineering physics. However, somewhere along the way, you seem to have abandoned numbers and hard facts for a more imaginative path – that of a creative writing teacher. People like us, who harbor such a broad range of interests, where do we fit into society?

Your accounts of your experiences often take on a spiritual nature that would be scoffed at in the laboratories where I hope to one day to study. Upon realizing this, I suffered an emotional conflict. You suggest that mending the damaged relationship between humans and the organisms composing our natural environment—a relationship that once consisted of so much respect—will require us to abandon our societal mindset of human superiority over all beings. Where might science aid, instead of hinder, such a transformation? Are scientific approaches towards conservation too impersonal? And if so, may this problem be remedied by combining biology with spirituality? Is that even possible?

Derrick, there must be a natural scientist somewhere within me, for, as you have surely noticed, I am brimming with curiosity and questions. I smiled when you told in your books about frustrating your teachers by posing questions they were unable to answer. I, too, have been guilty of this act. I don't expect you to answer all of the queries; I only wish to know if I am, indeed, positioning myself to help others learn a language older than words, so they too may join the conversations of the natural world. Please tell me, Derrick, that this language may in fact be spoken through any window, as long as those who speak it are willing to listen.

Respectfully,
Lucia C. Hadella
Talent, OR