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LOREN EISELEY: SPIRITUAL NATURALIST

by
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The writing of the late Loren C. Eiseley will be of considerable interest to the readers of Ecospirit, as his thought is expressive of many of the aspects of ecological spirituality; in fact, it may well be that Eiseley is one of the landmark figures of the effort to articulate this vital perspective. Eiseley's numerous writings demonstrate his profound awareness of the interrelationships between all earth communities, and his realization that the physical and psychic health of humankind and our planet, depends upon our recognition of this fundamental fact. Dr. Eiseley was a trained scientist, an anthropologist, who moved gradually away from the more conventional practice of his science toward a position which was, finally, critical of many of the achievements of this scientific and technological age.

Underlying all of Loren Eiseley's writings, even those which are more narrowly scientific in intent, is a deeply pondered, carefully crafted and sustained meditational quality. It is this quality which gives to Dr. Eiseley's work a unique and personal style, one which has earned him great popularity with the thoughtful public. Dr. Eiseley turned to nature for the insights he could find there about what has been called "the great science of human nature;" he hoped to find answers to the problems facing us in this age. His thoughts and writings did not rest in mere contemplation of the natural world. Rather, Eiseley went beyond contemplation to ask searching questions about the nature and role of humankind in the universe.

Dr. Eiseley was not always appreciated by his fellow scientists for these meditational writings and many preferred that the range of scientific inquiry not encompass such humanistic concerns. But Dr. Eiseley's essays have found a wide audience nonetheless. He is linked with the tradition of respected nature essayists which can be traced back to Gilbert White of Selbourne, and forward, closer in age and influence, to the works of John Muir and H. D. Thoreau.

Dr. Eiseley's nature meditations are unique in his time because of his basic biocentric orientation. His investigations into earth-human relations are concerned with the ways post-technological humanity can live in harmony with the natural environment. Dr. Eiseley's extensive studies in history, and in the history of science, persuaded him that there is no omniscience in science. He asserts frequently that we have misused the gift of technology, and cannot, indeed, must not, seek to control our environment. His message, in many of his essays, is a grave one, warning that there is much danger if humankind continues on its present exploitive course. Yet Dr. Eiseley believed that the future is not fixed, and his essays suggest ways in which a healthier nature-human relationship could be established. We will take a brief look at Dr. Eiseley's life story and follow this with an examination of his major themes.

The Life of Loren C. Eiseley

Loren Corey Eiseley was born on September 3, 1907 in the town of Lincoln, Nebraska. Both his parents were descendents of old pioneer families (Eiseley identified strongly with his background, calling himself "...a creature molded of plain's dust"). His father, Clyde Edwin Eiseley, and his mother, Daisy Corey (Shepherd), belonged to families long rooted in the prairie states, and original settlers of the Lincoln area. At an early age Eiseley seems to have found the story of his family's roots a compelling one, and, in fact, one of his books is dedicated to his ancestral memories. Coupled with his life-long study of anthropology, the recovery of time past, and Eiseley's deep concern for time in all its aspects was his strong belief that his personality and his sensitivity were shaped by his ancestors of long ago.

Of course, his life was most directly influenced by his parents. Eiseley remembered his father as being a quiet and gentle man with a deep love for literature and drama. Clyde Eiseley was in fact an "itinerant actor" who supported his family by selling hardware. Eiseley felt that it was from his father that he learned the "miracle of words," a love for language that molded Eiseley's entire life and career. Despite happy memories of his father, Eiseley's childhood was not a happy one, for his mother was an extraordinarily difficult woman who made the marriage nearly impossible. Eiseley was aware, from a very early age, that his father stayed with his mother only for his sake (it was a late, second marriage for his father who had another son by his first wife. Eiseley was born when his father was forty). It is difficult to assess fairly the nature of his mother's problems--it may be, as Eiseley seems to indicate, that she had a hereditary weakness in her constitution, that she may have been touched by the madness which was said to run in her family, the Shepherds. We know that she was deaf and a profoundly distressed and unsettling woman.

Although Eiseley's relationship with his mother was difficult, he believed his artistic interests originated with her. She was an artist who left him with "...a capacity for tremendous visual impressions," and he was grateful for that gift. Similarly, he discovered in himself a legacy from his father as well--his father's love of drama and language left his son with a deep appreciation for literary expression. These qualities were gifts which Eiseley possessed in abundance, as witnessed by his beautiful prose and his carefully crafted poetry. (Eiseley received a literary award from the National Institute of Arts and Letters.)

