

NEW HEAVEN, NEW EARTH

A sermon by F. Jay Deacon
Preached at Unity Church of North Easton
December 22, 2007

There is a sorrow as heavy as the night gloom into which Loren Eiseley once walked.

We all know it. And in the face of it religions have always hinted the advent of a new and better day.

My mother's memorial service a couple of years ago was thoroughly Presbyterian. All of the readings had to come, of course, from the Bible. But I did ask that, in addition to the planned readings, another be added, and that I be permitted to read it myself. It was all I could think of after the ravaging horrors of Alzheimer's Disease. The passage was from the twenty-first chapter of the Book of Revelation:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away."

And he who sat upon the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new."



Loren Eiseley writes of a despair so deep he was devoid of hope, and he was wandering on a dark beach like a dead skull out of which his revolving eye looked.

I have no way to know what was getting to him that day, but it's easy enough to imagine: he was a naturalist, you know. Why would a naturalist not despair?

THE READINGS

Loren Eiseley

*Excerpted from essay
"The Star Thrower"*

— from his book *The Unexpected Universe*

It began, if I may borrow the expression from a Buddhist sage, with the skull and the eye. I was the skull. I was the inhumanly stripped skeleton without voice, without hope, wandering alone upon the shores of the world. I was devoid of pity, because pity implies hope. Upon that shore . . . there were only the dead skull and the revolving eye.

I concealed myself beneath a fisherman's cap and sunglasses, so that I looked like everyone on the beach. . . . It is on the shore that the revolving eye begins its beam and the whispers rise in the empty darkness of the skull.

The beaches of Costabel are littered with the debris of life. Even the torn fragments of green sponge yield bits of scrambling life striving to return to the great mother than has nourished and protected them.

In the end the sea rejects its offspring. They cannot fight their way home through the surf which casts them repeatedly back upon the shore.

In the night, particularly in the tourist season, or during great storms, one can observe another vulturine activity. One can see, in the hour before dawn on the ebb tide, electric torches bobbing like fireflies along the beach. This is the sign of the professional shellers. A kind of greedy madness sweeps over the competing collectors. After a storm one can see them hurrying along with bundles of gathered starfish, or clutching bags of living shells whose hidden occupants will be slowly cooked and dissolved in the outdoor kettles provided by the resort hotels for the cleaning of specimens. Following one such episode I met the star thrower.

As soon as the ebb was flowing, as soon as I could make out in my sleeplessness the flashlights on the beach, I arose and dressed in the dark. As I came down the steps to the shore I

Continued 🗨️

Discontent or its harder cousin, despair. It's a stark picture he draws of himself on that beach.

But he is wandering on the ocean beach among a lot of other folks who don't seem to share his suffering. They are having fun, not at all worried about the fate of the imperiled life about them.

This reading presents a picture of three states of the human mind and I believe they show a necessary progression that we ought to consider. They aren't just moods, anyway. They're states of consciousness.

This is what Advent is about, more or less. It's a four-Sunday piece of the liturgical year which, in Christian churches, leads to Christmas. You may wonder why this post-Christian guy would hold onto Advent. But Advent pictures a dark time in which you wait for something that comes and brings relief — call it salvation, or call it enlightenment, call it what you will. And you don't just wait. Something happens to you.



It isn't quite totally dark when he goes to that beach. He describes a faint rainbow forming as the dawn approaches. It's enough so he can see the man on the beach who represents that enlightenment, or salvation.

But first, look what the others are doing. No despair. No pain or anguish. What they're doing, Eiseley describes as "vulterine." Greedy madness. While some defect in Nature leaves the sea's offspring to die on the beach in their thousands, their millions — these human tourists turn up with their vulgar little spades. They clutch bags of living shells whose hidden starfish occupants will be slowly cooked and dissolved in the outdoor kettles.

I didn't come here today to talk about starfish, but then, though Loren Eiseley clearly cares about starfish, they are not the final subject of his essay, either. Look deeper. The imagery is spot on.



From whatever state of skull you're looking at the world, let your inner eye see this. A man in

could hear the deeper rumble of the surf.

The shore grew steeper, the sound of the sea heavier and more menacing. Ahead of me, over the projecting point, a gigantic rainbow of incredible perfection had spring shimmering into existence. Somewhere toward its foot I discerned a human figure standing, as it seemed to me, within the rainbow. He was gazing fixedly at something in the sand.

Eventually he stooped and flung the object beyond the breaking surf. He was starting to kneel again.

In a pool of sand and silt a starfish had thrust its arms up stiffly and was holding its body away from the stifling mud.

"It's still alive," I ventured.

"Yes," he said, "if the offshore pull is strong enough."

"There are not many come this far," I said, groping in a sudden embarrassment for words. "Do you collect?"

