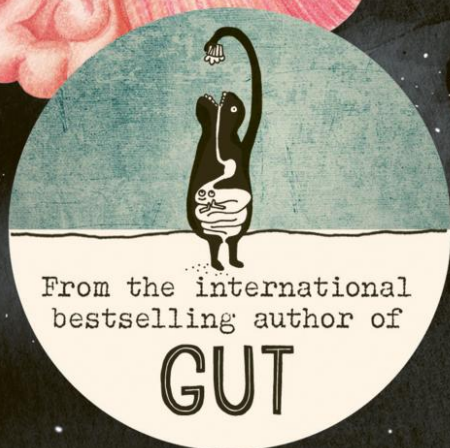


Giulia Enders

Organ Speak

What It
Really Means
to Listen to
Our Bodies

Illustrated by
Jill Enders



willstein 23

Organ Speak

Giulia Enders

Organ Speak

Illustrations by Jill Enders

Translated from the German by Jamie Bulloch

Ullstein

*For Reginald, Ruth and Alfred.
Even though I'm not telling their stories here,
I am writing with their words*

Organs *The Beginning* 11

1 *A Basic Need: The Lung* 17

Müdi's Advice 18

The Lung and the Air 21

The Stuff We Need 25

Oxygen Radicals 29

A Brief Digression on the Balance of Life 34

The Regulation of Breathing 35

Breathing Techniques 39

Dysfunctional Breathing 44

Air Pollution: What We Don't Want 48

Nitrogen Dioxide and PFAS:

Harmful Substances That Get into the Blood 52

What The Lungs Would Do Now 58

Politics, Thresholds, and Ventilation:

Protecting Our Needs 60

2 *Security: The Immune System* 71

Bill's House 72

The System of Security 75

What Are Viruses and Bacteria? 81

Pathogens: What Is "Bad"? 85

Being Ill: The Unpleasant Side of Security 94

Cold Medications and Herpes Compromises 100

The Immune System's Overblown Fears: Allergies 103

Desensitisation 107

Destructive Doubts of the Immune System:
Auto-Immune Diseases 109
Strengthen the Immune System? 114
Vaccination 119

3 Relationships: The Skin 127

Hedi's Death 128
The Generations of the Epidermis 131
The Healing of Wounds 135
The Connections of the Dermis 139
Anti-Aging and the Sun 143
*Sun Protection for Areas of the Skin
That Cannot Be Protected Any Other Way* 149
Touch 153

4 Strength and Impact: The Muscles 163

Anette's Arms 164
Three Ways of Walking 168
The Race of Life 171
The Classification of the Muscles 174
Where Does the Power Come From? 179
Relaxation and Tension 184
Achievement 190
Exercise and Sport 197
Does Exercise Help with Weight Loss? 199
How Does Exercise Work? 202
The Irreplaceable Effect of Exercise 205

5 *Thinking and Being: The Brain* 211

Jill and Giulia 212

The Grey Eminence 215

Sleep 222

Going to Sleep 223

Light, Core, and Deep Sleep 225

REM Sleep 230

Waking Up 235

Sleeping Badly 236

Tips for Better Sleep 239

Sleeping Pills 244

Knowledge and Feeling 246

Motivation and Reward 259

How We Help the Reward Cells 266

Addiction 269

Ways Out of Addiction 277

Hello, Brain 280

The Most Important Sources 289

Acknowledgements 315

Organs

The Beginning

My enthusiasm had always been reserved for just one organ – the gut. Even as a teenager I wanted to know everything about it. During my studies I often only truly woke up when its name was mentioned and, when I was 23, I wrote a book about the gut, which became a surprise bestseller.

From that point on, I thought, my future path was set. I found a hospital with a particular focus on the digestive tract and began to specialise. But I soon collided with reality. Whereas I'd believed that you needed to know only 'gut research' to be a good doctor, I now found myself laughing at such naïvety.

I was treating a woman suffering from stomach cramps after losing her baby and who was ashamed that she wasn't getting fit again quickly enough. I was advising a shift worker whose digestion was messed up because their work hours were always changing. A pensioner with a list of medicines as long as your arm was complaining about a 'vague nausea', and someone from the political world was suffering from troubling diarrhoea that

– as it turned out – was caused by the stimulants that were supposed to help get them through their busy day.

When, one afternoon, a bearlike contractor admitted that he often felt nervous and suffered from anxiety, my absent-minded response was, ‘Yes, a lot of people have this!’ I didn’t mean to downplay his complaint; I was merely surprised, as was he.

