



PROFESSOR
INDSEY

Please pardon your Professor, gentle readers, while he traipses across his topic like one of those water striders, or "Jesus Beetles," that dance about on the surface of ponds and streams. In his dotage he sometimes gets confused in his direction, and is subject to abrupt fits and starts.

As we lurch toward the 21st century, our world is increasingly filled with research and development staff, scientific and scholarly professionals of every stripe, computer and telecommunication machinery of uncannily sophisticated discernment, and a smugness about what we know, or can find out that, frankly, terrifies me. Perhaps certain truths are not self-evident. How can we know what we know? I suspect the known, like a shape-shifting chimera, changes as we change. Even moral truths, once discovered, are subject to flux through time.

The renowned biologist, Loren Eiseley, a man of reflection whose work amalgamates the best of science and poetry, once described his experience with a certain sand wasp he was studying.

The female wasp of this species burrows into a sand tunnel in late fall, depositing an egg in the ground. The female dies after the egg is laid. The egg will not hatch in the burrow until wintertime. Since no food source exists in proximity to the recently hatched wasp larva in its hole, starvation would be inevitable.

Nature's answer to this circumstance? The female wasp locates a mature cicada, drags it into the burrow, and through a delicate surgical process, performs a lobotomy on the cicada's notochord, leaving the insect in a state of suspended animation. The wasp larva hatches to a fresh meal in the dead of winter.

Eiseley confesses to finding himself all at sea in attempting to comprehend this process. The wasp doesn't merely sting or bite the cicada. One must then eliminate instinctive behavior as an explanation. Since the lobotomy requires a series of sophisticated surgical steps, the process is learned and transmitted from one generation to the next. How? Eiseley says it's simply impossible to know, and he must be content with that.

I can be comfortable with that approach to knowledge. Understanding the complexities of our universe is tough business. Simple dichotomies: right versus wrong, black or white, good or bad, don't necessarily fit in the cubbies we would choose for them. Last week a group of astronomers were discussing the age of the universe on National Public Radio. They expressed dismay because current theory would seem to indicate that certain stars are older than the universe itself! Very curious. We like things neat and pat, but often the pieces don't quite fit. The Chaos Theory, currently popular in academic circles, backhandedly addresses quirks and glitches.

I would like to espouse what I might refer to as "colloidal thinking," in other words, holding in suspension those things which don't fit the current schema or our past beliefs and ideas. Try it for awhile even if it feels uncomfortable. The music of the spheres just may be composed by Satie, and that makes understanding difficult.



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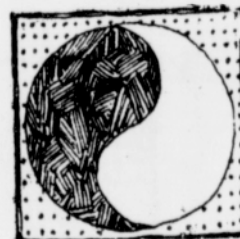
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There are three rules for writing a novel,
unfortunately, no one knows what they are.
W. Somerset Maugham