

Finding Our Spiritual Universe

by Douglas Cowan & Stephen Miller

Years ago when I first attended First Unitarian the sermons on our relationship to the natural world and our connection to it attracted me. In 1988 our transitional minister between Todd Taylor and Christine Robinson was Joe Willis – a former Presbyterian minister that had become a Unitarian minister. This was a brief era in the church's modern history. On more than one occasion Joe's sermon would include a quote or reflection by a writer named Loren Eiseley. I did not know of Loren Eiseley but his thoughts interested others and me. There was enough curiosity about Eiseley in the congregation that the minister decided to hold a series of discussions at his home focusing on Loren Eiseley. Joe lived in a modest ranch style home in Dietz Farms, located in the North Valley. The book he chose to explore was "The Unexpected Universe" by Loren Eiseley.

This book, like his others, has chapter after chapter that suggest a mysterious and spiritual dimension in the universe. In his time Eiseley was called the modern day Thoreau or Emerson.

The reading today - "The Judgment of the Birds"- is a wonderful example of Loren Eiseley's insights into the spiritual force that permeates life in the universe. His role, as observer in this story, allows him to be a witness to the drama of this theme of life over death. Does his conclusion resonate with you, and do you see a spiritual dimension behind the Judgment of the Birds? Some of you may; others may not. Eiseley had insights that looked behind the mechanistic character of the universe to something beyond. Revelation texts from many religious origins address this subject on divine authority. Loren's story crosses the boundaries of many religions to affirm this view by using revelation found in empirical experiences. I would think that many of you that are here this morning might have a view for looking at the mystery of life in the Unexpected Universe through a similar lens that Eiseley did.

Who was Loren Eiseley?

Born in 1907 in Lincoln, Nebraska, he spent his first crucial years in the eastern part of the state. His time was characterized by the end of pioneer days in the Midwest, the growth of towns and cities, and the accumulation of wealth.

The Eiseley family always lived on the edge of town, somewhat removed from the people and the community from which they felt set apart through poverty and family misfortune. This setting, however, opened the adjacent country to a wandering boy with an early interest in the natural world. He described the lands around Lincoln as "flat and grass covered and smiling so serenely up at the sun that they seemed forever youthful, untouched by mind or time--a sunlit, timeless prairie over which nothing passed but antelope or wandering bird."

Loren's father, Clyde, worked as a hardware salesman with long hours and little pay. A sometimes-amateur Shakespearian actor, he gave his son a love for beautiful language and writing.

His mother, Daisey Corey, was described as "an untaught prairie artist". She had lost her hearing in childhood and was locked in a silent world. Given at times to irrational,

destructive behavior, she communicated with her son by thumping on the floor. It was an unhappy marriage and left its mark on the young child who felt forever alienated from his mother.

Having a troubled home life; as a youngster Loren found refuge at the public library and became a voracious reader.

In high school he wrote that he wanted to be a nature writer.

In college his education was interrupted by tuberculosis for which an enforced stay in the mountains and desert was mandated. In addition, his restlessness resulted in a year of riding the rails all over the west. He hitched rides on trains and lived as a quasi hobo. Finally, in 1933, he was awarded a BS Degree in English and Geology/Anthropology from the University of Nebraska. He combined his interest in writing and anthropology as he furthered his academic career.

Eiseley went on to secure his Masters and PhD in Anthropology from the University of Pennsylvania. Eventually he joined the faculty at the University of Pennsylvania in 1949 where he worked until his death.

In 1938, Eiseley married Mabel Langden of Nebraska. It was a childless marriage and she devoted her entire life to her husband and his career, a career, which was marked by increasing fame as a writer, science educator, teacher, and philosopher.

It was the publication in 1946 of his first and best-known book, *The Immense Journey*, which established him as a writer with the unique ability to combine science and humanism. *The Immense Journey* is a collection of essays, many of which owe their origin to his early Nebraska experiences. From that point on, he was recognized nationally and internationally and given major prizes and honorary degrees for his unique work.

Here is a quote from Eiseley that is representative of his view of humanity's evolutionary march through time in the universe:

"HE WAS BECOMING SOMETHING THE WORLD HAD NEVER SEEN BEFORE - A DREAM ANIMAL - LIVING AT LEAST PARTIALLY WITHIN A SECRET UNIVERSE OF HIS OWN CREATION AND SHARING THAT SECRET UNIVERSE IN HIS HEAD WITH OTHER, SIMILAR HEADS. SYMBOLIC COMMUNICATION HAD BEGUN. MAN HAD ESCAPED OUT OF THE ETERNAL PRESENT OF THE ANIMAL WORLD INTO A KNOWLEDGE OF PAST AND FUTURE. THE UNSEEN GODS, THE POWERS BEHIND THE WORLD OF PHENOMENAL APPEARANCE, BEGAN TO STALK THROUGH HIS DREAMS."

