

“Strange bedfellows”: Examining fragility, resilience, and healing in diverse contexts

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Abstract: *This essay examines how concepts of fragility and resilience, which are often considered to be polar opposites, intersect in a few quaint junctures. I read Derrick Jensen’s (1960-) autobiographical article “Silencing” (2000) with Charles Siebert’s “An Elephant Crackup?” (2006) to explore the interplay of themes of vulnerability and healing not only in the human world but also in the non-human world while further probing the associations between the two.*

Keywords: *Fragility, Resilience, Silencing, Derrick Jensen, Charles Siebert, Abuse, Rape.*

1. Introduction :

Derek Thompson in his article, “Why American Teens Are So Sad” (2022) cites parenting styles as one of the four reasons that add to the rising mental health challenges among children. Others include the increased engagement with social media, which is closely linked with plummeting healthy social interactions outside the virtual world and the stress of modern-day living. In comparison to their non-human counterparts, human children are often more sheltered and take much longer to become independent and grow up in ways more than one. As a parent of an eight-year-old kid, I often contemplate if I am shielding him too much. He is fortunate enough to have grown up in a much-protected bourgeoisie household, a gated community, and a private school wherein he has not only financial capital but also cultural capital. I often question if I am adequately training him to take on challenges head-on and engage with the difficult aspects of life. The ever-increasing rates of teen suicides and mental health disorders certainly cause me distress. While it is appreciable that the world is now taking note of the erstwhile oft-neglected issue of mental health and well-being, especially that of young adults, I am also noticing the growing tendency to mark and/or label students as having ADHD. We also need to take cognizance of the difficulty in creating clear boundaries between these vexed issues.

Drawing from Thompson’s examples, one can argue that while on the one hand, parents make excessive “accommodations” for their children and don’t push them out of their comfort zones when it comes to eating habits and/or social behaviour; on the other hand, they push them excessively to perform well and become highly competitive when it comes to the rat race in the educational sphere. Hence, a lack of balance and training, wherein children are gently taught to push out of their comfort zones and be equipped to manage uncomfortable situations, makes it difficult to handle challenging situations in classrooms and workplaces later. One could argue that striving to build resilience in children in smaller episodes daily and under guidance, so they are prepared to take on challenges as they grow up would be a good practice. While Thomson’s text enables one to reflect on whether one needs to strike a balance between the acts of shielding children from adversities and also allowing them to tackle impediments to develop resilience, Derrick Jensen and Charles Siebert problematize our conventional, often simplistic, understanding of fragility and resilience.

2. Derek Jensen’s Experiences of Resilience Emerging from Fragility

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines fragility as “the quality or state of being easily broken or destroyed” while resilience is explained as “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change.” However, Derrick Jensen’s article “Silencing” (2000) and Charles Siebert’s “An Elephant Crackup?” (2006) brought a shift in my understanding of both these terms that I earlier thought were polar opposites; fragility being solely associated with frailty and weakness that is deemed to be undesirable, while resilience is associated with strength and thus desirability.

Jensen in “Silencing” revisits his traumatic familial past, especially how his father abused his siblings and his mother sexually and physically. Not only did his father routinely beat and rape Jensen, his mother, and his siblings, but

he also denied his horrific acts by silencing these voices and maintaining the semblance of normalcy in public. Jensen often spectacularized these horrific episodes of violence that are not only unspeakable but are also vehemently discredited by his father. Siebert examines how fragility and resilience are closely entwined and traumatic experiences can cause intergenerational trauma if not addressed. Jensen deploys “make-believe” and “game” as strategies that have been deployed by both Jensen’s father to continue his abusive behaviour and by Jensen to develop strategies of resilience to cope with his acute trauma. He writes, “We live in a world of make-believe. Think of it as a little game—the only problem being that the repercussions are real....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” (9).

