



UNLEASHING:  
A WIKO FELLOWSHIP YEAR  
JOAN E. STRASSMANN

---

Joan Strassmann is interested in social behavior, in how genes behind social interactions evolve, in conflict and its mediation, and in what defines an organism. Since 1987, this research has been conducted in partnership with David Queller. Together they have teased out many of the intricacies of how conflict is controlled in largely cooperative systems. She is also interested in making science accessible. She was born in Washington, D.C. in 1953. Since 2011, she has been Charles Rebstock Professor of Biology at Washington University in St. Louis. From 1980 to 2011, she was at Rice University in Houston, Texas, ultimately becoming Department Head and Harry C. and Olga K. Wiess Professor. She has done sabbaticals at Copenhagen University (2010) and Oxford University (2016). She received her B.S. at the University of Michigan in 1974 and her Ph.D. at the University of Texas at Austin in 1979. She has been recognized with more than 35 years of continuous US National Science Foundation funding, a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship, election as a fellow of the Animal Behavior Society and of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, all in 2004. She was elected a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2008, served as President of the Animal Behavior Society in 2009, and was elected to the US National Academy of Sciences in 2013. – Address: Department of Biology, Washington University in St. Louis, CB 1137, One Brookings Drive, St. Louis MO, 63130-4899, USA. E-mail: strassmann@wustl.edu.

Zeus ran at top speed, arching his back and stretching his back legs to sail over the three steps down to the Villa Walther *Hof*. Still running, he turned sharply right and down the

steps, then past the old basketball hoop and up the steps toward Delbrückstraße, barking at a cooing wood pigeon.

I walked more slowly down the steps and out on the terrace above Herthasee, seeing Coots, hearing Robins, Blackbirds, and Great Tits, but looking without success for the Mute Swans. Zeus came when I called him, and so I gave him a morsel of freeze-dried lamb lung. At the gate to Delbrückstraße, I leashed him as we walked past the neighbors where his beloved black bolonka lives, past the *Seniorenheim*, past the massive sphinx, and down the path to Herthasee. Only after we were under the graffitied bridge and through the gates to the path along the south side of Hubertussee did the leash come off again. This would be a walk I repeated nearly daily during my Wiko year.

When we first arrived, I worried that our pup would spend a year on the leash, staying safe in the big city. I mourned his woodland freedom at Tyson near our St. Louis home. But in this as in so many things about Wiko and Berlin, I was wrong.

I had long dreamed of finding a way to spend a year at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, ever since Kevin Foster left our research group to join Francis Ratnieks' and Tom Wenseleers' Focus Group at the Wissenschaftskolleg, where they wrote a number of influential reviews. I also dreamed of spending a year in Berlin, the city my father had fled 82 years before with his mother and sisters to join his father in Rochester, Minnesota. Because his father was born to parents who had converted from Judaism before his birth, he was Jewish enough to be forbidden to practice medicine in 1936 and so left Berlin to become a fellow at the Mayo Clinic. Chuck Mayo saved my grandfather's life and in all probability the lives of his children.

I had been to Berlin before, but what would an entire year in such a place feel like? What would it do to me? My husband worried more about what I would do to it, would I burden Germans, not born at the time I knew so vividly, for something they could not help? Would 1930s Berlin be an albatross for me and me an albatross for him?

Instead it turned out that this history was not a leash I needed to unhook. I followed the history of my family in particular, finding the cemeteries with Strassmann or Lewy graves, identifying the tree before my great-great-grandfather's house on Fischerinsel, staring at the bullet holes in the *Frauenklinik* my great-grandfather built, where my grandfather once worked. I went to the theater just down the street from that clinic, the Deutsches Theater, where my great-aunt Antonie Strassmann once performed. Every new German word I learned connected me to that past, as I thought of my grandmother, *Omi*, voicing the words, or laughing at me that they seemed so novel. I also formed bonds

with others from our group with Jewish backgrounds, close or far, whose families also suffered in that not so long ago time. Instead of a sense of unease, I felt a sense of being at home, at home in the only place on the earth I could say my family lived for generations. For me, Berlin became magic.

My connections to Berlin deepened as I succeeded in doing something I viewed as reclaiming my German citizenship, a process I had started years before without success. Shortly after arriving, I got an e-mail saying that in fact because my father left as a minor and became an American as a minor, I could get my citizenship automatically for a fee of 25 Euros. I paid.

But what role did Wiko play in my accepting the new bond of German citizenship and Berlin as a home city? A big one. Early on, Daniel Schönpflug gathered those of us seeking our German-Jewish roots together for lunch. How could Wiko and particularly the library services help? It opened the door for us to scholarship on this personal topic.

It was special in other ways that Wiko is in Berlin, for we had so much history, culture, cuisine, and entertainment to explore. But no one should think that this got in the way of our main work. I suppose one does not get invited to Wiko unless one has a passion for one's work, a passion so strong that one might say it is not our work, but the thing we most love to do.

