



WHAT A DIFFERENCE WENDY ESPELAND

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“What a Difference a Day Makes”, a jazz standard, describes how falling in love makes the world new. One person, it turns out, can change everything. In a day. First written in Spanish by the Mexican composer María Méndez Grever in 1934 (*Cuando Vuelva A Tu Lado*), the song was quickly translated into English. Like any good standard, it has traveled the world, absorbing languages and nuance as it goes. It has been recorded, contorted, and appropriated in endless varieties and improvisations that range from magic to abuse. The best known version, sadly, is a 1970s disco rendition by Esther Williams (a fabulous blues artist, I can’t begrudge her the income). My favorites include Big Maybelle’s cover, all grit and gravel, and Sarah Vaughan’s sophisticated swing. As the song suggests,

sometimes those big “before and afters” in life are as abrupt as meeting someone. Others unfold a little more slowly, say, in ten months or so. You can probably guess where I’m going here. What a difference a year makes.

Anticipation

I had heard from colleagues that the Wissenschaftskolleg was something remarkable, a place and experience one never forgets. When they spoke of it, the nostalgia was palpable. Throw yourself into it, they told me. You’ll miss it so much when it’s over, they said. I was excited to come and I had my mental list of projects to start, finish or nudge along. I had imagined that I would give a few talks in places that, during a normal year in North America, might not be manageable, even on leave. I looked forward to its legendary library staff. I expected to make new friends. I had never lived in Europe for any length of time before; nor had I even visited Berlin. I was eager for the experience, eager to explore this city, eager to tackle my mental list. Not terribly imaginative but the normal stuff of an academic on leave.

When I learned that Wiko was interested in creating a focus group around issues of quantification and measurement, the prospect of meeting regularly with scholars from all over the world, people working in different languages, regions, and periods, using approaches that my discipline finds obscure, well, it was rousing. I wasn’t quite sure what this would entail, at first, but I could spot a rare opportunity when I saw one. Long before I arrived, the superlative and gracious competence of the staff was evident, in their prompt replies to questions. They seemed to have thought of everything. The move to Grunewald went more smoothly than I had imagined, largely due to their expertise. Advice from friends about how liberating it is to be away from your stuff also helped. But what I did not or could not anticipate was the gradual, revolving and powerful unfolding of an intellectual and artistic community, a community that shifted over time, one that included current, former and permanent Fellows, the College for Life Sciences Fellows, partners, families, and the steady stream of interesting visitors who appeared at concerts, talks or breakfast. It included, too, so joyfully for so many of us, the Wiko kids. And, most emphatically, it included the Wiko Staff. This was the community that changed my to-do list.

Improvisation

My first lesson of how to be a Wiko Fellow took place at lunch that first week in September. It was my happy task to help organize our focus group on quantification. Let's have a meeting over lunch, I thought, during our first week. We'll combine business and pleasure, get to know each other, get organized. Others helped me secure a big table, saving places for our members. After we discouraged several lovely people not part of our group from joining our table, including, to my everlasting chagrin, the ever diplomatic Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus who, through the fog of jet-lag, I had failed to recognize, we tried to launch our group.

Of course, that is precisely *not* the purpose of lunch at Wiko. To huddle with members of one's own team. The point, as I quickly grasped it, is to sit by everyone, *especially* those not sharing your intellectual interests, your discipline, your abilities or even your politics. The results of this mixing, whether at lunch, on trips around Berlin, or at the receptions following evening concerts, were extraordinary. Discussions of the best recordings of Pierre Boulez's music with the remarkable pianist and teacher, Pierre-Laurent Aimard. The collective mystery novel that Yuri Slezkine wanted us to write. I was pretty sure that he was joking but his plot was not bad. The chance to hear David Brown, partner of Fellow Pippa Skotnes, patiently explain how one casts a sculpture using different kinds of metal. Talking to Giovanni Frazzetto about his new book on the neurobiology of emotions. And our many experts on birds made being outside all the more alluring. I heard my first nightingale in Berlin and they helped me to identify it. From the wonderful and resilient Ursula, I learned a little German. Those peals of laughter Monday mornings in Villa Jaffé? That was our "baby" German class butchering the language. If I learned less German than I hoped, it was much more than I knew before. And when watching German movies with Eva von Kügelgen, I could actually understand an occasional word without looking at the captions. A shout-out to the staff at breakfast who helped me with my homework. Papers, photos, and invitations would arrive daily. E-mail that I actually looked forward to.

