

SCIENCE, HUMANITY, AND WONDER



In my junior year of high school, as I slogged through John Vitter's chemistry class, he suggested one day that I read *The Lives of a Cell* by Lewis

Thomas, sighing mildly when I asked if there would be extra credit involved.

No, I wasn't being nudged toward Dr. Thomas to improve my GPA. One should, I was reminded, read some books simply because they were wise and good.

About Thomas, you might already know. He was well established as a gifted medical researcher and administrator in the 1970s when one of his speeches came to the attention of *The New England Journal of Medicine*, which suggested that he write a regular column. His graceful essays attracted a wider audience, and when they were collected in *The Lives of a Cell*, the book became a best seller, prompting a string of others until his death in 1993.

I think I now know why Mr. Vitter, also gone many years now, connected me with Thomas. Although I was a diligent chemistry student who made good grades, my ambivalence about the subject was probably obvious. As the high school newspaper editor with a demonstrated passion for English,

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I no doubt appeared a step or two outside the circle of the sciences. Mr. Vitter was offering Thomas as a bridge of sorts, an invitation to think of science and literature as part of — not apart from — each other.

The ideal of reconciling science and the humanities was an abiding theme of the essays Thomas wrote, and he knew that his work was cut out for him. For generations, society has informally regarded intellect as running along two tracks: scientific intelligence, concerned with precise measurement, controlled experiment, and mathematical calculation; and artistic intelligence, the wild and woolly brain behind the liberal arts.

In his famous “Two Cultures” speech in 1959, C.P. Snow, trained as a scientist and accomplished as a novelist, lamented how disciples of science and art regarded each other across “a gulf of mutual incomprehension.”

The problem was still evident when Thomas tackled it in his 1983 book *Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Night Symphony*. “The sciences and humanities are all of a piece, one and the same kind of work for the human brain, done by launching guesses and finding evidence to back up the guesses,” Thomas argued. “The methods and standards are somewhat different, to be sure . . . The thing to do, to get us through the short run, the years just ahead, is to celebrate our ignorance. Instead of presenting the body of human knowledge as a mountainous structure of coherent information capable of explaining everything about everything if we could only master all the details, we should be acknowledging that it is, in real life, still a very modest mound of puzzlements that do not fit together at all.”

In that humility, Thomas suggested, is the seed of wonder, which any intelligent mind should embrace.

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