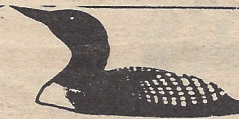


North Country Notebook



George Vukelich

There is a science fiction story based on the premise that Earth is a prison planet, a sort of intergalactic Devil's Island to which all the imperfections of the Universe were sent and from which none of them escaped. A Penal Colony off in the corner, isolated by radiation belts and vast distances from civilized Intelligences. And monitored constantly.

The way you monitor white rats in the maze.

The way you monitor bacteria in a petri dish.

I thought of that story the other night as I was watching some NASA scientists on the Cable News Network. The scientists were saying, in effect, that the Age of Manned (Personned, my daughter Jo points out) Space Exploration is over if you're talking Deep Space. The distances are too vast, the journey too long.

We can send our machines, they said; we cannot send ourselves. Even though the mind-boggling Apollo missions had sent 21 Americans to the moon, the NASA scientists were now saying what a few other scientists had been saying for years: *Earth is not a springboard to the stars. Earth is a springboard to Earth.*

One of those scientists was the late Loren Eiseley, who, back in 1970, defined our dilemma.

"We are now in a position to grasp," Eiseley wrote in his book *The Invisible Pyramid*, "after an examination of the many prisons which encompass life, that the cosmic prison which many men, in the excitement of the first moon landing, believed we had escaped still extends immeasurably beyond us."

The present lack of any conceivable means of star travel, Eiseley declared, and the shortness of our individual lives appear to prevent the crossing of such distances.

Eiseley insisted that even if we confined ourselves to unmanned space probes of far greater sophistication than any we now possess, their homing messages throughout the void could be expected to descend upon the ruined radio scanners of a civilization long vanished, or upon a world whose scholars would have long forgotten what naive dreams had been programmed into such instruments.

"We have, in other words," he wrote, "detected that we exist in a prison of numbers, otherwise known as light-years. We are also locked into a body which responds to biological, rather than sidereal time. That body, in turn, sees the universe through its own senses and no others."

The body defines the parameters of our dilemma.

Like a Zen koan, a simple Truth is encased in the statement: *Wherever you go, there you are.*

If Earth is our prison, then the body is our own individual cell. We are confined—at time, it seems, in solitary; at times, it seems not. But always confined.

To the day of our death, Loren Eiseley says, we exist in an inner solitude that is linked to the nature of life itself. Even as

we project love and affection upon others, we endure a loneliness which is the price of all individual consciousness—the price of living.

The price of living has also used up the Earth's resources criminally. We have raped and plundered the planet, and the hedge was always that Science would provide the technology to spring us away before the whole thing blew up in our faces. Some people, many of them currently in political power, argue that there's nothing wrong that a little American know-how can't fix, but they are only rattling their cages. In truth, there is no getting away from this one; there will be no last-minute helicopters coming in to take them away, because there is no place to go.

"We know that within our heads," Loren Eiseley notes, "there still exists an irrational restive ghost that can whisper disastrous messages into the ear of reason."

Today, humanity's mounting numbers and technological power to pollute the environment reveal a single demanding necessity to Eiseley: *the need for us consciously to reenter and preserve, for our own safety, the old first world from which we originally emerged.*

The first world is the *sunflower forest*—Nature, the natural world.

"Man must make," Eiseley declares, "by way of his cultural world, an actual, conscious reentry into the sunflower forest he had thought merely to exploit or abandon. He must do this in order to survive."

If man succeeds, he will, perhaps, have created a third world which combines elements of the original two and which should bring closer the responsibilities and nobility of character envisioned by the axial thinkers who may be acclaimed as the creators, if not of humanity, than of its soul.

The story of the great saviors, whether Chinese, Indian, Greek or Judaic, is the story of mankind enlightening itself; not simply by tools, but through the slow, inward growth of the mind that made and may yet master tools through knowledge of itself.

"Space flight is a brave adventure," Loren Eiseley concluded, "but upon the soaring rockets are projected all the fears and evasions of man."

Across millions of years, across two worlds, we have fled from the windy corridors of wild savannas to the sunlit world of the mind. And still we flee.

"We have called up vast powers," Eiseley warned in 1970, which loom menacingly over us. "They await our bidding, and we turn to outer space as though the solitary answer to the unspoken query must be *flight*, such flight as ancient man engaged in across ice ages and vanished game trails—the *flight from nowhere.*"

"Might as well fix up the Old Place," Steady Eddy says. "We ain't movin' out after all." •