

# LOREN EISELEY : ON OUR DISPLACEMENT FROM NATURE

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Linguists have a word for the power of language: displacement. It is the way by which man came to survive in nature. It is also the method by which he created and entered his second world, the realm that now encloses him. In addition it is the primary instrument by which he developed a means to leave the planet earth. It is a very mysterious achievement whose source is none other than the ghostly symbols moving among the ramifying pathways of the human cortex, the gray enfolded matter of the brain.

Loren Eiseley, *The Invisible Pyramid*, p. 144

## Summary statement

Loren Eiseley saw displacement as central to the human condition. While other creatures slowly evolve to meet changing conditions of habitats within which they live, nature developed the brain of homo sapiens to reach beyond incremental evolutionary adjustments, thereby fostering environmental adaptation through the medium of culture. This paper selects quotations from Eiseley's remarkably poetic writings to demonstrate his argument that human evolution has displaced us from an innate and existential sense nature, thereby creating environmental problems that have come to haunt us today.

## Scope of Argument

Eiseley's perspective on human existence is one of both wonder and melancholy. We are capable of envisioning a future or a place that does not yet exist—we can look with wonder and awe upon the cosmos and our place in it, but at the same time we sense that we are for all practical purposes alone in the frightening vastness of that cosmos, creatures who live at its mercy and whose time is finite. We are in effect displaced in time and place so we seek instead to achieve stasis by constructing environments that provide for us a second world within the world of nature.



Since the first human eye saw a leaf in Devonian sandstone and a puzzled finger reached to touch it, sadness has lain over the heart of man. By this tenuous thread of living protoplasm, stretching backward into time, we are linked forever to lost beaches whose sands have long since hardened into stone.

Loren Eiseley, *The Firmament of Time*, p. 56. <sup>1</sup>

Yet while we are displaced from our natural origins by the miracle of our minds, intuitive sensibilities deeply rooted in our evolutionary journey drive us to love the earth where we evolved. Eiseley was moved in particular by the crew of Apollo 13 who sought to return their spacecraft to earth, even if it meant they would burn up in earth's atmosphere.



. . . when the wounded Apollo 13 swerved homeward, her desperate crew intent, if nothing else availed, upon leaving their ashes on the winds of earth. A love for earth, almost forgotten in man's roving mind, had momentarily reasserted its mastery, a love for the green meadows we have so long taken for granted and desecrated to our cost. Man was born and took shape among earth's heavy shadows. The most poignant thing the astronauts had revealed in their extremity was the nostalgic call still faintly ringing on the winds from the sunflower forest.

Loren Eiseley, *The Invisible Pyramid*, p. 156 <sup>2</sup>

Since the onset of the Neolithic we have established our sense of belonging by building environments that anchor our place on the surface of the planet—from houses to neighborhoods, to cities and towns, and on to nation-states with specific boundaries we are willing to fight over. But if familiar places on earth radically change due to rising sea levels, uncustomary weather patterns and other conditions induced by climate change, places regarded as home to individuals will tend to become increasingly alien, in a sense *displacing their populations in place*. Eiseley stressed that we must seek ways to live more fully in both worlds, the world of nature and the world of our own making if we are to solve problems caused by our evolutionary displacement from nature. But if nature itself becomes all the more unreliable, to what may we turn?

Awareness of nature and its importance to us will become increasingly acute in the coming decades and efforts to confront the psychological effects of climate change and actual physical displacement caused by it will increase. Climate change itself is increasingly forcing us to recognize the presence, importance, and power that nature has on our “second world.” The construction of dikes and higher and higher sea walls and storm protectors, and changing agricultural practices to meet climate change while reinforcing buildings to resist increasingly violent storm events, may hold the line temporarily but it is recognition of our role in changing nature itself that continues as paramount. Or, as Eiseley put it



“. . . man's counting numbers and his technological power to pollute his environment reveal a single demanding necessity: the necessity for him consciously to reenter the preserve, for his own safety, he first world from which he originally emerged. His second world, drawn from his own brain, has

brought him far, but it cannot take him out of nature, nor can he live by escaping into his second world alone. He must now incorporate from the wisdom of the axial thinkers an ethic not alone directed toward his fellows, but extended to the living world around him.”

Loren Eiseley, *The Invisible Pyramid*, p.154. <sup>3</sup>

## Conclusions

It is obvious that the issues Eiseley commented on are now well known and his concerns substantially verified. Eiseley’s continuing contribution however, I believe, has to do with bringing together an understanding that combines science and a sense of the transcendent, which he made especially convincing through the poetic quality of his prose. Of course Eiseley is not alone in this. Other Scientists such as Edward O. Wilson and James Lovelock have posed similar arguments, but Eiseley is perhaps the most emphatic in that regard. Authors of the most definitive book on Eiseley’s writing and thought, Leslie Gerber and Margaret McFadden, described it this way: “[Eiseley] never sought to work [his ideas] into a rounded, defensible argument, because . . . he cherished the poet’s freedom to explore, speculate, and self-contradict. . . . [His] innate pessimism warred—often successfully—with his quest for a ground of hope. Although the clarity, order, and precision of his work suffered thereby, he was able to produce some writings that are startlingly rich and endlessly suggestive. . . . A great mystic, Loren Eiseley provides us not only with superb meditational literature but also, in a few cases, with pure experiences of self-transcendence.” Gerber and McFadden, *Loren Eiseley*, p. 54

Today as we consider our innate displacement from nature—or as Eiseley described it, a sensibility emanating from “the ghostly symbols moving among the ramifying pathways of the human cortex”—we are reminded that science provides the evidence and reveals ever-present realities, but only in partnership with a transcendent nature are we sufficiently motivated to act. In other words, our survival is dependent on a transcendent interpretation of nature much as he described was sensed by the astronauts of Apollo 13.

Reflecting on the future of man late one night from his home in Philadelphia, he wrote:

In the heart of the city I have heard the wild geese crying on the pathways that lie over a vanished forest. Nature has not changed the force that drives them. Man, too, is a different expression of that natural force. He has fought his way from the sea’s depths to Palomar Mountain. He has mastered the plague. Now, in some final Armageddon, he confronts himself.

Loren Eiseley, *The Invisible Pyramid*, p. 2

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<sup>1</sup> Figure 1: fossil leaf - accessed 8-4-17 fm. Google Images.

<sup>2</sup> Figure 2: view fm. International Space Station, courtesy NASA - accessed 8-4-17 fm. Google Images.

<sup>3</sup> Figure 3: village with agricultural terracing, accessed 1-3-09, fm. Google Images