"Only like this," he said softly, gesturing amidst the wreckage of the shore. "And only for the living." He stopped again, oblivious of my curiosity, and skipped another star neatly across the water.

"The stars," he said, "throw well. One can help them."

He looked full at me with a faint question kindling in his eyes, which seemed to take on the far depths of the sea.

I could feel the full night blackness in my skull and the terrible eye resuming its indifferent journey. I nodded and walked away, leaving him there upon the dune with that great rainbow ranging up the sky behind him.

I turned as I neared a bend in the coast and saw him toss another star, skimming it skillfully far out over the ravening and tumultuous water. For a moment, in the changing light, the sower appeared magnified, as though casting larger stars upon some greater sea. He had, at any rate, the posture of a god.

But again the eye, the cold world-shriveling eye, began its inevitable circling in my skull. He is a man, I considered sharply, bringing my thought to rest. The star thrower is a man, and death is running more fleet than he along every seabeach in the world.

I adjusted the dark lens of my glasses and,

Continued 📖

anguish of spirit, deep despair, walking the beach, surrounded by dying creatures. Surrounded, too, by the masses of people who don't care, feel no anguish at all. They just keep picking up the desperate gasping creatures and stuffing them in their bags. The surrounding scenes — the languishing and wasting of other life around them don't bother them none. For Eiseley, though, it's unbearable.

Now let's stop and inquire about this. We want to know, who's on the spiritual path here? The happy tourists or the despairing Eiseley?

You won't be too sure how to answer that until your inner eye spots the third state of consciousness pictured on the beach: the starfish-thrower. Or simply starthrower, as he calls him.

There was enough light for him to see that third possibility and it cast light on his despair.

Please think of this religiously.

Things undergo change, unfold. Millions of years ago, one day, the first flower appeared. It would be quite awhile before there were very many flowers but the day would come.

Even impenetrable rocks change in their molecular structure and turn to crystals, transparent to light, or diamonds.

No unfolding was quite so momentous as the appearance of consciousness. And that, too, unfolds.

I am not a Theist. Nor an Atheist. Both those options put the Essence, the ultimate heart and core of Being, in some Being-Out-There. I see it instead in the hidden core, at the center of things, hidden in the Nature of all things. In here, not out there.

Something finer than the vulgar tourists is about to turn up on that beach, by a path that requires a degree of suffering and anguish.

There is something that knows how to Unfold. To become for the first time ever a Flower. The grass knows how to grow and in Spring it will again. Our human consciousness shares that something, expresses it, is a part of it. There is Something at the heart of things that is preparing the way for a great shift in planetary consciousness,

thus disguised, I paced slowly back by the starfish gatherers, past the shell collectors, with their vulgar little spades and stick-length shelling pincers.

Deep-hidden in the human psyche there is a plea to wait upon some transcendent lesson preparing in the mind itself. Yet the facts we face seem terrifyingly arrayed against us.

Nevertheless, through war and famine and death, a sparse mercy had persisted, like a mutation whose time had not yet come. I had seen the star thrower cross that rift and, in so doing, he had reasserted the human right to define his own frontier.

Out of the depths of a seemingly empty universe had grown an eye . . . It looked out upon what I can only call *itself*. It searched the skies and it searched the depths of being. In the shape of man it had ascended like a vaporous emanation from the depths of night. It was an intrusion into, or a projection out of, nature for which no precedent existed. The act was, in short, an assertion of value arisen from the domain of absolute zero.

For a creature had stretched out its hand in pity. Some ancient, inexhaustible, and patient intelligence, lying dispersed in the planetary fields of force or amidst the inconceivable cold of interstellar space, had chosen to endow its desolation with an apparition as mysterious as itself. The fate of man is to be the ever-recurrent, reproachful Eye floating upon night and solitude. The world cannot be said to exist save by the interposition of that inward eye.

I had walked away from the star thrower in the hardened indifference of maturity. But thought mediated by the eye is one of nature's infinite disguises. Belatedly, I arose with a solitary mission. I set forth in an effort to find the star thrower.

On a point of land, as though projecting into a domain beyond us, I found that star thrower. Silently I sought and picked up a still-living star, spinning it far out into the waves. I spoke once briefly. "I understand," I said. "Call me another thrower." Only then I allowed myself to think, He is not alone any longer. After us there will be others.

making all things new. We are beginning to witness that spiritual awakening. But it begins with pain and discontent.



So come to that sea-beach just before dawn. Loren Eiseley saw three depictions of his own being there.

The first was his own, but his own state of mind turned out to be a midway, transitory state between clueless oblivion and enlightenment. The way between may begin with anguish and despair.

Be with it. Don't fear it. Praise be for the anguish and despair. But keep your inner eye open for enlightenment, for the salvation.