Make-believe evokes words such as fantasy, imagination, child’s world, creativity, and games. They evoke feelings of possibilities, a world of play, joy, solace, dreams, and creation. Jensen uses some of the same terms like “game” in conjunction with make-believe in the given paragraph. His juxtaposition of the two, however, serves to underscore the more sinister and darker undertones in which he deploys the term. This make-believe is not a child’s innocent game or the creation of a soothing, imaginative alternative reality that is nurturing and happy. This, on the other hand, refers to the act of Jensen’s father rescripting the ethical and moral codes and also that of family dynamics wherein he strived to normalize physical and sexual violence and brutality as the natural order. Jensen identifies the chasm between the usual connotations of games being fun as they refresh us and relax us and his father’s game of make-believe being “destructive” (9). He further explains that his father created this dark world of make-believe because he needed to rationalize his abusive behaviour. He needed this rationalization to also continue to perpetuate the same pattern of violence repeatedly without having to reflect, repent, and/or ameliorate this behaviour.

Denying the previous silencing and erasure, Jensen, however, remembers the past to move towards healing and examines how he survived this trauma. He speaks about the role that the stars played in his survival. Interestingly, while the cries of this child were stifled, it was the soothing and encouraging voice of the stars that rescued him. He writes, “When I was a child, the stars saved my life. I did not die because they spoke to me....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” (7). The mature narrator looks back and analyzes the significance of this message: “I cannot overstate 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.” (Jensen 11). It appears that Jensen develops a resilience to bear the horrific reality by creating an alternate vision wherein he forges a nurturing connection with other entities outside himself, namely the stars, to create a temporary amnesia and a sanctuary where he feels appreciated and loved. Jensen examines how his relationship with the stars enabled him to enter a state of conscious and temporary amnesia, empowering him to imagine/create an alternative possibility that in turn equipped him to use denial as a modality of survival. Jensen further explains how he survived things such as “beatings witnessed,... rapes endured” (7). He gave these memories that were “too large and sharp” for him at that time, for the stars to hold till the time he felt strong and resilient enough to excavate them via conscious acts of re-member(ing) them (7). The older writer is conscious of the fact that it was his will to survive that made him project the soothing injunctions that he is “good” and will “survive” to the stars: “It was not the stars that saved me, but my own mind” (7). However, he still does not deny how something that appears to be impossible and a figment of one’s imagination to him now was then real for him and served to save him from extinction when he was a helpless, silenced child. Jensen propels one to consider if fragility and resilience are more intertwined than one usually concedes, by illustrating how one could be both immensely vulnerable and resilient simultaneously. While Jensen examines how the “fury” that was unleashed via “fists, feet, and genitalia” (7) continued to mar his life and that of his siblings, he also underscores that despite all odds, his mother secured a divorce from his father despite him being an attorney. Jensen’s narrative recounts not only the episodes of gruesome violence that scar both the body and the mind, but also charts the development of tenacity and strength in the central character, which is again both physical and mental. Hence, one can argue that it envisions a possibility wherein Jensen traces and examines his interpersonal development in terms of acts of “silencing” and “speaking.” On the one hand, he grapples with the trauma inflicted by the rapacious father who silences what he and his family endured, and on the other hand, he is rescued by the stars that offer him comfort and hope.

Jensen begins the account with an image of a wooden cutout that showcases a black-and-white image using a circular composition formed by two human and two animal figures with stretched limbs. While the spine of the figure at the top is cowed down, the next image showcases the human body that appears slightly stronger. This image complements the verbal narrative in two ways. First, it shows a circularity of trauma and how it perpetuates. Second, the figures in it appear frail and are stretched out, but don’t snap. The image is a reflection of the complex relationship between frailty and resilience, wherein one’s tenacity might often emerge out of precarity. The image also serves to

highlight the relationship between humans and animals (Das), for the anthropocene impacts the non-human world too. While this connection is explored in detail in Siebert's article, Jensen refers to it briefly.