As a child in Lincoln, the young Eiseley enjoyed getting off on his own for long hikes of exploration, fossil collecting, and reflection. In his autobiography he tells of his joy, years after his childhood, at discovering in an old bookshop, a book which had strongly influenced his youth, called The Home Aquarium, by Eugene Smith. This book started him on a most absorbing hobby which was the beginning of his career as a scientist. He developed a passionate involvement in the various worlds of his small aquariums, filled with creatures collected in the salt flats and marshes which surrounded the city.

Another vehicle of escape and intellectual stimulation was his reading. By the time he was in high school, Eiseley had a great love for learning. This love was to culminate in his happy years in graduate school. Eiseley remembered that it was during high school that he first expressed a desire to become a nature writer, calling his statement of purpose at that time "half prophetic." He recalled reading the nature writers of that day--C. G. Roberts, E. T. Seton, Jack London, and S. Waterloo, wishing for a career such as theirs. How could he have seriously envisioned that this beloved goal would one day be realized? Later, Eiseley was able to see that there was an inevitability about his becoming a writer, for he recognized that his whole self, his very nature, impelled him to this activity. He felt that he

always had a strong desire to explain, to probe into his own personal existence, to search for meaning in his own life and in the larger world around him. Eiseley attended Lincoln High School and in 1925 graduated from the University of Nebraska Teacher's High School.

Eiseley entered the University of Nebraska that same year at age eighteen. He was not to graduate until 1933 (with a B.A. in Anthropology); the intervening eight years were filled with set-backs. Eiseley suffered from poor health due to recurring tuberculosis which necessitated a long convalescence, from financial difficulty met by months spent in odd, menial jobs, and a sort of personal malaise which resulted in long and dangerous train rides across the country during those Depression years. Eiseley turned away from the school, away from Nebraska, and became one of those many wandering drifters who traveled the continent in the days of the deep Depression. He headed West, riding the rails.

This period of aimless wandering was to have a profound influence upon Dr. Eiseley. He tells in All the Strange Hours (1975) of many experiences which took place at this time. Hitching rides on the express trains was perilous--high speeds and the danger of falling asleep combined to make it a chancy mode of transport. This was a kind of 'kairos' time for the young Eiseley. The aimless drifting and the attendant dangers, both psychic and physical, might have been disastrous for one with such an intense and delicate temperament. Instead, Eiseley seems to have profited a good deal from this painful experience, developing insights and a view of life which strengthened his finest personal qualities and gave him that poetic depth and intensity which many have admired in his writings. Eiseley learned a great deal about himself and humanity during those long months of wandering.

Eventually this drifting came to an end when Eiseley realized that he was quite lost, that he was truly "out of time" with no purpose. He had sensed this but only

concretely grasped it on the day he called "the last day" of his wanderings. On this day he turned himself toward the future, filled with the knowledge he'd gained during those many difficult days--knowledge of the ways of the world of man, a passionate caring for the natural world, and valuable self-knowledge acquired with some pain. We must notice the touching words of G. K. Chesterton with which Eiseley begins the account of the next stage of his life: "One must somehow find a way of loving the world without trusting it; somehow one must love the world without being worldly." Eiseley took these words as a personal credo and a guide to help him in his new life. He went back to college, completing his degree in 1933. In college he belonged to a literary fraternity called Sigma Upsilon which founded a small poetry journal, the Prairie Schooner. Eiseley served as editor of this magazine for a time, and had some of his poetry published in it. He was regarded in 1930 as a promising young American poet. After college he continued to write poetry and short stories as well.

Eiseley won a scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania for graduate study in anthropology (a Harrison Scholarship 1933-35). He'd been interested in anthropology for quite a long time; as a youth he'd spent hours fossil-hunting, and during the eight years around his college career he'd taken part in organized scientific expeditions. Eiseley received his M.A. in 1935, and worked for one year as an assistant sociologist at the University of Nebraska until another Harrison fellowship permitted him to continue with his doctoral course work. Eiseley earned his Ph.D. in 1937 after completing a dissertation entitled "Three Indices of Quarternity Time: A Critique." He described his interests at that time in rather broad terms: human evolution, paleo-archaeology, early man in America, floral and faunal problems relative to human dating. He also knew a good deal about such subjects as divination through the use of oracle bones, Indian ethnology and long-dead mammoths. "Happily irrelevant" is his judgement of these

subjects, but he took pleasure in them nonetheless.

