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Loren Eiseley Memorial Scholarship

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“And standing thus it finally comes to me that this is the most enormous extension of vision of which life is capable: the projection of itself onto other lives. This is the lonely, magnificent power of humanity (*The Immense Journey*, pg. 46).”

Of all the transcendent, inspirational ideas written by Loren Eiseley, the theme of humanity’s place in the universe resonates powerfully. His work glows with the rare, clairvoyant ability of man to see himself in other forms of life and to feel part of the universal thread of life. In an essay entitled “The Dance of the Frogs,” Eiseley tells the story of Albert Dreyer, a famous zoologist who was pulled by an ancient life force during his studies of amphibians. In the quiet of the wilderness and with disregard to human dignity, the old man actually skipped gleefully alongside frogs on a damp spring night. It was a contradiction to the typical human psyche where egoism usually discourages such action. After all, we are very different from frogs and other animals. This is the common perception at least. Many of us seem to believe that evolution stops with us; that humans are the final, perfected product. The belief in “geological prophecy,” or the predestined path to create man, is a manifestation of such thought. It is assumed that humans must have been designed to govern over all the “lowly” creatures of the earth. Eiseley suggests otherwise.

Indeed, there is valid evidence of our relationship to the lower animal world—both archeologically and sometimes through the perception of minds like Loren Eiseley’s. Yet there is still great separation. Eiseley described it as the “loneliness of humanity.” In his essay, “The Long Loneliness,” he states: “There is nothing more alone in the universe than man. He is alone because he has the intellectual capacity to know that he is separated by a vast gulf of social memory and experiment from the lives of his animal associates (*The Star Thrower*, pg. 37).” Yet this loneliness can be interpreted more than one way. Besides having obvious cerebral differences, technology and choices of habitat have created great separation. Ironically, by clumping ourselves together in over-crowded cities and bustling metropolises, we have voluntarily isolated ourselves. Interaction with the living world is now replaced with computers and other equipment. Gone are the days when dependence on the earth and all of its inhabitants was a daily realization. It is no wonder that it would be considered an oddity to stare eye to eye with a crow lost in the fog or to tumble about with a young fox. It is only when we push aside our “upright arrogance” and become immersed in the natural that we will find our place in the scheme of life again. If this can be achieved, several realizations will inevitably occur. What was once apart from us will become part of us. Perhaps we will gaze into vast waters and sense that “The salt of the ocean seas is in our blood, its lime is in our bones (*The Star Thrower*, pg. 118).” A stroll through a museum will render more than a simple look into the past. Maybe we will come to realize that we truly are “... but one mask of many worn by the great face behind (*The Immense Journey*, pg. 210).”

This awareness could even give rise to a dramatic mutation. It would be much unlike the *chance* mutations occurring in all living things, some holding the keys to success or failure in future generations. It seems as if the recombination of DNA can be like rolling a dice; providing the right traits only if you’re lucky. On the contrary, Eiseley’s “Star Thrower” had an unusual trait that was unlikely genetic, it was chosen. “...he had reasserted the human right to define his own frontier (*The Star Thrower*, pg. 182).” The anomaly was a love and compassion for life extending beyond the boundary lines of species. It seems unlikely that this caring star thrower was a lonely reject, an outcast among the greedy shell collectors who walked the beach with him. Despite social disapproval, she hurled the living stars into the sea again and again in order to save at least a few from drying up on Darwin’s bank of death and destruction. It was an obvious contradiction to “survival of the fittest,” the selfish fight to endure even at the cost of others. The great irony is that compassion will probably *be* the trait that will allow our species to survive in the future. The compassionate who are strangers among men will come out on top when everyone else is defeated. As Eiseley said, “It was the failures who had always won, but by the time they won they had come to called successes. This is the final paradox, which men call evolution (*The Star Thrower*, pg. 311).”

Loren Eiseley wanted all of humanity to become star throwers, to love not man, but life. In order to achieve this, we must have empathy for life itself. Compassion must extend even further than soup kitchens and nursing homes. If we save the whales, then we must likewise save the lowly starfish. One must recognize himself in more than children, chimpanzees, or furry little kittens. If you and I identify our relationship to the web of life, perhaps we will become more than just human. And someday in the midst of turmoil, wandering in solitude along polluted water, contaminated soils, and a non-existent ozone layer, amid a few enduring species... star throwers will be found and they will survive.