Why did no one see things as the star-thrower did?



Maybe the problem starts with a naive religion. God will take care of it. God would not allow global warming, say the hard-right religionists. Or whatever. But there is no God-Out-There. Whatever gracious, and miraculous, and ceaselessly creative force there is at the heart of things, is at the heart of you. What other hands does it have? If there is going to be a new kind of earth, *we will need a new kind of heaven to make it possible.*



We aren't going to have a new Earth until we have a new Heaven: — until the primitive dieties and myths are replaced by an evolutionary kind of enlightenment, until we understand that the Universe itself is now awakening as we awaken, wake up to our own human possibilities, wake up to just what's at stake right now, wake up to a new quality of consciousness. Then will come the New Earth because we will make it.



Or maybe the problem begins with our fear. We don't yet know the power of the Advent of the New Heaven and the New Earth. It's where the gods are.



He sees the star-thrower. That was the moment of Enlightenment. He saw, as if a god, the star-thrower, calmly defying convention, and he soon afterward *became* the star-thrower. Casting the stars slowly, deliberately, and well, he says — that's what he saw in his moment of Revelation, and that's what he did, that's what he became. After us, he knew, there would be others.

Look, that's all we're here to be and do. If we balance budgets, raise money, resolve or accept conflicts, consider new initiatives, go to meetings, write letters, get up in the morning — that is what it's about.

Listen again to what Loren Eiseley wrote: Deep-hidden in the human psyche there is a plea to wait upon some transcendent lesson preparing in the mind itself. Yet the facts we face seem terrifyingly arrayed against us. Out of the depths of a seemingly empty universe had grown an eye . . . It looked out upon what I can only call *itself*. It searched the skies and it searched the depths of being. In the shape of man it had ascended like a vaporous emanation from the depths of night. It was an intrusion into, or a projection out of, nature for which no precedent existed. The act was, in short, an assertion of value arisen from the domain of absolute zero.

Some ancient, inexhaustible, and patient intelligence, lying dispersed in the planetary fields of force or amidst the inconceivable cold of interstellar space, had chosen to endow its desolation with an apparition as mysterious as itself. The fate of man is to *be* the ever-recurrent, reproachful Eye floating upon night and solitude. The world cannot be said to exist save by the interposition of that inward eye.

Another surge of creation, a further unfolding of the human spirit, a new dimension of human consciousness, is crying out to come into being.

Loren Eiseley wrote that this mysterious eye through which he saw that early morning — that eye looked out upon some larger whole which was, in fact, *itself*. When you awaken to a new consciousness, when that inner Eye begins to see beyond the familiar territory in front of you, see something of the scope of this world of life — then it isn't just *you* who have woken. The Universe itself will have woken in you, and you will have begun to see that you are just that, a manifestation, right here, of that life which is everywhere, that creative energy and intelligence that created this Universe and creates it still.



We awaken to a new Possibility and a new Necessity. We see its advent and become it. We must wake up and watch for it, not by heading for a high hill to sit and wait, but by paying attention to the details of our lives, our work and our play, our love and our hate, our courage and our fear. The power of its Advent becomes the strength of our living.



And so Loren Eiseley concluded:

I picked up and flung another star. I could feel the movement in my body. It was like a sowing — the sowing of life on an infinitely gigantic scale. The task we had assumed was too immense for gazing. I flung and flung again while all about us roared the insatiable waters of death.

But we, pale and alone and small in that immensity, hurled back the living stars. I set my shoulders and cast, as the thrower in the rainbow cast, slowly, deliberately, and well. The task was not to be assumed lightly, for it was [humanity] as well as starfish that we sought to save.

I have come to look at Advent and Christmas in this way. If there's a Christ coming, it will have to be you. How can this be? I'm not even a Christian! Well, he wasn't, either.

It's bigger than that. It involves us all. The power of its coming will be the power of our community, and our faith, and our lives. May we see this coming one in each other and, inexorably, in our very selves. And be ourselves the Advent of a new heaven and a new earth.

MEDITATION & SILENCE

As the earth is blanketed in white, a silent music would envelop us in wonder. Let our ears be open to hear it.

In its quiet wonder we hold these lives
with fears
with tension of conflicts
with broken dreams
with unspoiled hopes

From the noise and tumult of our days let it awaken us.

As the reflected light illuminating the clouded sky signals horizons we cannot yet see, let the light we are given awaken us to the promise of a new day and lighten these minds.

May we discern — coming into being in this day — the new heaven and the new earth, hope fulfilled and surpassed, beauty beyond our hopes —

May we see it and know it, love it and give it comfort, and in this day work well and wisely to fulfill its promise, the promise of our inmost being
— in the silence.

- SILENCE -