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*Loren Eiseley Memorial Scholarship*

THE MESSAGE

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"In many a fin and reptile foot I have seen myself passing by – some part of myself, that is," said Loren Eiseley in one of his many essays, *The Flow of the River*. At one time or another, we have all looked at some little piece of nature and felt this way. For most people, however, that strange feeling quickly turns into the hope that their temporary insanity wasn't noticed by anyone who knows them. Loren Eiseley is one of the few who don't simply attribute these sudden sentiments to madness, but try to understand them and then file them into their library of knowledge, waiting to be called upon again.

Eiseley used the knowledge he gathers from everyday life to stimulate others through his essays. He writes down his experiences, and then adds in his own musings, all the while using excellent descriptive language to clarify his opinions to the reader. But his unique theories provide more than interesting reading. They call our entire concepts of life into question, scratching at the doors of our beliefs. They force us to think about how we came up with these ideas in the first place, and make us realize that we may have been entirely wrong in our approach to life from the start. But he doesn't do this by criticism or slander; he simply sets us in front of the TV of his life and lets us see for ourselves his philosophy of life. "The projection of itself into other lives...is the lonely, magnificent power of humanity," he said in *The Great Deeps*. He has projected himself into many lives, including my own. His power has touched me, and I have changed my view of the world. But this essay isn't about how it changed my life, but his underlying message, so I will now explain it the way I understand it.

This inborn power sets us apart from other animals. It makes us the rulers of the animal kingdom, even though our bodies are so defenseless. Other creatures have the teeth and claws that make them special, but only humans are intelligent enough that we don't need them. We seem to be specifically created to understand the workings of the universe.

But however far we may seem from these primitive minds, we are still connected. "Never make the mistake of thinking life is now adjusted for eternity," he says in *The Snout*. For the creation of new life has not stopped. Not so long ago, strange three-legged mutant frogs were found, living proof that nature has not stopped experimenting with different skeletal structures. Our genetic diseases are even more proof. Granted, none of these mutations have proved fruitful, but the time may come that one of these mutations will give rise to a new species, more powerful and intelligent than *Homo sapiens*. After all, to the dinosaurs, it must have seemed that the formation of new life had reached an end, that they were and always would be the masters of the Earth. Then God threw a monkey wrench into the machine of nature. The dinosaurs' reign did indeed last for millions of years, but it clearly came to an end. We as humans have only been around for a few thousand years. What right do we have to think that nature won't jump-start itself again?

Nature always seems to surprise us. We think we've got it all figured out, and then we discover a new organism, or galaxy, or technology, something that turns us end over end again, trying to figure out where we fit in. Many people don't think that it's even worthwhile, that maybe we should just stop trying to understand something so complex. Fortunately, there will always be those few dissatisfied people, the ones who feel that they must understand. They will be the ones that keep humans from falling into the trap on non-adaptation that has destroyed a good deal of potential species. But the path to the top of the proverbial 'ladder of knowledge' is not an easy one; in fact, it may be impossible. "The journey is difficult, immense, at times impossible, yet that will not deter some of us from attempting it," as Eiseley theorized in *The Slit*. But perhaps this 'journey' is necessary for the survival of all humankind.

Inevitably, this search for all the answers will lead us right back to where it all began: our ancestors, the animals. Soon we may realize that humanity's place in the universe is just as the Bible says, to name and nurture all creatures great and small. Certainly we aren't here to destroy them, although it sometimes seems that way. We share this world with the other trillion creatures that live here. And no other creature exhibits such love for all life as we do. That is what truly sets us apart, and yet binds us eternally to the fate of nature. We must use our God-given gift of love, as well as our knowledge, if any of us, both human and beast, are to survive in this beautiful yet fierce world. We can follow the circles that lead nowhere, or learn from nature, from our own beginnings. And that is Loren Eiseley's true message to the world.