



VIGNETTES WITHOUT A TITLE
JEREMY G. WIDEMAN

Jeremy Grant Wideman is a white, (mostly) heterosexual anglophone male attempting to scale the walls of academia while trying to acknowledge his privileged status. He is generally careful about what he wishes for, because when he thinks boldly “I will never be X, Y, or Z”, these seem to be just the things that he ends up being. When he was just a young nerd growing up on the plains of Alberta, Canada, he said to himself as he watched a man pick up all the trash left over after a hockey (read: ice-hockey) game: “I will never do that.” Sure enough, he took on that particular job to get extra money during his undergraduate biology education at Augustana Faculty, University of Alberta. Likewise, growing up as a creationist, although he loved biochemistry and genetics, he went as far as to cover his ears during the evolution sections of high school biology courses, thinking, “I will never believe this.” Naturally, through his love of biochemistry, he began to understand evolution such that belief was never necessary; knowledge was sufficient to convert him completely. During his more conservative years, he laughed at the idea of an arts’ degree; he was going to be a medical doctor or an optometrist. Philosophy courses were for leftist nut jobs. Throughout his academic life, however, both continental philosophy and philosophy of science have been constant sources of inspiration and pleasure. During his Ph.D., he even tricked his supervisor into signing off on an optional course “Philosophy of Biology”. This course was completely unnecessary to his Ph.D. in Molecular Biology and Genetics, which focused on the role of the ERMES complex in mitochondrial protein import in the filamentous fungus *Neurospora crassa*. After his Ph.D., he swore off research. It just wasn’t for him. Then, he quite literally stumbled into a research position in yet another thing he had sworn off years ago: investigating biological diversity. And no less, the methods

required were all computational! – something he had avoided learning about his entire life (in the late '90s his parents owned only a Tandy1000). He truly fell in love with academic research on evolutionary cell biology and was awarded a European Molecular Biology Organization Fellowship, which he took up at the University of Exeter, UK (2015–17). Of course, before starting his fellowship, he took a five-month writing break to pursue his philosophical interests – was he becoming nutty and leftist? After his time in Exeter, he was awarded a College for Life Sciences Fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. His research has been published in journals ranging from *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* to *Current Biology*, the *Journal of Cell Biology*, and even *Biology & Philosophy*. He is still learning how to navigate what he wants from life. He finds it difficult to figure out exactly what one should do when life keeps giving him things that he doesn't want but ends up loving. So, he continues living the motto that he adopted early in his adult life: “try everything twice”. Which is why he feels that, one day, he should probably give this whole Wiko thing one more try. He is not completely certain that he got it right the first time ... – Address: Department of Biochemistry & Molecular Biology, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, B3H 4R2. E-mail: jeremy.grant.wideman@gmail.com.

Since my time at the Wiko really, truly felt like an experiment, I attempted to write up my experiences in the format of a scientific article. In truth, however, it is a series of nearly unrelated vignettes without a title.

Abstract

My wife (Alicia) and I had several visitors during the short six months that we were living in Villa Walther. One of the visitors was my father, who came in November, after we had been at the Wissenschaftskolleg for about two months. Even at this time, I could not quite grasp what I was experiencing. I was showing him around the backyard, and he was marveling at the sculptures and architecture of the building and the location on the little Grunewaldsee. I was still in a state of disbelief at my surroundings. My father is not an academic, but he has always respected my life choices and is proud of me. Reflecting on my career and accomplishments thus far, he said to me with pride and love, “You deserve this.” I replied immediately, “No one deserves this.”

I still feel this way.

Introduction

Being a College for Life Sciences Fellow, a stubborn procrastinator, and a short-term Fellow who started in September, I sit here in Halifax, Canada, detached from my Wiko family for more than four months, attempting to put into words my experience in Berlin. I think it is healthier to reflect now, after the bittersweet departure, after the dreamland that is Wiko has disappeared into the dreamland of academic reality. I miss my dreamland of lunches, suppers, wine, discussions, arguments, biting colloquium questions, cultural tensions, friends, döners, clubs, dancing, BERLIN!

But I miss it like I miss Disneyland.

I would like to go again, but maybe not for a little while. Don't misunderstand me. It was NOT a vacation. I got a lot of work done. It was an extremely productive six months. I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg to "gain time to think". I did just that; I thought, and I wrote, and I worked. But before I arrived, I did not know what to expect from Wiko, and whatever I might have expected was not what I got – which is a good thing. I really thought that though I am an evolutionary biologist, since I have a strong liberal arts education and a deep connection with philosophy, I was going to be just fine. The colloquia would make sense to me. I would contribute my unique academic perspective. I did contribute ...?

