

An Immense Journey

A Religious Naturalist Learns to Celebrate the Great Story

by Connie Barlow, 20 March 2002

"Men still live who, in their youth, remember pigeons. Trees still live who, in their youth were shaken by a living wind, But a decade hence, only the oldest oaks will remember, and at long last only the hills will know."

I am onstage at the Civic Center auditorium in Hot Springs, South Dakota, reading these lines from a chapter of Aldo Leopold's book, *A Sand County Almanac*. Aldo Leopold is a half-century dead. His essay, "On a Monument to a Pigeon," was written as a eulogy for the extinct Passenger Pigeon. Leopold recited these lines at the installation of a monument to mourn the loss of what was once an "onrushing phalanx of victorious birds, sweeping a path for spring across the March skies, chasing the defeated winter from all the woods and prairies of Wisconsin."

Just now, in bed with my laptop computer an hour before dawn, I feel a peaceful excitement. It is the realization that, on this Spring Equinox of 2002, I can yet again create from a convergence of two streams of life.

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I am a "religious naturalist" in the tradition of Aldo Leopold, and so the science mind within me knows full well that the "March" within Leopold's text and the "March" of the now is mere coincidence. Yet the science mind knows, too, that it shares neural territory with a far older mind: a religious mind that has been honed over countless generations. This religious mind offers emotional fitness by interpreting deep meaning, even portents, in such congruences of life. Only in recent years has my science mind happily ceded control to the religious mind in moments such as this. It is, after all, helpful to feel that I am a vessel for important work in the world. It boosts my spirits for action and productive engagement. Surely, no harm is done, and maybe, just maybe . . .

Such are the tensions in the life of a religious naturalist. I have learned how to turn the tension into play and enjoy the ambiguities, the immiscible mix of hard-nosed philosophical materialist with the dreamer who longs for purpose in life—in my life, in the life of my kind, in the life of the cosmos.

That dreamer was onstage in Hot Springs, South Dakota, because she is absolutely convinced that it makes a difference whether or not those who passed before are remembered or forgotten. Just as Aldo Leopold was attending to the memory of the Passenger Pigeon, I was attending to the memory of the Mammoth. It was the 25th anniversary of The Mammoth Site, which is an immense pit that displays partially excavated skeletons of Columbian Mammoths beneath a cathedral roof, only a mile from the Civic Center. The Mammoth Site has been skillfully developed to foster scientific understanding of this largest beast of Pleistocene America, while catering to the curiosity of tourists hopping from one amazement to another in this southern flank of the Black Hills, high holy of the Sioux Indians.

My mentor and friend, the paleoecologist Paul S. Martin, had invited me to help him organize this "Mammoth Memorial Service" as part of a weekend of celebratory events. It was Paul who suggested we use the Leopold essay, as to his knowledge that is the first record of an actual memorial service for an extinct species. "Ours will be the second," he told me. Sadly, we envision a veritable flood of such services in the decades and centuries ahead.

Aldo Leopold is a mentor too. I regard him as a religious naturalist, one of the tribe who feel and speak and write of the natural world with the sensibility of the science minded, yet with a reverence that is unmistakably religious—religious without the use of God language or of any supernatural constructs. For us religious naturalists, the natural world is more than sufficient to evoke a sense of the sacred. "Spirit" emerges from the material world as the cosmos complexifies through time. The greater indeed springs from the lesser; we are not compelled to find in the Beginning a kernel of what is eventually to come. The Universe is awash with genuine and breathtaking novelty. Here is the wonder!

We religious naturalists experience divinity by immersing ourselves in the wonders of nature. That immersion happens sometimes through direct experience, at other times by reading and rereading accounts of the natural world written by scientists, and especially those scientists or interpreters of science who are part of our tribe and are exquisite writers.

Saint Aldo, I submit. The spirit of Aldo Leopold has been very much with me since 1990, when I commenced a ten-year period of summering alongside the Gila Wilderness of southwestern New Mexico. The Gila was my culture's first designated wilderness area. It attained that status in 1924, thanks largely to the efforts of one of the early forest rangers of those public lands: Aldo Leopold.

Aldo was not only ahead of his time in his reverence for nature; he gave us a lovely metaphor for what Thomas Berry now calls "the new story" or "the universe story," and what I, following Michael Dowd, like to call "the Great Story." Aldo called the evolutionary pageant "the odyssey of evolution." Other great religious naturalists have coined equally appealing terms. Edward O. Wilson calls it "the evolutionary epic." Loren Eiseley wrote of "the immense journey."

