

## Preface

Everyone has their own way of learning. Mine has always been verbal. When I was a kid, I used to think out loud. I was caught at it once by a school janitor—a very nice man who suggested that what I was doing was a little strange. After that, whenever I wanted to learn something new or complicated, I'd begin by reading up on it and then lecturing to myself in my head. I still do this. If I get stuck I realize that I had better do some more reading or maybe ask an expert. Once I think I have it down pretty well, I write an essay. Almost never are these essays commissioned, and almost never do I know where, if anywhere, they are going to be published. For this reason a lot of my essays are too long to be published in most magazines or newspapers. It is very rare that you will get as much as 3,000 words in a magazine. The old *New Yorker*, for which I wrote for thirty-five years, was different. Many of the things I turned in emerged substantially longer than what they were in their original form. But this is incredibly rare. If the editing is good, an editor can preserve the essence of what you are saying while chopping the piece in half, or even more than half. Like most authors, I have learned to accept this if I respect the editor and the publication. But there is always a sense of loss.

There is a bit more opportunity with books of essays to take the time to get where you are going with an idea. The essays in this book are about science and scientists in a very broad sense. Each one reflects something about which I became extremely interested at various times. A couple of these essays, the ones that were published in trade journals, were published at their original length or longer. The rest have either never been published at all or have only been published partially. The subject matter is very eclectic. I hope the reader will find the choice interesting.

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