Eiseley's next step was to look for a job, and he turned to the possibility of a career in teaching, though he said he'd never been aware as a young adult of any interest in teaching. The fact that he was job-hunting during the Depression gave him little hope that a teaching position would be available, but it was really the only job for which he was prepared. Fortunately, he was offered a position at the University of Kansas, at Lawrence, in a department which combined anthropology, his field, with sociology. Eiseley found himself teaching courses in Introductory Sociology for which he prepared carefully every night. He did not do a bad job and recounts that he'd gained an appreciative group of followers by the end of that first year. He learned, too, that teaching suited him; it helped in some way to "...sustain his psyche." Eiseley remained at Lawrence for some years, becoming associate professor in 1942, having married his wife, the former Mabel Langdon, in August of 1938.

As the war drew to a close in 1944, Eiseley was offered, and accepted a position at a Oberlin. The appointment combined a full professorship with an administrative position. Dr. Eiseley served as Chairman of the Sociology and Anthropology Department at Oberlin from 1944 to 1947. Besides this demanding position, Eiseley continued with his early love of writing. All through the thirties and forties Eiseley was writing and publishing his poetry in periodicals such as the American Poetry Journal, Poetry, and his old college publication, the Prairie Schooner.

In 1947 Eiseley went to the University of Pennsylvania as professor of Anthropology and Department Chairman. In 1948, Eiseley was appointed Curator of Early Man at the University of Pennsylvania Museum and began to write the first of the essays which were later to become The Immense Journey (1957), his first and, perhaps, most popular book. Eiseley was

occupied with evolving his uniquely personal style of writing which he called the "concealed essay," a form adapted from the popular essay, a form then not too popular but one which Eiseley had an affinity for. Eiseley decided to work on a book incorporating this concealed essay, a form "...in which personal anecdote was allowed gently to bring under observation thoughts of a more purely scientific nature." This format, so successful in The Immense Journey, was developed and refined by Eiseley in his many articles and in his books which are basically thematic groupings of his essays.

After the brilliant success of The Immense Journey, Eiseley received an offer from an editor representing a New York publishing firm to undertake the writing of a book about the Darwinian era and evolutionary history. This book, Darwin's Century (1958), later won the national Phi Beta Kappa award in science writing.

In 1959, shortly after the publication of Darwin's Century, Eiseley was given the appointment of Provost at the University of Pennsylvania. Eiseley served as Provost for two years (1959-61) before the Benjamin Franklin Professorship at the University of Pennsylvania was created for him in order to give him time to write, do research, and teach a course if he desired.

Between 1960 and his death in 1977 Eiseley published ten collections of essays. Two works, The Star Thrower and Darwin and the Mysterious Mr. X were published posthumously.

Major Themes

The Immense Journey (1957), despite the fact that it was the earliest of Eiseley's works, expresses most of his important perceptions concerning man's proper relationship with the natural world, and is a fine starting point with which to begin a study of Eiseley's thought. In this work, Eiseley the literary naturalist and Eiseley the accomplished anthropologist and historian of science relates the extraordinary evolutionary journey which

human beings have traveled since life began upon this planet. The evolutionary story is, scientifically, a remarkable one; but Dr. Eiseley's explorations of the deeper significance of the story add a humanistic richness which is desperately needed in our age. His account is unique because of his concern to remind his readers that humanity is only one part of this entire evolutionary process, and that we have responsibilities towards the rest of life, towards the other creatures with whom we have shared many evolutionary stages. Our profound interconnections with all of nature and our concomittant obligations form the basis of Dr. Eiseley's special kind of natural history writing. This theme pervades all of his numerous essays which are, thereby, enriched by an unusual spiritual perception.

In one fascinating chapter of The Immense Journey, Dr. Eiseley takes a look at "The Great Deeps," at the seas of humanity's ancestral beginnings, and of life's origins. His special focus is upon cellular life. He reminds his readers that this primary component of human make-up does arise from the seas, and urges us to think how far sea water has traveled in us and in all of nature's diverse forms. Cell maintenance devices, elaborating in numerous ways, have shaped life's multiplicity of forms; human beings are but one instance of this fabulous evolutionary activity. Eiseley speaks of this as the "reaching out," the "groping" of life, and reminds us that this wonderful process is still going on. Humanity, as an integral part of this unfolding and diversification of life, is thus intimately connected with the totality of creation.