In recent years, the mid-twentieth century essays by Loren Eiseley have become scripture for me—and I am not alone. Many of us in this Great Story movement point to Eiseley's essays as having played some role in our awakening to a depth realization that the evolutionary story is far more than science and that our love for nature and our zeal for contact with the more-than-human world are no less outpourings of religious sensibility than are churchly prayers and pilgrimages.

One essay by Saint Loren stands out for me, above all others. This is "The Judgment of the Birds" in his 1957 book, *The Immense Journey*. It took me a long time to open up to the religious naturalism of Loren Eiseley. I had to catch wind of him again and again. First, I had to fall in love with Annie Dillard, with her *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and learn, somewhere, that Loren had shaped her own writing, her own contact with the wild and the not so wild of rural Virginia. Some years after I received a postcard from Annie, authorizing me to turn a few sentences of *Pilgrim* into a short poem for an evolution anthology I was publishing, I learned that she, too, had communicated

with her mentor in seeking words of encouragement (and hoped-for praise) for her soon-to-be-published book, but to disappointing results. Eiseley had not responded.

My results were fabulous: her handwritten postcard is taped to the inside front of my life history journal, and her "poem" has carved out a place in my mind:

*I am a frayed and nibbled survivor
In a fallen world, and I am getting along.
I am aging and eaten and have done my share
Of eating too. I am not washed and beautiful,
In control of a shining world in which everything fits,
But instead am wandering awed about on a splintered wreck
I've come to care for, whose gnawed trees breathe
A delicate air, whose bloodied and scarred creatures
Are my dearest companions, and whose beauty beats and shines
Not in its imperfections but overwhelmingly in spite of them.*

Not all nature writing is religious naturalism. To begin, it must of course have a religious tone, a sense of the sacred. For some of us, "God" and God language can be present in measured amounts, so long as God is not removed from nature—directing nature from afar or, God forbid, creating nature. Rather, what is verboten is a sugar-coated rendition of the world. If those who celebrate evidences of cooperation in nature—no matter how enthusiastic they may be about the story drawn from science—do not also celebrate the role that strife plays in prodding evolution, then, in my view, they are not of this tribe.

On the other hand, we religious naturalists can wander dangerously deep into the dark side. Annie Dillard clearly struggles with the dark side in her *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and she struggles with it still (*For the Time Being*, 2000). When I choose to sink into darkness, to explore the depths of melancholy as a way of cleansing, as a way of getting through depression quickly by plunging straight into it, I reach for Loren on my medicine shelf.

I did that one day in July of 2000. I tossed *The Immense Journey* into my backpack, and headed out for a four-day solo in the Gila Wilderness. And there I experienced a meaningful, to my mind mystical, congruence of life streams.

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It was Day 3, the day I intended to spend at least six hours doing nothing but sitting on a low cliff overlooking Little Creek, contemplating predation. Why here? On a hike the week before, I had discovered a treasure trove of bear shit, and a circular impression on the bed of pine needles that looked the proper size for a bear-size bed. But this day as I approached "Defecation Point," I heard the unmistakable alarm cries of a pair of robins. Not unusual in this wilderness: I have watched jays harass a sleeping fox. But many a time I have heard that sound ahead of me and become more watchful for larger predators, the kind that my ancestors feared—and were the fitter for it.

As I topped the ledge, I realized the birds were protesting the presence of something hidden in the green just thirty yards away, on the other side of the creek. This could be interesting! The ritual would, of course, begin with my paying homage to the dozen or more tokens of ursine prowess on the point, all far from fresh. But there amidst the scatter was something I had not expected: a fresh scrape. A heap of needles at the butt end of two long scrapes that exposed bare earth. This is not what bears do; this is lion. Lion, less than a week old. Oh my.

I gathered several palm-size rocks and began my vigil, back against a young juniper. My intention had been to contemplate predation this day—not to fear it. Soon the robins were joined by a rufous towhee and a pair of canyon wrens, all protesting the presence of something invisible to me. I scanned the green jungle directly ahead and slightly below my ledge. I scanned it again, and again. Who and where was the predator? Surely it would come out into the open of the creekbed soon. But it did not.

I wonder now what the day would have been like had I not happened (or felt compelled?) to turn my head to the left at one crucial point. For there, slightly above me on the far slope, perhaps a hundred yards away, was the back and shoulder hump of a very large animal, its head down and lost in the brush. The head came up and turned to my direction. Such a small head for a massive body: lion!

Although the distance was too great and the ridge too shaded for me to make out the eyes, the head was pointed in my direction and remained there for a time I cannot honestly estimate. A decision apparently was made, and the animal casually resumed its upslope journey. A long tail emerged from behind a bush, the end jauntily tipped up.

