

THOUGHTS ABOUT LEWIS THOMAS

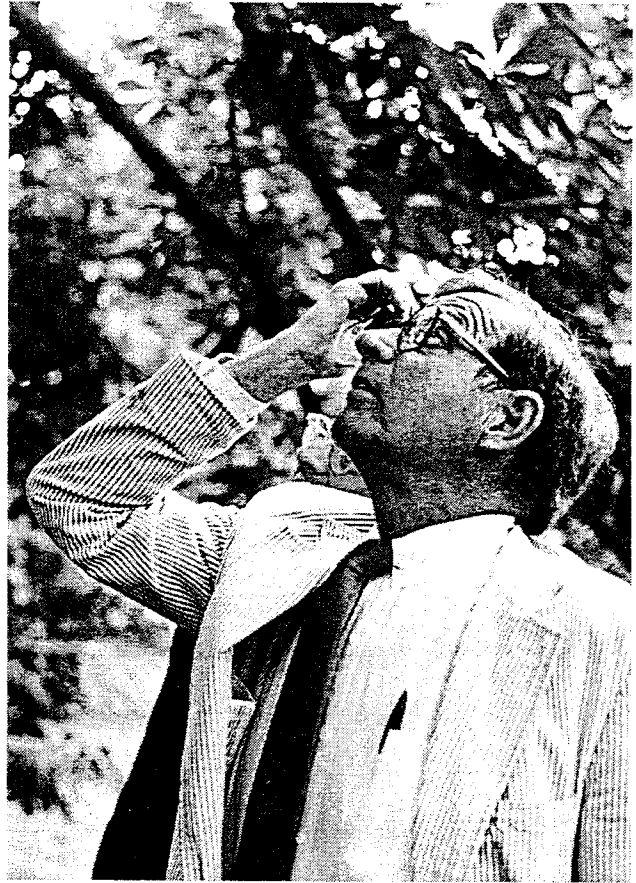
Bob Keidel

All of us know, to one degree or another, that our classmate, Lewis Thomas, made significant contributions to mankind's understanding of life, of the human body and mind. Certainly the outpouring of sentiments about him, following his death in December 1993, from colleagues and others who knew him from his writings, his poetry, his love of music, clearly emphasize that he was an extraordinary man.

Those who have read his books find their minds being stretched into entirely new and unfamiliar territory, made to think unconventional thoughts, to contemplate fundamental basic structures of life at the microscopic level and at the global level, life in evolution, life as it might become, planet Earth "hanging there in space, obviously alive" and relationships at every level. And so many of these thoughts, new to us, are expressed in such pure elegance of style as to delight the reader all the while leading him into new philosophical realms. A quote from one of his essays used in Kenneth Warren's introduction to his book *The Fragile Species* (Charles Scribner's Sons, MacMillan Publishing Company, 1992) is an example: "I am a member of a fragile species, still new to the earth, the youngest creatures of any scale, here only a few moments as evolutionary time is measured, a juvenile species, a child of a species. We are only tentatively set in place, error-prone, at risk of fumbling, in real danger at the moment of leaving behind only a thin layer of fossils ..."

He was constantly reminding himself, and us, how unsteady we are in our knowledge of things; how, rather than knowing a lot about life's mysteries, we are just at the dawn of discovery. These thoughts are beautifully expressed in his essay which we published in the 1990 Summer News Letter called *Puzzlement and Science* (which is commended to a rereading) and which ends with: "The culmination of a liberal arts education ought to include, among other matters, the news that we do not understand a flea, much less the making of a thought. We can get there some day if we keep at it, but we are nowhere near and there are mountains and centuries of work still to be done."

It is impossible to convey here the miracle of Lew Thomas' writings. You must read or reread his books, all available in your local library: *The Lives of a Cell*; *Medusa and the Snail*; *Some Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony*; *Et Cetera, Et Cetera*; *The Youngest Science*; and his latest, *The Fragile Species*. Only then will you appreciate his magic.



In contrast with the cover picture showing Lew at his chosen profession in the science lab, here, looking aloft, is the philosopher, poet, dreamer speculating about unsolved mysteries, the universe or some animal or insect to put in a poem.

*The truth of the matter is that he is gazing up into the horse-chestnut tree in his back yard which we understand is why he bought the East Hampton home and which he describes in the opening chapter of his book *Et Cetera Et Cetera* as follows: "In our back yard is a horse chestnut tree - - - - but I swear to you that tree is inhabited."*