

Flinging Stars, Sowing Hope

The Reverend Cynthia A. Frado (with Dr. Ed Tick reading)
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It began, if I may borrow the expression from a Buddhist sage, with the skull and the eye, said anthropologist Loren Eiseley. I was the skull, he said. 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. There was, he goes on to say, in this desiccated skull, only an eye like a pharos light, a beacon, a search beam revolving endlessly in sunless noonday or black night. Idea likes swarms of insects rose to the beam, but the light consumed them. Upon that shore meaning had ceased. There were only the dead skull and the revolving eye. With such an eye, some have said, **science looks upon the world. I do not know. I know only that I was the skull of emptiness and the endlessly revolving light without pity.**

Long ago now, it was Loren Eiseley's writings that brought science and spiritual reflection together for me. As a Nature writer, his critical observations and beautiful literary ability to sensitively process them was an intimate invitation to those with "eyes to see and ears to listen." In particular, I was drawn to his experience on the shores of Costabel...*upon that shore meaning had ceased. There were only the dead skull and the revolving eye. It was the skull of emptiness and the endlessly revolving light without pity.* Loren Eiseley's descriptive reflection of his own state-of-mind in the midst of the wreckage of the world, while related with such poetic, philosophical, and spiritual depth, touches a part of our common humanity that knows of what he speaks.

At times we, too, become desensitized observers to the suffering of the world, and we, too, know what it is like to fall prey to the *skull of emptiness and the endlessly revolving light without*

pity. All you have to do is turn on the news and feel small and helpless up against the pain and tragedy that seems to permeate all existence. The paralytic effect can be overwhelming at times. It is decidedly hard to keep hope alive when we see life as a constant struggle in an ocean of despair, walking as we do among the littered debris of poverty, disease, war, climate change, and destructive governmental policies. But just as Eiseley described this real dilemma of our human journey he also goes on to offer us a glimpse of salvation through his experience on the shores of Costabel.

As retold in his essay *The Star Thrower*, it was with his observant yet disillusioned eye that Eiseley walked the beaches of Costabel one morning before dawn. He speaks of the *shellers who are out there with their torches, hurrying along with bundles of starfish, or toppling overburdened, 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*.

The people in his story capitalize on the fact that the sea rejects its offspring, and being satisfied with that reality, they greedily take advantage of the suffering of others for their own benefit. (It is not hard to see parallels with our reality, today.) **This was a world that Eiseley understood.** It was the survival of the fittest. It was devoid of compassion. It was a non-feeling world without meaning, only the illusion of meaning. But then...but then...he met the star thrower, and that made all the difference.

*His story continues: *The shore grew steeper, the sound of the sea heavier and more menacing, as I rounded a bluff into the full blast of the offshore wind. I was away from the shellers now and strode more rapidly over the wet sand that effaced my footprints. Around the next point there might be a refuge from the*

wind. The sun behind me was pressing upward at the horizon's rim—an ominous red glare amidst the tumbling blackness of the clouds. Ahead of me, over the project point, a gigantic rainbow of incredible perfection had sprung shimmering into existence. Somewhere toward its foot I discerned a human figure standing, as it seemed to me, within the rainbow, though unconscious of his position. He was gazing fixedly at something in the sand.

Eventually he stooped and flung the object beyond the breaking surf. I labored toward him over a half mile of uncertain footing. By the time I reached him the rainbow had receded ahead of us, but something of its color still ran hastily in many changing lights across his features. 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.

“Yet,” he said, and with a quick yet gentle movement he picked up the star and spun it over my head and far out into the sea. It sank in a burst of spume, and the waters roared once more.

“It may live,” he said, “if the offshore pull is strong enough.” He spoke gently, and across his bronzed worn face the light still came and went in subtly altering colors.

“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 stooped 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 do not collect,” I said uncomfortably, the wind beating at my garments. “Neither the living nor the dead. I gave it up a long time ago. Death is the only successful collector.” 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 great 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 sea beach in the world.**

We have all walked upon metaphorical shores like Costabel, where there are those ready, willing and able to capitalize on the sufferings of others. And we, too, have seen those fewer souls who work in the midst of the most dire of circumstances...and we secretly ask ourselves, “Why? Why do they care so deeply? Why do they make such an effort in a seemingly losing battle? Why do they dare to believe that they can make even the slightest difference? Why do they choose hope over cynicism?”

Eiseley went back to his room to contemplate the very same thing. He went on to write: **Man is himself, like the universe he*

*inhabits, like the demoniacal stirrings of the ooze from which he sprang, a tale of desolations. He walks in his mind from birth to death the long resounding shores of endless disillusionment. Finally, the commitment to life departs or turns to bitterness. **But out of such desolation emerges the awesome freedom to choose—to choose beyond the narrowly circumscribed circle that delimits the animal being.** In that widening ring of human choice, chaos and order renew their symbolic struggle in the role of titans. They contend for the destiny of a world.*

Somewhere far up the coast wandered the star thrower beneath his rainbow. Our exchange had been brief, partly because I had been abrupt because I had, in the terms of my profession and experience, nothing to say. The star thrower was mad, and his particular acts were a folly with which I had not chosen to associate myself. I was an observer and a scientist. Nevertheless, I had seen the rainbow attempting to attach itself to earth.

*[And so it was] on a point of land, as though projecting into a domain beyond us, I found the star thrower. In the sweet rain-swept morning, that great many-hued rainbow still lurked and wavered tentatively beyond him. 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.**

And so it is that we gather in this community, turning our back on the disillusionment of the world, to infuse each other with the audacity to hope. We contend for the destiny of the world one person at a time, daring to be that difference...daring to be that hurler of stars who recognizes that the calling of our species is to bring compassion into this world that needs our defiant act of hope to bring possibility and meaning where there is only suffering and despair.

**I picked and flung another star, said Eiseley. Perhaps far outward on the rim of space a genuine star was similarly seized and flung. I could feel the movement in my body. It was like a sowing—the sowing of life on an infinitely gigantic scale. I looked back across my shoulder. Small and dark against the receding rainbow, the star thrower stooped and flung once more. I never looked again. 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. Somewhere far off, across bottomless abysses, I felt as though another world was flung more joyfully. I could have thrown in a frenzy of joy, but 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 people as well as starfish that we sought to save.**

Is it folly and madness to believe that our lives only find their true meaning when we refuse to be overcome by cynicism? Is it folly and madness to believe that while we cannot save everyone, we can save someone from the abyss of pain and suffering, loneliness and despair, starvation and death? **Is it folly and madness to believe that we are made stronger for our journey when we stand shoulder to shoulder with others who dare to find life and meaning in the difficult places?**

This being the first Sunday of a new year, I invite you to carry Loren Eiseley's story of *The Star Thrower* with you for further contemplation. For what we do here is folly and madness: in the midst of life's desolation, **we choose to live deliberately with meaning and purpose**; *we choose to help those we are able to help*; and we never give-up flinging hope into this world that

trembles with pain. Our task is not to be assumed lightly, for it is people as well as our planet that we seek to save.

Amen and Blessed Be