Standards and Standardization

How did my list change? One of the central themes of work that interrogates measurement in its various social contexts is the tension between the virtues of the standardizing

and precision that numbers require, and the vices of the desperately necessary simplification that they offer. No one who does or studies measurement thinks that it is simple to do it well. But that tension, between building and simplifying, measuring what is out there and creating something new with numbers, reveals itself in so many forms. It is there in the complicated and contingent organizational and cognitive structure that is needed to measure and keep measuring; in the making of the categories that sustain measures; in the policing of the boundaries that are meant to contain those categories, and so on. That tension, in its remarkably various expressions, is just one of the themes that animated our group over the course of ten months of meetings. Some of these meetings were spontaneous, some were well-organized; in some we were well-behaved, and in others a bit unruly. I have to name them: John Carson, Lorraine Daston, Emmanuel Didier, Tong Lam, Ted Porter, Jahnnavi Phalkey, and Bruce Carruthers were there from the beginning. Andrea Mennicken, arrived with her family, including her new baby, in January. In March, Cosima Rughinis, a sociologist from Bucharest, joined us for several weeks. We were delighted to annex Nina Verheyen, and Janina Wellmann joined us on many occasions.

Like our lunch tables, properly understood, the flow of those who visited or were incorporated into our group was an evolving mix. Historians of science, anthropologists, students of film, sociologists, and intrepid professors of accounting, all were represented. Ted Porter, also a neighbor, in office and apartment, could conduct our many conversations almost without getting up. And then there are those like Tong Lam or Jahnnavi Phalkey, who make photographs and curate museum exhibitions as part of their interrogations of numbers. A heady mixing of talent, that. But because these interesting people read and discussed my work, told me who to talk to, what to read, popped in my office to chat, and challenged me on my facts and figures, I had to think harder. (There is no better reader than John Carson.) Harder included re-framing the main argument of one paper. It is better now. And so are other things I worked on while my colleagues were nearby.

Not only did the content of the work on my list change, my list changed, too. Because we were neighbors and could meet regularly for breakfast, Andrea Mennicken and I are writing a proposal for a joint paper for a journal of annual reviews. Because our group received funding to host two workshops, one including eminent scholars from all over Europe, the other including scholars affiliated with the Nantes Institute for Advanced Study, I shared four days packed with people whose work I had mainly only read or heard about. And those workshops live on. Our focus group is planning to meet in Nantes

again next year, aiming for a book with a new mix of papers and collaborations from people who attended our workshops. Because of that, I am working on a new project with Emmanuel Didier about how measurement is being incorporated into contemporary art.

Resolution

The year flew by. I finished revising my book on the effects of rankings on higher education, an especially controversial form of quantification. My co-author and I are sending it to our publisher in the next week or so. Wiko gave me the time, freedom and quiet to finish this stage of it. I wrote and revised an article about the special forms of visibility and invisibility that numbers confer. I revised another paper for an edited book that should be coming out in the next year or so. I wrote a couple of short essays. I gave more talks, in more places, than I could have imagined. Being at the Wissenschaftskolleg made all of Europe so much closer. It also made it easier for others to invite me to speak and for me to say yes to their invitations. There is an impressive visibility that is attached to Wiko. Yet, I soon learned that I didn't want to be away from Wiko too much, for too long. I would just miss so much.

But that is just the kind of work that you put on your vita. There are all those other less traceable forms of influence, the sorts of thing that never show up on lists. I hope I have absorbed some of the lessons and rhetorical skills of so many of our speakers at Tuesday colloquia. I have a notebook full of notes. I bought and read some of your books. Katharina Wiedemann put me in touch with a journalist who could teach me much about German rankings. Several of my fellow Wiko scientists served as stealth "respondents" in informal interviews about the aesthetic dimensions of quantitative representations in science. Thanks to Urszula Hibner, Gunther Jansen and Michael Hochberg for your thoughts on whether and how beauty matters in the kinds of pictures, models and tables you publish. Other fellow scientists, be warned. I have your e-mail and the Fellow Finder.

What a difference a year makes. Watching our Fellows, my Fellows, as they begin to pack up and leave felt like a series of small amputations. Saying goodbye to the staff was every bit as hard. But like a good jazz standard, the embrace of a new community keeps moving and evolving. It sticks in your head and pops up at unexpected moments. It crosses borders of all sorts and makes connections that are invisible to many. And as everyone tells me, you can come back. For talks, conferences, breakfast. As the song ends, "the difference was you".