Yet Eiseley wishes us to realize how unique is our human form of cellular elaboration, for we have gifts denied to other of nature's creatures. Our intellectual, spiritual and creative gifts are an outgrowth of the evolutionary process itself. A principal component of Dr. Eiseley's work was his effort to fashion a new image of humankind based upon this newer ecological perception. As our intellectual and creative abilities are an

outgrowth of the evolutionary process itself, we are enjoined to develop a harmonious relationship with nature, to cultivate a way of being in the world which will truly further the magnificent creative process of which we are a special part.

Only humanity has this ability, just as it is only the human species which possesses the terrible destructive powers which have already been activated. As Dr. Eiseley recognizes and expresses so beautifully, humanity has a most amazing gift. We alone are in a position to project ourselves into other lives, human and animal, and by means of that compassionate identification, to enrich our lives, and guard, as well, earth's potential creativity:

And standing thus it finally came to me that this is the most enormous extension of vision of which life is capable: The projection of itself into other lives. This is the lovely, magnificent power of humanity. It is, far more than the spatial adventure, the supreme epitome of the reaching out. (The Immense Journey, p. 46)

This gift, whether it be called compassion, or sympathy, or communion, is an acknowledged component of our religious traditions, and here becomes the centerpoint of what could be called Eiseley's earth spirituality.

Eiseley's spirituality is linked to other modes of religiosity, most especially to that of the shamanic traditions of the American Indian with whom he felt a great affinity. Yet his spirituality is informed by a scientific world picture which was unavailable to the shamanic tradition. There are obvious links to other natural history writers, in particular to Henry David Thoreau whom Dr. Eiseley studied with appreciation. Eiseley believed that Thoreau, too, sought to express an enlarged vision of the human founded upon some sort of humanist, spiritual sense of the earth. Like Thoreau, it was Eiseley's wish to lead

others to attain what he called a "supernatural life in nature," by an activity which Eiseley likens to that of the alchemist.

The alchemist is an artist who wishes to preserve the beauty and mystery which comprises our world. I will quote Eiseley in some length because his words are so powerful:

One man sees with indifference a leaf fall; another with the vision of Thoreau invokes the whole of that nostalgic world which we call autumn. One man sees a red fox running through a shaft of sunlight and lifts a rifle; another lays a restraining hand upon his companion's arm and says, 'Please, there goes the last wild gaiety in the world. Let it live, let it run.' This is the role of the alchemist, the true, if sometimes inarticulate artist. He transmutes the cricket's song in an autumn night to an aching void in the heart; snowflakes become the flying years. And when, as archaeologist, he lifts from the encrusting earth those forgotten objects Thoreau called "fossil thoughts," he is giving depth and tragedy and catharsis to the one great drama that concerns us most, the supreme mystery, man. Only man is capable of comprehending all he was and all that he has failed to be (The Star Thrower, p. 241).

The vision of Thoreau, the vision of the individual whom Eiseley so brilliantly terms the alchemist, is the only suitable response to the mystery, beauty and complexity of this wonderful world. Eiseley wishes all men to cultivate this sensibility. We repeatedly see in Eiseley's own writings this same effort to read and to understand the natural world, as well as to shape a meaningful relationship between humanity and nature. Eiseley and Thoreau speak for the wild things, for the red fox, for the starfish,

which have messages for us, if we can only learn to leave them be. We can learn a great deal about our human past and future by attentiveness to nature's creatures, remembering that we once took many similar steps with them.

Eiseley suggests that human self-knowledge, in fact the preservation of our race, may well depend upon our ability to plumb this alchemical gift, this possession unique to the human. Only we can step outside ourselves and observe nature in order to respond with a perspective wider than the personal and the immediate. Our human gifts have been used for great evil and have placed us all in terrible jeopardy. Yet, we still have the ability to transform our future through the self-knowledge which can arise from what is often considered the poet's or the artist's vision. Eiseley, artist and scientist, was an individual in possession of this perspective, one which he finds most perfectly expressed in the writings of Thoreau and other naturalists. We desperately need this balancing vision, for through this kind of attentiveness to the natural we may enrich, perhaps redeem, the present human course which many, including Eiseley, have come to fear. In Eiseley's own beautiful evocation of Thoreau's vision, we see, too, Eiseley's own personal credo:

A flower might open a man's mind,
a box tortoise endow him with
mercy, a mist enable him to see
his own shifting and uncertain
configuration. But the
alchemist's touchstone in Thoreau
was to give him sight, not power.
Only man's own mind, the artist's
mind, can change the winter in man.

Eiseley, like Thoreau, was a spiritual naturalist who wished to read nature's wizardry for the insight this could bring a humankind which has journeyed a long, long way through nature. We will forever be marked by this journey's stages, and will carry both the cruelty of winter and the promise of spring in our hearts.