Materials and Methods

Food was always plentiful at the Wiko. For new Fellows, I have a few suggestions:

1. Go to breakfast as often as you can. You will miss it when it's gone. Especially on Thursdays – some Fellows could make it all the way to supper if they pilfered enough bread at breakfast.
2. You can have seconds. It may not seem like it, as most Fellows are too shy or don't want to be judged by their Wiko *fünf*. Just wear that extra *fünf kg* with pride. You will never regularly have this much good food ever again in your life.
3. Pre-aperitifs. I know that aperitifs happen before supper on Thursdays, but what happens before aperitifs is up to you! A small taster of vermouth or a drop of gin really warms up the palate for a bit of bubbly.

4. Fridays are fish Fridays! Think about being a vegetarian on Fridays. I love fish, I really do. However, Thirsty Thursdays often led to Fuzzy Fridays, which more often than not made fish less appealing.
5. Beware the *desert* of the weekend (not the dessert of the weekend). Social interaction and the availability of good food disappears and the longing for Monday's lunch occurs shortly after finishing Friday's dessert.
6. LEAVE GRUNEWALD. Just get on the M19 to the U1/U2 or walk to the S7. Go have as many döners as possible. Go to Winterfeldtplatz, Neukölln, Wedding. Go find the best restaurants in Berlin. Go have a cocktail. If you stay in Grunewald you will miss it all.
7. Stock up on the good wine. Not all wine is equal. Take note of the best Thursday bottles and stock up in advance in order to ensure that you always have the best vintages close at hand.

Results and Discussion

Things became real that were once only myths.

Wars and struggles that were distant and foreign became present and real. Survivors became friends, prisoners became mentors. Nothing has been the same since. The tenacity and courage of my Wiko family has changed the way I view life and has changed the way I judge people. However, in spite of my Wiko family and the seeming transformation that occurred within and around me, the world outside my Wiko never changed at all. Most, when faced with adversity, vehemently protect what is theirs instead of standing up for those that are oppressed. My Wiko family has taught me that self-sacrifice is necessary if some kind of justice is to be brought to this world. I can only hope that when the time comes I can choose wisely.

The same words mean very different things.

I was shocked on several occasions to learn that my usage of fairly simple words like “method” and “theory” was at odds with the majority of Fellows at the Wiko. In several conversations I would notice two sides emerge, the natural scientists on one side and the less-natural scientists on the other side. I have to admit that I still struggle to view theories

as neither predictive nor explanatory. I am however happy with my conclusions that all humanities scholars and social scientists are biologists who study one rather peculiar species.

“We are all equal here at the Wiko” – unknown

I forget who said this, but it was the subject of contention for me throughout my whole stay at the Wiko. As a junior academic, with no permanent position to go home to, with no books or honorary degrees to my name, 30 years junior to many of my Wiko colleagues, I did not feel equal. Nor did many others. I learned that feelings of equality are usually felt by those that have benefitted from a system more than others. This has made me much more cognizant of situations in which I feel equal – it usually means that I am in a power position. Feelings are deceiving. I have realized that the privileged have the power to dole out the feeling of equality. My greatest mentors have made the effort to make me feel equal, while acknowledging the existent inequalities between us. This perspective is extremely important as I begin my journey into academia full of white, male, Western, straight privilege – as a perpetual ally, how can I help bring justice into this world?

Conclusions

If you have an extended family of about 40 individuals, chances are you don't like all of them equally. But, chances are you love most of them, or at minimum understand their quirks and faults. You might have that aunt who just says things too loudly, even when the people she might be insulting are within earshot. But she is actually just lovely and doesn't quite mean what she says. You might have that crazy uncle who falls asleep at the dinner table, but if you catch him just before he nods off, he has the most brilliant insights. You might have that smug cousin who always leaves early, but you know that he/she is doing something really important. But more likely than not, you also have that group of misfits to which you happily belong. So too it is with the Wiko family. Like any family, the Wiko family isn't chosen; it is collected somewhat haphazardly, a bit by chance, a bit by design. Ours was a beautiful thing amidst even the blemishes. In part, it was beautiful because it reflected the struggles going on in the world outside. We were unwittingly modeling the confusion seen at much larger scales on the outside. May we all learn from our experiences.