I came to Wiko as part of a Focus Group organized by Koos Boomsma on the major transitions in evolution. These transitions are the steps that build life into ever more complex units, from single cells to multicellular organisms or from organisms into societies, for example. I am particularly interested in the biological and philosophical question of what it means to be an organism, something that seems so simple, but is not. But this is not the place for technical details. Suffice it to say I hoped to write a book on the topic of organismality. I also hoped to progress on another book on our main research organism, the social amoeba *Dictyostelium discoideum*. And I even had a third book project, me who has never written a book, and so was very optimistic. This last book is different. Called something like *Slow Birding*, I hoped for it to be an antidote to what I call motor birding, the practice of running all over the globe looking for a new bird here and there and adding it to an ever lengthening life list.

I imagined that *Slow Birding* would be easy to write and began with some stories of birds. I learned that the bird folks capitalize the common names of birds. I wrote about Blue Jays. I wrote about American Robins, Northern Mockingbirds, Northern Cardinals, and Great-tailed Grackles. I searched for my voice in these pieces by dropping one bird and

beginning another. With this process I started to identify the elements each piece needed, a bit about the behavior, something unusual, something related to conservation, something about seeing this bird on my walks, something on the scientists who made the discoveries.

But this process was not getting me any closer to a compelling book. Could I even write this book? I wondered and turned to our wonderful librarians for examples of successful books, books on birds, on natural history, on biology in general. I read John McPhee, Craig Childs, Terry Tempest Williams, Bernd Heinrich, and more. I read fiction, our own Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, György Dragomán. I read poetry, again with the help of the librarians. I could do this! But how?

I read textbooks on ornithology. I read about bird after bird. I spent weeks making an outline I was happy with. It had five sections with three points under each section and three birds under each point for 45 birds tied by themes. Under *Where are the birds*, I had *Most abundant birds*, *Displaced birds*, and *Migration*. Under each topic I chose birds I knew that also had significant research on them. For example, under *Migration* I had Purple Martins, Indigo Buntings, and Yellow Warblers. I imagined writing about the Yellow Warbler that I freed from a screened room in Belize as it migrated north. I imagined writing about the first Indigo Bunting I saw as a child in Michigan, marveling at its black wings against its brilliant blue body. Surely this would be both a good book and one that would be easy to write. So I sent the outline to two mentors who are both friends and eminent bird researchers. (I do not do research on birds.) I was on my way to making my Wiko year productive and novel.

But I got a shock. One of my readers pointed out that my outline was great as vignettes on the behavioral ecology of birds, but was not slow birding. I had somehow forgotten to include my main point, the point I was most passionate about, the point that I hoped would transform how people watch birds. How could this have happened?

I did not stew about the problem once I got over the horror of having gone astray, for I immediately saw the wisdom in what my critical reader said. How could I easily fix it? Could I even write a book after all? Everyone around me at Wiko was writing books without angst. Could I only write articles? I realized this is a book I have to write. It may be hard, but I need to do it. For myself. So I looked back at earlier outlines. There was one that included 14 walks and their birds from places I had lived. I wrote a bit using that outline but had the experience that everything I wrote bored me. I know writers should be their own strongest critics and so I should go easy on myself, but this really was boring writing. What was wrong?

I turned back to reading. I talked to Yvonne who asked me who the protagonist was. She shared a detailed questionnaire about the characters every novelist should be able to answer. I was not writing a novel, but it was useful. So was her passion for writing, her understanding of the process and what separated writing from editing. Just get it down, she encouraged.

I talked to György Dragomán at many lunches. He could write anything. He could write anywhere. It was a discipline. He had been a food critic, chosen more for his ability to write than for his expertise on food. He also wrote a short story a week for a long time. But he also understood when something wasn't right and could finally fix it, in one case as the plane circled a city where he had a manuscript deadline. I could learn from his shy confidence.

I left Wiko in April with a small group to see Jessica Stockholder's art installation in Utrecht. Her creativity astounded me with its novel use of space, its vividness, and its humor. And on the train ride home I had the privilege of hours with Daniel Schönflug, who cares so much for all of us. We talked about many things, but particularly of my book struggles. He told me about his books and particularly the latest one and the process he used. He listened to my travails. He gave me his book. He encouraged me to keep struggling. I read the book carefully and learned.

It was April, then May, and now it is June, our final Wiko month. But now I am happy. I don't even remember how it happened, but I think I came up with an outline that will enable me to fulfill my goals of writing both about the birds and about what it means to be a slow birder. It will have a strong sense of place and the history of the places. It feels right. Daniel thought it could work. Now it only remains to write it. It will have shadows of my earlier piece in Washington University's Common Reader (<https://commonreader.wustl.edu/c/flight-feathers-freedom/>).