The *Christian Century* magazine called attention to a study of Loren Eiseley by saying: "The religious chord did not sound in him, but he vibrated to many of the concerns historically related to religion. Although Eiseley may not have considered his writing as an expression of American spirituality, one feels that he was quite mindful of its religious character. As an heir of Emerson and Thoreau, he is at home among the poets and philosophers, and among those scientists whose observations also were a form of contemplation of the universe."

Dr. Richard Wentz, professor of Religious Studies at the University of Arizona, quotes Eiseley from *All the Strange Hours* and *The Star Thrower*, to indicate that he was, in fact, a religious thinker:

"I AM TREADING DEEPER AND DEEPER INTO LEAVES AND SILENCE. I SEE MORE FACES WATCHING, NON-HUMAN FACES. IRONICALLY, I WHO PROFESS NO RELIGION FIND THE WHOLE OF MY LIFE A RELIGIOUS PILGRIMAGE."

"THE RELIGIOUS FORMS OF THE PRESENT LEAVE ME UNMOVED. MY EYE IS ROUND, OPEN, AND UNDOMESTICATED AS AN OWL'S IN A PRIMEVAL FOREST -- A WORLD THAT FOR ME HAS NEVER TRULY DEPARTED."

"LIKE THE TOAD IN MY SHIRT WE WERE IN THE HANDS OF GOD, BUT WE COULD NOT FEEL HIM; HE WAS BEYOND US, TOTALLY AND TERRIBLY BEYOND OUR LIMITED- SENSES."

"In essay after essay," writes Wentz, "he writes as a spiritual master or a shaman who has seen into the very heart of the universe and shares his healing vision with those who live in a world of feeble sight."

We must learn to see again, he tells us; we must rediscover the true center of the self in the otherness of nature."

Brian Cox, the English astronomer, has said: "We are the cosmos made conscious and life is the means by which the universe understands itself."

What a wonderful gift has been bestowed on us as conscious observers in the universe to be given the responsibility of this awareness.

We all have this capacity and through compassion bestowed upon us; we also have reason to, in our small way, make this planet in the universe a better place. It may be social justice or religious education that drives you. Or just the sheer pursuit of beauty may move your spirit.

Remember that you are part of the Immense Journey. Giving the Unexpected Universe a spiritual element through your life of compassion can be your contribution.

Loren said,

"WE HAVE JOINED THE CARAVAN, YOU MIGHT SAY, AT A CERTAIN POINT; WE WILL TRAVEL AS FAR AS WE CAN SEE, BUT WE CANNOT IN ONE LIFETIME SEE ALL THAT WE WOULD LIKE TO SEE OR LEARN ALL THAT WE HUNGER TO KNOW."

When Loren Eiseley was three his father held him up to watch Halley's Comet blaze across the sky and told his son to look for its return in 75 years. But Loren Eiseley did not live that long. He died July 9, 1977, having used his brief seventy years to leave behind a heritage that continues to enrich the lives of all who come to know his work.

A Spiritual Universe? Loren Eiseley seemed capable of capturing a vision of it and paved the way for others after him to see the universe through the lens of spirituality and unity. Steve Miller will offer his thoughts now.

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“Our Spiritual Universe”

A sermon by Doug Cowan and Stephen Miller at First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque, July 26, 2015
Stephen Miller’s part

Loren Eiseley was ahead of his time. Like Tielhard de Chardin and others, he saw the spirituality of the universe not as filled with demons and angels, but as filled with awe and wonder. We live in a spiritual universe. Maybe it’s not the *only* universe. And anyway, most people don’t even notice.

ee cummings wrote:

pity this busy monster,manunkind

not. Progress is a comfortable disease:
your victim (death and life safely beyond)

plays with the bigness of his littleness
– electrons deify one razorblade
into a mountainrange;lenses extend

unwish through curving wherewhen till unwish
returns on its unself.

