

LOREN COREY EISELEY: IN APPRECIATION

by *Ward H. Goodenough*

Abstract. In his writings, Loren Eiseley revealed the feelings and the wonder that inspire many scientists in their work but that most scientists are unable or unwilling to write about. He was at once an anthropologist of science and the scientist's bard.

Imagine ourselves, each one, as members of a small group of people who live by hunting and gathering, very much like northern Canadian and Alaskan Indians and Eskimos. Our world is made up of creatures, many of them large and some of them formidable, that are not human. We humans are a very small part of the world in which we live. The significant environment with which we reckon, often without the company of any fellow human, is one of plants and animals, lakes and rivers, snow or rain, and wind. Our survival depends not simply on our knowing about these things but on our being in tune with them, in the same way that people who live intimately together must be in tune with one another.

Most of us, by contrast, have spent our lives in a world that is made up largely of other people and of the things that people have made. Animals, other than housepets, are objects of occasional curiosity of no importance in our lives, except as shoe leather and processed food. Our dealings with plants are limited largely to domesticated varieties, objects either of sentiment on our windowsills or of impersonal mass production on industrial farms. For us, it is fellow humans, masses of them, functioning in the various institutional niches of our social environment, with whom we must manage to deal successfully and to whom we must learn to attune ourselves. What the state legislature will do is far more important than how the wind will blow. Aside from humans, things of human creation dominate our world. We must be sensitive to the sounds of engines, be in mystical harmony with carburetors, and be skilled in reading the flow of traffic rather than of air or water.

Ward H. Goodenough is university professor of anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, University Museum, 33rd and Spruce Streets, Philadelphia 19104.

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There is a profound difference between our world and that other world of our ancestors—a world where people were few and where things other than people made much of its humanly significant history, a world where one came to sense the underlying meaning of all existence, including one's own, through direct experience of the events and their various rhythms that made that history.

Loren Eiseley's great gift to us was his ability to take us into that other world, for it was a world in some ways much like the one in which spiritually he lived. In the quiet social isolation of his childhood, he kept intimate company mostly with other than human beings. He dealt with the contents of abandoned houses, of woods, fields, and stream edges. These dealings provided much of the experience in which his being grew. But these dealings were with things that lay on the fringe of an expanding mass of humanity that seemed totally indifferent to them. Eiseley enjoyed human company in small groups and on a one-to-one basis, but crowds, humanity in the mass, made him uncomfortable.

There were no ready clichés in which to express what was so meaningful in his life, and he was drawn to literature—to poetry especially—for to give evidence of experience as an aspect of self is the poet's craft. Inevitably, too, he was led to paleontology, natural history, and the study of humans who still lived in a natural world—all of which touched on his own deepest contemplations.

So, like many of us, he sought for the meaning of his own life in a search for the meaning of all life. He studied the efforts of Charles Darwin and of the many others who in the last century revolutionized the terms of that search. But he went beyond most of us in coming to see the meaning he sought as being somehow in the act of search itself, seeing experience as meaningful insofar as we try to make it so. He returned more and more to his own experience as the scene of his search and, appropriately, to poetry again as the way to record it. In his writings he has taken us with him on his search, taken us on excursions into his world—that world where experience of the other than human, and therefore of the very much more than human, so largely defines our being.

In doing this, he has done something else as well. He has expressed things that we, either as scientists or as educated men and women in the post-Darwinian era, are often hesitant to talk about—at least so it seems to me—because they concern aspects of our private religious lives that are outside of and, indeed, difficult to reconcile with what we publicly recognize as established religious traditions.

As Eiseley eloquently described in *Darwin's Century* (1958), the nineteenth century produced a major revolution in outlook in which the established cosmogony, based on Genesis, was replaced by the

outline of an entirely new one. Fleshing out that outline was the task of natural and physical scientists, who had, in effect, become the new cosmographers.

The bitter debates about evolution are now largely behind us, but we are still struggling with what the post-Darwinian revolution implies for our conception of human destiny, of the meaning and purpose of life, now infused with new mystery. No longer can we see ourselves as created in God's image and capable, with God's help, of perfection or collective salvation. We are, rather, only one small eddy in the vast flow of energy through space-time, one of the innumerable eddies that take shape, hang unsteadily for a while, and disappear in the course of that flow. What is our purpose here? Where is our hope? How do we put meaning back into human existence when we are no longer lords over all things but only bit-part actors on a stage whose limits in space and time we cannot discern and in a play whose plot, if indeed there is one, we do not know?

Nonscientists can turn their backs, if they so choose, on the cosmic enormity and attend entirely to the contemporary human scene, deriving their sense of purpose and worth from it, accepting on faith whatever definitions they find comforting. We who are scientists spend a big part of our lives doing much the same thing, but there is that other part of our lives where we must attend to the enormity. We try to bring order to it by constructing myths of it that are intellectually acceptable according to the standards of plausibility of contemporary science. We do this knowing that the orders we seek to build are transient, doomed to extinction along with everything else. Yet we do it. Like North American Indians we go on our vision quests and rejoice in the revelations of order that our insights give us. We revel in the new-found powers our revelations provide, powers whose very exercise speeds us toward our extinction. So we find our personal salvation not in transcending our humanity but in finding purpose and fulfillment within the confines of our humanity, in doing what our human nature in the context of our time and culture compels us to do. Insofar as we are humbled by the realities as they appear to us, there is melancholy as well as joy in our work. And always there is the remaining mystery, the lurking presence of the overwhelming enormity, and the knowledge of our fate.

These things, part of what it means to be a natural scientist, are things Eiseley had a rare ability to say for us all. He was in his prose as well as in his poetry the scientist's bard. As such, he was also very much an anthropologist. For this entirely human process in which we scientists are engaged is among the many human processes that make up the subject matter of anthropological concern. As Miles Richardson has said so well,

Being a human is an impossible task, but it is our task.

The anthropologist's job is to tell of the task, to glorify man by composing and reciting with skill and passion the human myth. Like the poet recording the exploits of the epic hero, the anthropologist mythicizes the human record. He takes the discrete bits of human data, the pelvic girdle, Acheulian handaxes, Eskimo kinship, and phonemic contrasts, and narrates the human story, how we came to be, how we fought in the past, how we live today. As teller of the human story, the anthropologist cannot falsify what we are. He seeks to find the full range of human variation, the cruelty, the magnificence, the love that is in us all and in all of our cultures. But the anthropologist is not a passive recorder of human data; he searches for the human secret (Richardson 1975, 530).

Such was Loren Eiseley. He composed and recited with skill and passion our own part as scientists in the human myth, and ever he searched for the human secret.

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