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Loren Eiseley Memorial Scholarship

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Nebraska scientist, essayist, and naturalist Loren Corey Eiseley once remarked, “It’s *life* I believe in, not machines,” and he demonstrated this unyielding conviction throughout his life. From his humble beginnings in Lincoln, Nebraska, Eiseley was an individual captivated by nature and enamored by life of all forms. Growing up on the edge of town without many of the modern conveniences or pleasures of the day, Eiseley began to develop a keen interest in the natural world, especially in the flora and fauna native to Nebraska. Throughout his life, these intense bonds withstood the test of time and distance, and Eiseley consistently returned to the idyllic and bucolic environment, whether it was in person or in his writings. A common thread among his writings, studies, and specialties was his overwhelming passion for nature and his acute sense of his place in the world.

One of Eiseley’s strongest motifs in his works is a compassion for all organisms. In one of Eiseley’s signature essays, *The Star Thrower*, he relates the touching story of a truly compassionate gentleman who roams the beaches of Costabel, returning beached starfish back into the tumultuous surf from whence they came. The man could not hope to complete with the terrible power of death, which runs “more fleet than he along every sea beach in the world,” but the star thrower was content to do what was in his ability to rescue the otherwise helpless starfish from certain death on the cruel and unforgiving sands of the beach. He capered the star thrower’s posture to that of a god, perhaps alluding to a divine compassion that was present in at least a small measure in the kind man. That same divine compassion and mercy was Eiseley’s passion in both his writings and his daily existence.

Likewise, Eiseley noted his subconscious aversion to the undue imprisonment of animals in his essay *The Bird and the Machine*. Although he caught a diminutive sparrow hawk and had every inclination to deliver it to the zoo for a pecuniary profit something deep within him stayed his hand. Instead, he delved deep within his most intimate emotions, finding the strength to return the bird to its natural habitat and to its loving mate. Years later, Eiseley was still profoundly touched by the cry of unutterable and ecstatic joy that issued from the souls of the freed hawk and its concerned companion. Experiences such as this profoundly touched Eiseley’s life and gave him insight into the relationships between mankind and nature.

Loren Eiseley also had a complex sense of humanity’s place in the universe, specifically his own place. In *The Innocent Fox*, he noted that “one can never, try as he will, get around to the front of the universe. Man is destined to see only its far side, to realize nature only in retreat.” Eiseley was heartbroken at the calloused nature of the British fox poacher, who swore to kill foxes even at the risk of extinction of the entire species. Instead, he realized that man ought to coexist peacefully with the animal kingdom. He included several examples of such peaceful coexistence with animals that traditionally do not interact civilly with humans: a rattlesnake and a young fox. In both cases, stillness and tranquility were more than sufficient to facilitate peaceful interaction between the often conflicting creatures.

Eiseley occasionally wondered about the evolution of machines in our universe; he questioned whether or not machines were destined to overcome nature. Eiseley mentioned that automated technology could already outperform its natural counterparts in many menial tasks, and he suspected that it would soon possess the ability to duplicate many natural phenomena flawlessly. However, he made it impeccably clear that he preferred the ordinary to the extraordinary, the natural to the supernatural, and the power of nature to the power of the machine. Though mankind’s collective technological expertise has swelled, machines’ ability to feel emotion and passion is no comparison to the awe-inspiring sentiments of the living, breathing world in which he lived. Eiseley, when comparing the power of the machine to the power of the mind, noted that “the machine does not bleed, ache, hand for hours...in a torment of hope to learn the fate of another machine, nor does it cry out with joy nor dance in the air with fierce passion of a bird.” He made the distinction between the *physical* capacity of the machine and the *eternal* capacity of the soul, and his spirit rejoices with hope and renewal that memory brings, even when overwhelmed by a deluge of drudgery or torrents of toils.

Loren Eiseley drew upon his extensive understanding of anthropology, philosophy, nature, and the human experience as he formulated his dynamic ideas and thoughts. His Nebraska heritage similarly played a crucial role in his development intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. All those who encounter Eiseley’s progressive works continue to be edified and inspired through the simple yet profound truths contained in his enduring words.