

Yin and yang

By Dana Cook Grossman

Sir Charles Percy Snow—a British novelist and physicist more commonly known as C.P. Snow—gave a famous lecture in 1959. He rued the schism between what he called “the two cultures” of society—the sciences and the humanities. The inability of scientists and humanists to communicate with each other augured ill for solving the world’s problems, he posited.

Snow “spoke of scientists who could scarcely struggle through a novel by Dickens,” England’s *Daily Telegraph* said of his talk at the time of its 50th anniversary last year. “But more importantly,” the paper went on, Snow spoke “of humanities professors who were ignorant of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, who sneered at science as an inferior branch of learning that no really cultured person needed to trouble with.”

Snow came in for a good deal of criticism after the talk, in part because he set up the sciences and the humanities as dichotomous opposites. Why he saw the disciplines as polarized is puzzling, since his own training and proclivities embodied the potential for the disciplines’ integration.

Perhaps it was just for rhetorical effect that Snow cast the sciences and the humanities as being polar opposites. Humans have long—perhaps forever—sought to package the world into dualities: Good and bad. New and old. North and south.

Interestingly, just a year after that famous talk, Snow was one of the speakers at a symposium at Dartmouth Medical School. I haven’t ever read his famous 1959 lecture (it was published later the same year as a book, *The Two Cultures*), but I have read a transcript of the talk he gave at Dartmouth. It was the closing address at a three-day conference featuring a thorough mix of “scientists” and “humanists”—the other speakers included researchers, physicians, public health advocates, diplomats, government officials, and writers. (The roster was also an exceedingly illustrious one, ranging from novelist Aldous Huxley, the author of *Brave New World*, to Brock Chisholm, the former director-general of the World Health Organization.)

Snow’s remarks at Dartmouth in 1960—a reflection on the previous three days of the conference—strike me as reasoned and balanced. For example, he hailed his fellow speakers for having, “through their researches, through their benevolent

contributions to mankind, made our lives sweeter, longer, and healthier than they otherwise could have been.” In other words, he was paying homage to the contributions of both scientists and humanists—and his words even suggest that he saw them integrating their efforts. Perhaps the criticism of his 1959 talk had tempered his thoughts somewhat.

One of his comments at Dartmouth speaks to another kind of integrating effect—and is especially interesting given the insular mindset that was prevalent in 1960. “Every action of ours,” Snow said, “has a possible effect, not only in our own circle, not only in our own country, but conceivably to people we don’t know and never shall know.” Surely, then, he’d be pleased by the response the Dartmouth community summoned in the wake of January 2010’s devastating earthquake in Haiti (see page 9 for insight into that effort).

Maybe it’s of note that Snow’s talk at Dartmouth was about medicine—a specific subset of the science-humanities duality. I’ve always been fond of a statement made by a noted contemporary medical ethicist, Dr. Edmund Pellegrino. He has described medicine as “the most humane of the sciences and the most scientific of the humanities.”

The value of an integrative approach to any pair of issues is perhaps best expressed by the Chinese concept of “yin and yang”—the idea of complementary rather than opposing duality. It’s not yin *or* yang. It’s yin *and* yang.

Certainly in medicine, but also in other disciplines, such as engineering, I believe that Dartmouth represents the very best of an integrative rather than a dichotomous approach to the sciences and the humanities.

That’s why you’ll find within the pages of DARTMOUTH MEDICINE both a collection of poems about the emotions of medicine (see page 44) and a feature about computational genetics (see page 26). A section (starting on page 3) devoted to research and a section (see page 64) featuring a piece of artwork with some tie to Dartmouth and some tie to medicine. And letters to the editor from physicians, historians, public health experts, and patients.

We always enjoy hearing from our readers. And we hope that you enjoy hearing from us about the yin and the yang of medicine at Dartmouth. ■

For a **WEB EXTRA** with a link to C.P. Snow’s 1960 talk at Dartmouth, see dartmed.dartmouth.edu/sp10/we08.

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