A major theme of Dr. Eiseley's writings is his recognition that humanity has taken some very dangerous courses in this technological age. Dr. Eiseley sternly warns that to forget "the green wood" from which we arose is to invite disaster both for our species and for the entire planet. Dr. Eiseley finds that developments in the "rocket age" have seriously jeopardized the health of man and of the planet. We have become "world eaters;" we feed upon the earth but do little to sustain it.

Eiseley develops his theme of man as "world eater" in two essays from The Invisible Pyramid (1970) called "The Cosmic Prison" and "The World Eaters." In the latter essay, Dr. Eiseley proposes that man has become a sort of blight upon the planet, manipulating it for selfish ends, doing little or nothing to sustain the earth and its productivity: "It came to me in the night, in the midst of a bad dream, that perhaps man, like the blight descending on a fruit is by nature a parasite, a spore bearer, a world eater" (page 53). Eiseley's "bad dream" has much credibility, for humanity has certainly become a spoiler of the environment. This is even more evident in our present day than it was in the early sixties when Dr. Eiseley had this terrible vision. Eiseley advances the sobering suggestion that "the planet virus homo sapiens" may have entered its final phase of evolutionary growth in this technological age, and warns that a new ethic must come out of the reconciliation which he looks to. This ethic, in contrast to the ethic of manipulation which undergirds our technological sciences, would be directed to the preservation of the earth that has birthed us.

We humans need desperately to evaluate the results of our centuries of "progress," to articulate and implement changes which will ensure a healthy future for the earth and our descendants. This is a major message of Loren Eiseley, one which is largely as unheeded now as it was during the years when he actively promoted this view. Eiseley speaks of such "old fashioned" values as the cultivation of

"the good inner life," of discipline and thoughtful planning for our future on this planet. He speaks, unfashionably, of humankind's "moral predicament" and our loss of self-control, warning that we must be true to the dictates of our soul, to the courageous human spirit. Eiseley reminds us of this great gift, our possession of an "inner light," "the way of the heart" which has been essential to us all through our evolutionary journey. We have endured, despite much barbarity, because of this inner gift and will survive into the future only if we develop the potentials of this possession.

Conclusion

It is very difficult to summarize the contributions of a thinker as complex as Loren C. Eiseley. Eiseley was a dedicated, professional scientist, unique within his discipline and unique within the wider scientific context of his age. He was concerned with questions outside the usual scientific purview, questions about ethics, spiritual aspiration, and humankind's relationship to the surrounding, majestic and mysterious universe. Eiseley's awareness of the significance of the evolutionary journey which humans along with plants and other animals have undergone, is the source of this richer, more spiritual context. This context adds a very special texture to Eiseley's writings and demonstrates his affinities to the long tradition of natural history. Eiseley explored nature, which he called a "vast miracle," because he knew that human life today can be enriched by this effort. He felt that humankind imperils itself, as well as the universe, by neglecting this meditative probing of nature and its lessons. His writings reveal him to be a naturalist sensitive to the sacred dimensions of the natural world, concerned to reveal the spiritual perceptions which give meaning to human life. Eiseley knew that humanity has a unique role to play within the universe. His understanding is markedly different from the exploitive manipulation of the environment which has, sadly, been the dominant reality in recent centuries. Because of his commitment to

the evolutionary process, Eiseley perceived our role in the universe in quite a different manner. Knowing that we have shared many evolutionary stages with the creatures which surround us caused Eiseley to assert that we are ontologically linked with all of nature, and to believe that we have violated our very nature by our exploitive response to the richness of the universe. Eiseley agreed with Thoreau that humankind is specially placed to be able to read nature's messages, to find in nature values which give meaning to human life.

Perhaps the best way to place the life and career of Loren Eiseley is to consider him to be a major exponent of what Thomas Berry has insightfully termed the "metaphase" of modern science. Dr. Berry identifies this as the meaning phase of science, a promising stage characterized by the sort of reflection upon the wider context in which science exists, a stage in which questions concerning values -- human values and earth values -- must be raised. This metaphase of scientific activity brings

science close to the traditional concerns of religion, associating the two fields in a profound manner. Loren Eiseley's career as scientist and literary naturalist certainly seems to fit into this metaphase model. Eiseley succeeded in becoming a special kind of scientist and naturalist, one who could be a storyteller of "life in its dealings with the universe," one who could respond to the numinous present in nature.

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