

February 2006 UDWPA exam

Author: Bethann Garramon, Junior, Fine Arts

It is extremely interesting to consider Lewis Thomas's essay "To Err is Human" within the context of his professional career. As a physician and research scientist during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas was clearly a member of the scientific community whose foundations are solidly centered in Baconian principles. To view the world as something to master, something to be conquered and overcome is to be a scientist in the Western tradition. In addition, Frances Bacon and other early scientists were significant contributors to the concept of natural hierarchies, topped of course by humankind, a notion which is now entrenched in the scientific communities. It is within this context that Thomas' exploration of humankind's fallibility proves itself highly ironic. In the simplest analysis, his commentary would lead to a conclusion of the blind leading the blind; flawed nature requires erring human to fix it.

Additionally, consideration of Thomas's periodic context is useful. Thomas writes this essay in 1979 and speaks of computers in terms of entire buildings encompassing the humming and churning machines whose groanings could easily be characterized as suffering and concentration. To identify the chronological context of his thoughts is crucial, as it presents us with the necessity of recognizing Thomas was thinking in an era drastically different from our current situation. Thomas certainly did not settle in with his laptop notebook, tossing his thoughts out on a keyboard while accompanying the effort with tunes from his Ipod Nano. Rather, he spoke of the complexity and potential extant within the "great halls" (561) enclosing vast machines which could hardly be reconciled with today's palm pilots and camera phones.

Having briefly considered these two significant contextual factors in Thomas's writing, we could easily continue to explore the effects the era and profession would have had upon Thomas' perception of human foibles. However, pursuit of this inclination is not necessary. Clearly, Thomas was involved with the evolution of our conscious[ness] from an independent entity to one which is nearly entirely reliant upon technology and its computers. The emphasis on technological possession of computers is significant and deliberate. The overriding cultural perspectives of our day have so thoroughly integrated

computers that we literally cannot think of living without them. As useful as we have found computers, it could be said they have found humanity at least equally so.

Were we to pause and consider this, not as an existential exercise in an effort to affirm mechanical consciousness, but as a clear symptom in the trend which identifies humanity's marked surrender to a fatal disease, we might recognize how terminal this progression actually is. Western thought and its penchant for altering the cosmos to suit its fancy has grown from a blemish to a disorder which has become globally ubiquitous. No longer can we look to the East, to the subcontinents nor the southern hemisphere in hopes of locating a cleansing perspective. The Earth-respect once displayed by much of the globe's population has been obliterated, saved only in those few, desperately threatened cultures whose connection to Earth is still immediate and personal. The deep relevance of an intimate relationship with the intricacies of nature has been largely foregone by global humanity, and has been extracted from the majority of resisting cultures.

It is in this transition, from reverence for Earth and her systems to condescending, clinical dissection of life's complexities, which marks most clearly what Thomas identified. "Other creatures do not seem to have DNA sequences for making mistakes as a routine part of daily living, certainly not for programmed error as a guide for action" (562). Quite so. In fact other creatures, not excluding those limited cultures which still engage respectfully and successfully with natural systems, do not go about their daily business with overt presumption and ambition as do we members of the overlying global culture. Aside from the majority of our earth's human population, the biosphere and its inhabitants interact in a system of unconscious equality. The lion preys on the gazelle—today's chase yields hunger for the lion, life for the gazelle. However, tomorrow's hunt brings sustenance for the lion, and through that, a continuation of the life energy of the gazelle. The hyenas may be competition for the lions, but no lion pride will ever set out across the African savannah intent on destroying every hyena, nor do they look upon each and every gazelle as solely and exclusively their own.

It is this difference, this innate understanding of the equal validity and necessity of each species in its place which humanity's consciousness has overwhelmed, marginalized, and discarded. *THIS* is the error, practiced and repeated until it has been

imbedded, “coded,” into humans which ultimately and irrefutably contradicts Thomas’s faith that error is a “splendid freedom.” For it is within this error that we have enshrined our disregard for equitability, balance, and the self-governance of Earth’s systems. Thomas’s “splendid freedom” spells out a disastrous excuse, for humanity has responded to the splendid imprisonment of Earth with a splendid shrug.