Jensen not only delves into his personal trauma but also talks about trauma experienced by others owing to their gendered, racial, and ethnic identities. For instance, in his reflections on the acts of silencing, Jensen moves from the personal and the familial to a larger sphere encompassing acts of silencing that are gendered, racialized, and/or political. In addition to referring to the silencing of women(9), Africans, Native Americans (10), and Holocaust survivors (14), Jensen's essay also explores how animals are literally silenced by their vocal cords being cut off by the vivisectionists while conducting experiments on them. Jensen argues that vivisectionists routinely silenced the animals to perpetuate a "make-believe" notion (5) that animals are not sentient and do not suffer in the same ways as humans do (15). This, he contends, enabled them not to confront the harsh reality that they were torturing another life form for their experiments.

By the time one finishes reading Jensen's "Silencing," one's understanding of fragility and resilience shifts and becomes more layered. One re-envision modalities of resilience with the multi-faceted nature of Jensen's narrative: his denial of everyday violence that he suffered and witnessed to survive his horrific reality, coupled with his will to survive, his inherent goodness, and these acts of violence being unnatural, irrational, and aberrant. However, when exposed to another dimension of make-believe and imagination wherein it is not soothing, comforting, and nurturing, like in the case of his father's make-believe, one wonders if resilience (such as that of Jensen) can also enable oppression, or if his father too can be seen as being resilient but in an undesirable manner as I had deemed it to be earlier? The narrative nudges the reader to reevaluate the complexities that inherently exist in the nature of frailty and resilience.

3. Movement Towards Addressing Trauma and Healing

While Charles Siebert's long-form journalism piece, "An Elephant Crackup?"(2006), appears distant in terms of subject matter from Jensen's personal essay, both engage in some way with entwining issues of vulnerability and explore the possibilities of healing. Siebert delves deep into intergenerational trauma suffered by elephants. The essay also examines how the crisis unfolding in the elephant community has been ushered in largely due to human intervention. Reading Charles Siebert's "An Elephant Crackup?" in conjunction with Jensen's narrative helps one further navigate the connections between the trauma suffered by humans and non-humans. Siebert examines the "Human-Elephant conflict" (2) and maps staggering parallels between the aberrant behaviours of elephants who witnessed the deaths of their tribe owing to civil war, poaching and culling, and those of human orphans who witnessed the murder or were rather forced to kill their parents during the civil war, such as child soldiers from Acholi villages that were recruited by Joseph Kony in the Lord's Resistance Army (8). Contemplating how the repercussions of human actions not only cause intergenerational trauma among humans who are oppressed and silenced but also extend to interspecies trauma, wherein elephants who are inherently social animals and thrive under the care of their mothers and allomothers turn into perpetrators of violence as documented by instances of elephants raping and killing rhinoceroses in Pilanesberg National Park. Siebert cites Allan Schole who argues that these "mechanisms cut across species... Elephants are suffering and behaving in the same ways that we recognize in ourselves as a result of violence" (6). It is pertinent to observe that akin to the image in Jensen's article, the trauma appears to be cyclical here as the elephants who face abuse and trauma from young age continue the cycle by oppressing and raping other animals like rhinos in this case. Like the human world then, patterns of sexual abuse and violence prevail in the animal world too.

Siebert not only maps the similarities in the breakdown of the social fabric, families, culture, and way of life both for humans and elephants, like Jensen, but he also charts how alternative ways of envisioning inter-species relationships could lead to arresting past trauma among humans and their non-human counterparts. He cites how Sheldrick Trust substituted the dead elephant allomothers with human caregivers to rehabilitate elephants, who have now been successfully reintroduced into their natural wild habitats. Once these rehabilitated elephants give birth to calves, they want to familiarise their young with their "human allograndmother(s)" (12). Siebert additionally cites Gay Bradshaw who observes how instead of being destroyed, humans, like nature, can become a source of healing and "can participate actively in the healing of both themselves and nonhuman animals" (12). Siebert examines a model of development that emphasizes peace, co-existence, and mutual growth rather than the domination and annihilation of one species by another.

4. Conclusion :

Thus, Jensen and Siebert engage with issues of hierarchy, precarity, vulnerability, and invisibilization and propel us to re-envision the hackneyed understanding of the dynamics of fragility and resistance for they appear to intersect/entwine in ways that often elude our usual ways of perceiving them.

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