Birds! my mind screamed. Birds! Wake up! There's a lion over there. That's the animal you ought to be scolding!

But no. The staccato protests maintained in the thicket straight ahead.

Soon, the most frightening event of the day occurred. A pair of Steller's jays had added their harsh voices to the din, and now one flew from the jungle to a low branch on my side of the creek, a few paces directly ahead. The jay kept scolding, but here is the horror: the bird's back was to me.

Well, that's it. I never saw the mysterious predator. The jays and towhee and wrens eventually tired and went on with their lives. But the robin couple kept up the protest for hours. A late afternoon thunderstorm chased me back to camp, which happened to be right beneath where I saw the lion. And that's when I made the connection.

I decided to stay put, but to gather wood for an all-night campfire to keep me company. Fire, too, is bred into my bones for such moments as these. In the last light of evening, I pulled out the little book, and began "The Judgment of the Birds."

How could I have forgotten! The title image of that essay is Loren awakening from an afternoon doze in the woods "dimly aware of some commotion and outcry in the clearing." The light was "slanting down through the pines in such a way that the glade was lit like some vast

cathedral. And there, on a low branch, sat an enormous raven, with a red and squirming nestling in his beak."

The outcry in the clearing came from the nestling's parents, who were soon joined by birds of "half a dozen varieties."

"No one dared to attack the raven. But they cried there in some instinctive common misery, the bereaved and the unbereaved. The glade filled with their soft rustling and their cries. They fluttered as though to point their wings at the murderer. There was a dim, intangible ethic he had violated, that they knew. He was a bird of death."

Loren recounts how the protests stilled and the mood shifted. "It was then I saw the judgment. It was the judgment of life against death. I will never see it again so forcefully presented. I will never hear it again in notes so tragically prolonged. For in the midst of protest, they forgot the violence. There, in that clearing, the crystal note of a song sparrow lifted hesitantly in the hush. And finally, after painful fluttering, another took the song, and then another, the song passing from one bird to another, doubtfully at first, as though some evil thing were being slowly forgotten. Till suddenly they took heart and sang from many throats joyously together as birds are known to sing. They sang because life is sweet and sunlight beautiful. They sang under the brooding shadow of the raven. In simple truth, they had forgotten the raven, for they were the singers of life, and not of death."

I had not forgotten the lion. For all I knew, the robins were still sounding the alarm a short distance upstream, as darkness was creeping into the canyon. Fear was still a real presence, and the fire I would soon light was intended to do it battle. A day scheduled for the contemplation of predation had yielded a night exquisitely tuned to contemplate death.

My mother's death was standing ready for the task. The two-year anniversary was just a week away. What I was not prepared for was the sudden insistence of my father's death, more than thirty years distant. Quickly I made the calculation: within a few days I would attain the age my father would forever remain.

A second revelation followed: now I knew why I had chosen Loren as my companion, and why his *Immense Journey*. This was the book our minister had given me the day before my father's funeral, the day before my fourteenth birthday.

My sister and I had just completed confirmation classes at our Congregational church. I recall Dr. Read explaining how, like a watch, a creation requires a creator. I was almost convinced that day that believing in God was warranted.

An hour must have passed as Betsy and I stood outside the church waiting for Mom to pick us up. A neighbor finally came in her stead, and then the rest is just blank. I do remember Reverend Read sitting by my bed and offering the little book with its tangerine cover and black-lined fishes.

I don't believe I ever opened it.

The book I had with me now was blue, a silhouette of a fork-tailed tern at its center.

Even closer to my soul than Saint Loren is Saint Julian. Julian Huxley was of my grandfather's generation. An esteemed evolutionary biologist, he came from a family that would have him be no less: he was the grandson of the biologist Thomas Henry Huxley, who not only coined the word "agnostic" to describe his religious outlook but also promoted a book written by a great friend and colleague that would transform the world. That book was *On the Origin of Species*.

Few in the Great Story community (other than Thomas Berry) are familiar with the work of Julian Huxley and his substantial contribution to the worldview that impassions us. Yet it was Sir Julian who wrote the Introduction to the 1959 English translation of Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man*. There Julian recalls meeting Teilhard in 1946 and discovering that "he and I were on the same quest, and had been pursuing parallel roads ever since we were young men in our twenties."

