



STEPPING OUT OF THE LABORATORY
AND ACROSS CULTURES
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Und du erbst das Grün
vergangner Gärten und das stille Blau
zerfallner Himmel

R. M. Rilke, *Das Buch von der Pilgerschaft*

This year was an experiment – very different from the experiments that normally fill my days. Like numerous experiments, this one failed. I thought if I would work hard and find the right kind of data, then the right sentences, those that would adequately describe my project and findings, would appear.

As an experimental scientist I fully recognize that most failed experiments translate into understanding and advancement, but not necessarily of the expected kind. I began the year with a conviction that working at the intersection of scientific disciplines and benefitting from collaboration across disciplinary boundaries has become increasingly

important for basic scientific discovery. This is what shapes my own scientific work. Indeed, it was gratifying that during my Wiko stay our highly collaborative efforts within the Pittsburgh HIV Center that I direct culminated in the determination of an all-atom HIV capsid structure and its publication in *Nature*.

During my year at Wiko I learned that my training as a chemist/biophysicist left me ill-equipped to make significant advancements in testing hypotheses in an area remote from experimental science. I leave Wiko with new awareness of the discourse that is played out in the social science literature and more questions than answers about our ability to quantify the gains that may result from multidisciplinary inquiry.

Meeting the other Fellows, I immediately envied them for their clearly delineated projects, half-written books and disciplinary identities: they stated their fields without hesitation – anthropology, law, history, philosophy, evolutionary biology – while I was struggling to find the most applicable label for myself whenever I was asked about my line of work and Wiko plans – physical chemist? biophysicist? structural biologist? – but embarking on a study on evaluating the results of working in interdisciplinary teams in the natural sciences. I had nothing in hand apart from access to databases and my ideas about the values of teamwork. My tangible product – at least, for now – is an article written with a former Wiko Fellow and Philosopher of Science, Sandra Mitchell, on pluralism in representational perspectives in scientific discovery – the result of a two-year dialogue and discussion that finally came to fruition during my year in Berlin. For intangibles, I can point to new awareness of methods and objectives of my colleagues in the humanities, new appreciation of the creative process in the arts, and new depth of understanding of world crisis – especially in the Middle East.

Did my life and style of working change while at Wiko? Yes and no. The interactions with scholars in the humanities were enriching intellectually and Tuesday's colloquia allowed me to learn or re-acquaint myself with topics like "Sectarianism in the Ottoman Empire", "Islamic Christianity", and the entanglement between art and politics. Sadly, however, it didn't seem to translate into impulses for my own project – there was no discussion/reading group that I fit into, leaving me most of the time feeling oddly insular, retreating to my office to immerse myself in reading or writing scientific papers.

Was it a coincidence that my colloquium was on the 7th of May, the same day that C. P. Snow delivered his *Rede* lecture at Cambridge 54 years ago? Are the two cultures alive and well? Has the gap between scientists and "literary intellectuals" narrowed or widened? I only hope that what I felt as a "gentlemanly disdain" for science that perturbed Huxley and Snow was simply due to my own shortcomings.