Did it really take me the entire year of working at Wiko to get an idea for a book outline that might work? Did others write entire books while I walked the dog, birded slowly around Hubertussee or Grunewaldsee, and kept up with my regular tasks?

Ah, those regular tasks. We did keep up with our lab group, Debbie, Justine, Laura, Katie, Tyler, Trey, James, Shreenidhi, and Israt with nearly weekly Tuesday Skype calls. We saw our students progress through the year and helped them with the many tasks of data interpretation and writing, things that can be done at a distance. Justine got a faculty position. Katie successfully defended her Ph.D. We wrote and rewrote several papers, so our Google Scholar pages for 2018–2019 are not blank. I wrote in its entirety a paper on

creativity in science for a festschrift. I read the weekly 300 words of undergraduates Kobi, Rory, Rintsen, Cara, and Anthony. I read Rory's thesis, nominated him for the Harrison D. Stalker Award of Washington University in St. Louis for best biology undergraduate thesis by someone also active in another area – arts, policy, and the like. And he got it! Sorry I wasn't there to present it to him.

The other regular tasks I did not shirk were editing for a society journal, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, and all those letters of recommendation I get asked to write, for tenure, for undergraduates, for jobs, oh so many. Could I have let these tasks go? I don't think so very easily, for I am part of the fabric of my discipline and others depend on me to support their efforts in these ways. I would not feel good about it. It is a leash I accept.

This so far has been so much about me, but I need to say more about Wiko. It is not a silent monastery. It is not a cabin in the woods at a writer's workshop. It is not a sabbatical at someone else's home university. In some ways, the summer camp for adults analogy holds, if only in the way that we are all thrown in together in a new place. We all have to share the challenges of being newcomers, of figuring out where to get our hair cut, where to eat out, which museum or concert to go to. Those of us not originating in Europe also need to figure out banking, residency, and health insurance. These challenges of daily life brought us together. And really they were not bad challenges with all the marvelous help of the regular Wiko staff.

Time might be the one gift we most thought we would get from Wiko. Or at least I did. But time was elusive. There were meals, including lunches right in the middle of the day. There were Tuesday and often Thursday seminars, Wednesday focus group meetings, and German class. Easily this was ten hours a week, more if you lingered at meals the way I did. Studying German added another five hours a week at least. Not so many hours perhaps but then there was the intellectual overstimulation of meeting so many Fellows and partners, first learning to recognize them and getting to know their names, then figuring out who they were, which ones we would get to know well, which were more distant. Then there was the staff numbering 50 or more, it seemed, and also interesting and important to get to know. Pilates with the incomparable Rebecca Rainy relieved some of the confusion, but my brain needed to process all these people before it felt ready to do anything else. It was an exciting time at first, and now a pleasant time as I know everyone. I like everyone, but have become closer to some.

Maybe only toward the end as I felt settled could I dig in and make creative progress on my work, but I don't think so. I think the emotional and intellectual confusion of the

early days was ideal for shaking up ideas, changing processes, and helping me decide what is really important.

I did not want to leave Berlin having spent all my time only improving my German, though doing so was very important to me. From our German classes, I know Eva von Kügelgen perhaps better than any other staff member. Her openness and gentle way of teaching a hard topic in an unthreatening way was wonderful. But no, my German only reached a passable level and that was my choice. I let go of the leash on German, though I expect to keep reading and slowly get better.

Another leash I was happy to drop was invitations to give talks. I kept track and turned down eleven such invitations that would have meant returning to the US. It felt odd at first because there is a kind of competition among academics to have tons of invitations. Also, they are both fun and educational. One always gets to meet with eager grad students. But it takes time and fuel and will not get my book written. Perhaps I have gained the self-confidence to turn down more. I just turned down Stanford for a time I will be back in the US. Tempting, but travel won't get my book written. Maybe in two years I can go and visit Bissera and Olivia and Amr. I'm dropping the leash of seminar trips, at least mostly.

In some ways, for me Wiko has been leaping into the spin cycle, seeing that what is important to me and my discipline is very different from what is important to other disciplines. It has shaken me up and challenged my views. I have met people whose very lives are challenged by repressive regimes. I have met judges, lawyers, and negotiators who are actively making the world a better place. I have met people who have paid dearly for standing up for others. I see my life of security, my research in a privileged setting. Yet even there I can do things that matter if I keep my eyes open.

Emerging from the Wiko whirlpool, I can only hope that I keep the breadth and clarity of vision that a perspective across disciplines in my father's hometown has given me. I have picked up the leash of Berlin and German citizenship. I have kept the leashes of responsibility to my group and my colleagues, time-consuming though these are. I have kept a hold of Zeus' leash on the streets of Berlin, but have dropped it in the Grunewald forests. I have dropped the leash to excessive travel to give talks. And I know that someday this book will be finished and I have Wiko and all it means to thank for this.