Julian, a staunch proponent of what he called "evolutionary humanism," did not share in Teilhard's Christian extensions. He demurred, "Though many scientists, as I do, find it impossible to follow him all the way in his gallant attempt to reconcile the supernatural elements of Christianity with the facts and implications of evolution, this in no way detracts from the positive value of his naturalistic general approach." Overall, Julian judges that Teilhard "has forced theologians to view their ideas in the new perspective of evolution, and scientists to see the spiritual implications of their knowledge."

Teilhard, in turn, acknowledges Julian on one key insight: "Man discovers that he is nothing else than evolution become conscious of itself, to borrow Julian Huxley's striking expression. It seems to me that our modern minds (because and inasmuch as they are modern) will never find rest until they settle down to this view. On this summit and on this summit alone are repose and illumination waiting for us." (*Phenomenon*, p. 221)

Evolution become conscious of itself: what a species self-image! For me, coming across Julian Huxley saying this in the original (not first via Teilhard) was pivotal in my philosophical and religious journey. But it would require some years for me to fully take in the implications, to begin living a life congruent with this principle of faith.

Evolution become conscious of itself. Now here is a way to move through the dark times, especially in these worldwide dark times of ecological assault. Yes, my kind is bad, bad, bad for the planet. I have felt that way since the first Earth Day, and even before, as I mourned little losses in my neighborhood. I recall that in my twenties, working for wilderness protection in the forests of southeastern Alaska, I was occasionally overwhelmed by misanthropic yearnings; Earth would be far better off if we would just hurry up and go extinct. I still feel that way from time to time, but now I bring myself back to productive engagement with the world by remembering that, truly, the dinosaurs would be worse off without us.

You see, the dinosaurs (nonavian, *T. rex* type dinosaurs) have been extinct for 65 million years. Not only extinct, but there has been no active memory of dinosaurs for 65 million years.

And, for me, memory is key. Death is inevitable; death is natural. But, ah, there is memory! There is memory of my mother, of my father, of the long-necked sauropods and flying pterosaurs. It is the complete and utter loss of memory of what came before that is the true tragedy, not the death itself.

This I know: today, anytime a child plays with Barney, Earth once again is playing with dinosaurs. Whenever any of us stands in awe before a museum skeleton of *Triceratops* or *Brachiosaurus*, Earth is once again delighting in dinosaurs. When we feel a rush of adrenaline as we watch (for the umpteenth time) that cup of water on the dashboard begin to ripple or that spoon of jello in the girl's hand begin to quake, Earth is once again experiencing terror of reptilian giants.

Yet there is more to being human, to being fully human, than just *knowing* the Great Story of life's immense journey in the odyssey of evolution and teaching this story to our children ad infinitum. We are more than a sterile repository for Earth and cosmic memory; we are Celebrants of the Great Story—that is our species role! It is here that the work and wisdom of Thomas Berry have made such a difference for me, and, I have learned, for many others, too. It is here that Thomas's insights serve to update, enrich, and re-motivate my tradition of religious naturalism.

In his 1957 book, *Religion Without Revelation* (p. 156) Julian Huxley wrote, "If the spiritual life-blood of the great masters of thought is available to everyone, why go to church and listen to familiar prayers and to a prosy sermon, when you could stay at home and receive new knowledge and deeper thoughts from a book?" The answer, dear Julian, is that it is not either/or. I *can* go to a church and get the best of both worlds — especially if I or another of us in this "movement" has been invited to give the sermon or presentation at Sunday service. I can come into a church and choose as the scripture reading Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme, Loren Eiseley, Aldo Leopold, Edward O. Wilson, Ursula Goodenough, or even Julian Huxley. I can engage the youngsters with evolutionary parables about "Earth's Challenging Childhood" or "The Lucky Little Seaweed," or dramatically tell them the story of how the calcium in their bones was created in the belly of a supernova star. I can dab their foreheads with glitter — with stardust — while the congregation chants

*We are made of stardust, every single atom
Of carbon and of nitrogen, calcium and iron.*

I can also walk out onto the stage of the Civic Center auditorium in Hot Springs, South Dakota, wearing a silly headdress of long, curling pods. I can stand before the microphone and declare, "I am Honey Locust, *Gleditsia triacanthos*, and I have to tell you I am shocked. I'm absolutely shocked that the mammoths are no longer with us. Until I received an invitation to present this eulogy, I had no idea the mammoths were gone!"

Julian: Hear this: I can have both worlds! I can have religion and have naturalism, too. I can cultivate my mind, yet still chant and dance and laugh and look silly. And, for you, Loren, know that a bright light can always be found in your darkness, which is my darkness too. There is meaning and purpose and ample room for joy and hope. For these gifts, I thank you, Thomas!