

"The Turtle Talk" pattrice jones

This speech was delivered at the "Paths to Animal Liberation" plenary session at the national AR2006 conference in Arlington, Virginia on Friday, 11 August 2006.



This photograph was taken in 1971 in Baltimore City. The turtle was called Timothy. The little girl was called Patti-Lee. She grew up to be me.

One summer day not unlike today, little Patti-Lee was standing in front of that rowhouse with one foot on the sidewalk and one foot on the postage-stamp sized front yard, shifting from leg to leg and saying "our property, not our property, our property, not our property, our property, not our property."

She was troubled. She was trying to figure it out. But no matter how hard she thought, she couldn't make it come out fair.

She knew that her grandparents had bought the house from somebody who had bought the house from somebody who bought the house from somebody going back to when it was built. But how did that little bit of land come to belong to one person rather than another in the first place?

She thought back to what she learned in school about the Pilgrims and the Indians. She imagined a Pilgrim with his musket building a fence and threatening to shoot anybody who trespassed onto what had become his "property."

It didn't seem right that the trees and the squirrels who used to belong to themselves belonged to him just because he had a gun. And if that wasn't right, she wondered, how could it be right for the people who bought the land from the people who bought the land from the people who brought the land from him to say "that's my property?"

And so it came to be that, in those childish musings, little Patti-Lee happened upon a truth that

many adults never get around to figuring out: Property is violence.

So it's apt that this grown up girl is here to convince you that breaking locks, tearing down cages, disabling bulldozers, and other ways of interfering with property are anti-violent activities. i also aim to convince you that demonstrating on public sidewalks is always okay, no matter what the defenders of the sanctity of the private property bounded by those sidewalks might say.

The division of the world into countries with borders policed by armies has been and continues to be a violent process that hurts both human and non-human animals.

The subdivision of the natural world into disconnected bits of private property hurts animals too. Fences interrupt ecosystems, breaking up homes and families while blocking off resources like watering holes. Fences enclose animals, making them into slaves and ultimately into bits and pieces of property to be bought and sold.

It's time to tear down the fences, freeing the animals and restoring their habitats to them.

Of course, violence is never okay since that is the root of all of our problems.

Violence is unjustified or excessive injurious use of force. Many uses of force are not violent. How can you tell the difference? It's easy in context.

One day, Patti-Lee was standing at the top of a flight of stairs, facing an angry and out-of-control adult not unlike those we've seen in undercover videos from vivisection labs. All of a sudden, the screaming grownup gave her a short, sharp shove to the shoulders, sending her tumbling down the steps. That was violence.

But the exact same muscular action -- a short, sharp shove to the shoulders -- would have been justified and even heroic if she had been standing in the path of an onrushing truck.

I tell you these details from my life so you will know that i know what violence really is.

Take it from an animal who knows what it's like to be hit and hurt and hope, hope, hope for somebody to come to the rescue: Breaking locks isn't violence, tearing down cages isn't violence, tossing a monkeywrench into the works of a machine that kills animals isn't violence, carrying a hurt and terrified animal to safety isn't violence, and -- certainly -- using public sidewalks to denounce abuses that occur behind closed doors is not violence.

Look at the picture:

What if that little girl was trapped inside that rowhouse and being burned by a fire?

Wouldn't you break down the door to help her escape?

What if she saw that turtle being tortured in her neighbor's basement? Wouldn't she climb in the window to help him escape? Wouldn't she break that window if she had to? Wouldn't she match her little muscles against those of the torturer if that's what it took to make the violence stop?

What if the torture was happening in a vivisection lab?

What if that little girl learned that the homes of that turtle and his whole family were going to be

bulldozed to make room for fancy houses for people who already have perfectly good places to live? If she could, wouldn't she put a little sugar in the gas tank of that bulldozer or maybe take a monkeywrench to its engine? I think she would.

What if that little girl learned that her neighbor was torturing puppies at his job? Can't you just see her marching up and down the sidewalk with a picket sign? Of course she'd be very careful not to do anything that might scare the dogs, cats, or children living in surrounding houses. But wouldn't she want to tell the world: "This man hurts animals!" And wouldn't that be her right?

I made 300 copies of a picture of myself to give out tonight not because I'm so egotistical but because I want you to have something to hang onto to help you remember what I said tonight.

I want you to remember that there's a difference between force and violence and that the context often determines the difference.

I want you to remember that violence is never okay but force is sometimes necessary.

I want you to remember that property is violence and that we can -- and must -- interfere with that violence if we want a world in which little girls and turtles can be safe, happy, and free.

Not everybody has to do that work but we all have to be in solidarity with those who do.

So, if you ever find yourself getting ready to denounce or distance yourself from the brave and loving activists who risk their own freedom to free animals and protect their habitats, I want you to look at this picture and remember what I said tonight.

If you are one of those brave and loving activists, well, you know who you are and you know what you need to do. What I want you to know is that you're not alone. Wherever you go to take truly nonviolent direct action for earth and animals, that little girl goes with you.

And, when I stop talking and the people start clapping, the applause will be for you.

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The ideas expressed in this speech and those chapters are those of Patrice Jones and do not necessarily reflect those of the Eastern Shore Sanctuary or its supporters.

The speaker coordinates the Eastern Shore Sanctuary. Her book, *Aftershock*, will be published by Lantern Books in November of 2006.

For a more detailed discussion of the idea that property is violence, see her article "Stomping with the Elephants: Feminist Principles for Feminist Solidarity" in *Igniting a Revolution: Voices in Defense of the Earth* edited by Steve Best and Tony Nocella (AK Press).

For a more detailed defense of nonviolent direct action in defense of animals, see her article "Mothers with Monkeywrenches: Feminist Imperatives and the Animal Liberation Front" in *Terrorists or Freedom Fighters: Reflections on the Liberation of Animals* edited by Steve Best and Tony Nocella (Lantern Books).

Please note that the text of the speech above was reconstructed from notes and the memory of the speaker and is not an exact transcript. Audio recordings of this and other speeches delivered at AR2006 are available via the conference website.