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Professor Taft

Expository Writing E-25, section 6

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In his essay, *The Judgment of the Birds*, Loren Eiseley depicts observations of nature and highlights some of his personal experiences with birds. He carefully communicates the detail and inspiration he gains by these experiences, where he finds himself encountering birds doing what he feels are extraordinary things in the wild. Eiseley asserts that all human beings gain significant insight and perspective when immersing them in nature, in separation from the routine chaos of daily human life. What could be perceived merely as daily observations of birds in nature, Eiseley believes, actually entail life lessons. “It is a commonplace of all religious thought, even the most primitive, that the man seeking visions and insight must go apart from his fellows and live for a time in the wilderness. If he is of the proper sort, he will return with a message.” (525) Eiseley is careful not to predict what message, or where the message may come from in the isolation of the wilderness, but he clearly defends the significance of messages sent to us by nature. “It may not be a message from the god he sets out to seek, but even if he has failed in that particular, he will have had a vision or seen a marvel, and these are always worth listening to and thinking about.” (525) Throughout his essay, Eiseley finds his faith and inspiration for life in nature. He sees birds as living in community, making decisions, eating, nesting, caring for their offspring and even being affected by weather. We explore in this essay Eiseley’s perspective that nature is spiritual rather than a series of routine observations in the wild, and explore his belief that birds share the pitfalls of existence much like humans.

One aspect of life for birds, humans and other species is what Eiseley calls “judgment upon life.” (530) We both judge, and are judged, in our interactions with other human beings in daily life. For humans and birds – all species – the final judgment on earth is similarly death. Some judgments are more serious than others. Some judgments are fair, and some based on misperception can be incorrect. We see in Eiseley’s essay where he quietly rests in the wilderness and observes clearly a “judgment of life, and that it was not passed by men.” (530) Eiseley introduces the scene: “I had sat down to rest with my back against a stump. Through accident I was concealed from the glade, although I could see into it perfectly.” (530) After resting quietly he’s awakened by a loud noise. He sits upward, the light is perfect, the view is perfect and he observes: “there on the extended branch sat an enormous raven with a red and squirming nestling in his beak. The sound that awoke me was the outraged cries of the nestling’s parents, who flew helplessly in circles about the clearing. The sleek black monster was indifferent to them.” (531) It is important to note that both birds and humans become parents and care for their young. Upon birth, it is innately perceived that the young offspring are the sole focus and responsibility of the parents. And, it is the main objective of parents, both bird and human, to protect and defend their offspring. “He gulped, whetted his beak on the dead branch a moment and sat still. Up to that point the little tragedy followed the usual pattern.” (531) Eiseley observes the murder of one bird by another bird, and calls out the routine aspect of the life cycle to this point. A raven has merely hunted and eaten a small bird. It’s what Eiseley sees next that impacts him emotionally. “No one dared 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. He was a bird of death.” (531) Eiseley observes the parents of a murdered youngling protesting and grieving for their lost offspring. He hears the passion behind the cries of the birds, and their protest. He sees the raven unapologetic and confident in what he has just done. “And he, the murderer, the black bird at the heart of life, sat on there, glistening in the common light, formidable, unmoving, unperturbed, untouchable.” (531) Rather than a routine experience in nature, Eiseley understands he has witnessed a tragedy, a judgment on a life. And he realizes to witness a death and powerless, bereaving parents – either bird or human – is a spiritual experience.

Eiseley observes another judgment that day as he sits in the wilderness: “The sighing died. It was then I saw the judgment. 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 the 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, doubtedly at first, as though some evil thing were being slowly forgotten.” (531) He sees the community of birds nearby gather and join in unprecedented song overcoming evil with good. Before his eyes, Eiseley sits silently and shocked in nature, observing the same struggle of relationship, loss, death and beautiful music from a choir of birds, as with humans. It’s there in nature in a happenstance spot in the sizeable space of the wilderness, that Eiseley has a spiritual experience.

Eiseley is very affected by this observation and says, “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.” (531) Eiseley sees the birds ignore the murderous raven, and create beauty through unifying musical song unlike anything he feels we could imagine. He has witnessed judgment. He has seen the raven judge the youngling. He has seen a community of birds in nature judge the raven. He has felt these judgments and observed their respective power. Eiseley inadvertently is a witness, and a part of what he observes. He cannot separate from it. He cannot clear it from his mind, and he is affected by it because Eiseley favors the wilderness. He trusts and believes in the power of nature, and he expresses his faith in nature thematically in this essay and his writings in general. His personal experience in the wilderness becomes something he reflects upon and considers, and that motivates him in a surprising observation he did not schedule, create or plan. Eiseley realizes in this that the unplanned portion of such a unique experience also empowers nature as a diverse, robust source of spirituality.

Works Cited

Eiseley, Loren. *The Judgment of the Birds*. The Immense Journey. New York. Random House, 1957.