Of course, I could provide these people with remedies – prescribe something, try out various things to alleviate their complaints, but at the same time these didn’t feel like the real solutions. A nagging dissatisfaction developed within me. I saw how bothered people were when they didn’t function like machines, didn’t look like dolls – and that they were embarrassed to feel lonely or sad.

I couldn’t find the words for something that I was noticing more and more: that as much as I was treating my patients’ sick organs, I was treating a strange kind of time.

I had been working for a few years when my grandma died suddenly. She was one of the most important people in my life and yet in the immediate aftermath of her death I felt nothing. I would get up, go to work, then go back to bed at night. Even my fear of the dark had vanished. *‘Refusing to admit feelings like grief pushes them into the background and amplifies them,’* I’d jotted down once in a psychology lecture. I couldn’t help thinking about these words now, but this awareness didn’t help. What was wrong with me?

A while later, I was sitting at my desk with the sun streaming in, reading a medical text about wounds. And suddenly I started to cry. It seemed to me that my skin understood what it’s like to

lose someone. Being injured, suddenly missing tissue, the initial shock. What I had suppressed til now was finally possible: I could grieve. I also approached the question 'How can I get over this?' by thinking about how the skin deals with its wounds. Looking at the body helped me to be human.

This experience made me think. We live in a loud, challenging world. We're barraged nonstop by external information: what we ought to achieve, how we could live, how we should look or feel – whereas often we don't even understand what we are in the here and now.

Could knowledge of our own bodies be a counterweight to what I was observing in the hospital and in myself? Would a bodily perspective help – if only partially – to preserve our human element in the whirl of modernity?

It's striking how many terms used to speak about our bodies are borrowed from technology, economics and even war. We compare the brain to a computer, our immune system 'dispatches troops' to 'attack intruders', when we do exercise we increase our training efficiency with 'regimes' and those who don't invest enough in their health will 'have to pay the price' later. Obviously the themes/topics of the world colour the way we see ourselves – but what does this do to us? And why shouldn't it more often be the other way around: our bodies shaping how we think about our work lives or social interactions?

Pursuing this idea became a hobby. Whenever I was faced with questions about the world, I consulted specialist books about our

inner lives. New research on the lungs made me think differently about our basic needs. I took my cue from how our body gets what it requires and how it deals with what it doesn't want. Diving into modern immune research made me realise that other things were important for my safety. The skin gave me a new perspective on relationships – on injury, healing, touch and boundaries. And who would have thought that muscles could provide such a unique perspective on strength and power? Each of our most important human needs has an organ that corresponds to it.

How our body solves problems is fascinating. Time and again I was able to come up with tips for my own life and I felt as if I were in an ice-cream parlour full of answers.

Understanding the body isn't just useful for preventing illness. Our organs also have a substantial say in what it means to be ourselves. They're involved in key questions such as: what do we really need? How do we deal with threats? How do we want to treat each other? Or even: what can we achieve and how do we do this? If we could better understand the answers from our body, we could lead a more harmonious life.

Beyond illnesses and pandemics, however, the body rarely leads the way in public debate and, even when it does, some of the things we think we understand about it are rather out of date. Research into the immune system over the past twenty years, for example, has shown that protecting our health doesn't just depend on 'staving off bad things'. Understanding such principles of the body could, to put it a little crudely, induce a similar perspective on life in general, too.

Everything in this book is based on science and yet has a per-

sonal aspect to it. For example, I used to find the lungs rather passive until I realised that they reminded me of my great-grandmother. Although she was a soft and, yes, sometimes passive-seeming woman, she had a huge influence on everyone who came after her. She was a foundation, in the way that the lungs and breathing are.

Instead of keeping these personal reflections to myself (as was my initial intention), I have put them at the start of every chapter. They show that my words have been influenced by how I was brought up and how I see the world, as is true of all research and everyone working in science. This doesn't undermine the soundness of ideas or scientific discoveries, but it does mean that the way we arrive at them can be personal to us.

Learning *from* my body rather than just *about* it has changed me. I now regard the state of being human with a new degree of respect. 'Unproductive feelings', physical limits or a different definition of power no longer seem unreasonable or weak but follow a logic that I now feel closer to. Just as recognising who we are is part of growing up, I believe that understanding *what* we are is also part of becoming a person. And what we need. For no matter how loud the world around us is, whether it's based on clicks, on 0s and 1s with nothing in between, this in no way changes our foundation – we are organ-ish beings. Connected by fibres, we weave the capacities of our organs into a unique vitality. We're constantly reinventing ourselves, remodelling ourselves, and at the same time staying millions of years old.

There is a voice that reminds us of all of this. Listening to it opens us up to new conversations within ourselves: Organ Speak.