A world of made
is not a world of born–pity poor flesh
and trees,poor stars and stones,but never this
fine specimen of hypermagical
ultraomnipotence. We doctors know
a hopeless case if—listen: there’s a hell
of a good universe next door; let’s go

Would you like to escape to a universe next door? Theoretical physicists tell us it might be possible. At least five plausible scientific theories suggest we live in a *multiverse*. Multiverse proposals do *not*, however, suggest we could choose to *go* to another universe. Of all the vast universes in the multiverse, our universe is all we know.

Most of us realize that the Milky Way is the galaxy in which our planet spins around our tiny star or sun. We know that many galaxies swirl around in outer space, but our knowledge of them is limited. In fact, our knowledge is pretty limited even of the other stars in our galaxy, and our knowledge of the rest of the planets beyond earth is limited. Look what we’re now learning about Pluto. And really, we barely know our own planet.

Did you see fireworks on the fourth of July? They were nothing like the show the universe puts on constantly. For those who have eyes to see, every star in the sky and every cell on our planet puts on a great show.

Loren Eiseley invites us to gain more awareness of the spirituality of the universe, maybe even the multiverse, but especially of our own planet in our own time and place in the vastness of all that is. Here’s a song to put music to the message:

“Our Spiritual Universe”

Of all the vast verses of the multiverse,
Our universe is all we know.
Of all the great galaxies of our universe,
Our Milky Way – we barely know,
Of all the pretty planets in our galaxy,
Our Earth is the one we know.

Look as a child to the stars.
Mystery presents a great show.
Imagine yourself as an ancient.
Ignore what you think you may know.

Our universe stretches out
Beyond what we see with our eyes
The more we awaken deep senses
The more we discover surprise.

Chorus

Sometimes what we think we know
Blinds us to the next great surprise
Can we find a space and a silence
To open our ears and our eyes?

Our earth is more than a rock!
She feeds us and suffers our pain.
She lives in a living universe.
To act like she’s dead is insane.

Chorus

Earth is the planet we know
And yet we don’t know her so well.
If we learn to listen to silence
She has stories and wonders to tell
Look as a child to the stars.
Mystery presents a great show.
Enter our spiritual universe
Dare to awaken and grow

See, the problem is the Enlightenment. Oh yes, we gained a lot in the Enlightenment. The light of science and rational philosophy have brought us a long way. I would not want to go back to the Dark Ages. But something was lost as well, and reason continues to

pull.

The journey from the Dark Ages to the Enlightenment pulls consciousness relentlessly.

Thus it may take centuries for any of us lest we be blinded by the light.

Once enlightened, however, facts seem much clearer as the light of science and technology illuminate.

Problem: In the Dark Ages we saw the stars better and absorbed meanings within Mystery.

In Enlightenment, stars are objects lightyears away to be explored by telescopes and documented.

In Enlightenment, Mystery presents a challenge as an obstacle to be overcome or solved.

Maybe life is best when light and dark take turns and we can understand and still stand in awe.

Maybe day and night are needed for wholeness and we can study and learn and still dream.

Maybe illumination takes place in total darkness and we can still be blinded by the light.

Maybe both sound and silence are required to make both speech and music.

Maybe both intuition and reason provide truth to reveal the complexity of reality.

Maybe both cognition and emotion are valid to empower our senses in both darkness and light.

The journey from the Dark Ages to the Enlightenment happened in a blink of an eye in historical context.

Centuries come and go, and humanity trudges on, most of us unaware of beauty in light and darkness.

Awareness: May the next era be the Awareness Age in which humans begin to notice.

Hopefully, many points of relevance come to mind. Here's one: When we are aware of our spiritual universe, we value our living planet. By value, I mean we love her. We don't want to abuse her. We don't want to extract our earth as if she's a resource to be used for the marketplace. We can see our Earth as an incarnation of God. Free market capitalism, by most descriptions, calls for constant growth. Isn't constant growth the basic characteristic of both cancer and free-market capitalism? In both, that growth uses up the healthy cells of the body. So it's time now to be aware. It's time to love our Earth as part of the spiritual universe and to care for her as we see ourselves as belonging to the community of all beings. Loren Eiseley is among the many who show us the joy and responsibility of falling in love with our Earth.

On this fragile planet we do live in perilous times. So ee cummings says there's a hell of a good universe next door while Loren Eiseley invites us to celebrate the heavenly universe right here. Let's open our spirits to all that's near and far. Let's be aware of what's within us and what's beyond us. Let's celebrate the life-force that carries us onward. And let's continue to "say to ourselves, it's a wonderful world."