



WIKO AS METAPHOR
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How can you capture a year at Wiko? What even *is* Wiko? As scholars and writers, artists and musicians, surely we can reach beyond the dry and factual (“The *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin* is an interdisciplinary institute... dedicated to research projects in the natural and social sciences... The purpose of the institute is to offer scholars and scientists the

opportunity to concentrate on projects of their own choosing for one academic year, free from administrative duties.” – *Wikipedia*). But beyond that: Wiko is a place (14193 Berlin-Grunewald, Germany). Wiko was a time (in our case, the 2022/2023 academic year). Wiko is people – Fellows, partners, families, visitors, and a remarkable group of skilled and dedicated staff. Wiko is an adjective (“Dunia served up another fantastic Wiko lunch today”), and it’s an adverb (“I worked very Wiko-ly this morning, but then fell asleep after that fantastic lunch”).

Here I want to consider Wiko as a metaphor¹. Metaphors implicitly suggest stories or narratives through which events in our lives can be understood, useful especially when we can’t find the right words to capture them. As I struggle to find the right words to describe my experiences, I reach once again for metaphor.

Wiko is a state of mind

My mind was sufficiently Wiko this year that I was able to focus on my overall goal of building new conceptual frameworks for our understanding of interactions between species, particularly mutually beneficial ones (mutualisms). That is not to say that the projects I worked on, let alone completed, were those I initially set out to do. I am particularly happy about the progress I made on one of them, an analysis of how within-species cooperation and between-species cooperation interact. This project is a collaboration with a previous College for Life Sciences Fellow, Hari Sridhar, who visited for two productive weeks in the spring. A related project was sparked by a very stimulating workshop on division of labor, organized by Michael and Barbara Taborsky. It poses the idea that mutualism itself is a form of division of labor, as it involves outsourcing tasks such as transportation or protection to another species. I also made progress on addressing the question whether domestication is a form of mutualism, a topic that had been troubling me since being challenged on this point during a short-term stay at Wiko in 2019.

The other projects I worked on were ones I hadn’t foreseen at all before I arrived in Berlin. All were strongly influenced by conversations I had at Wiko, particularly with people far from my own discipline. As might be obvious from this essay, I thought a lot

1 A Metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable. Think that what I’m talking about here is actually Simile or Analogy? Perhaps. We wouldn’t be scholars if we could resist the temptation to pick an argument. But I say it’s Metaphor, and this is my Yearbook entry.

about metaphors this year. I talked a lot about them, too, probably to the exasperation of many tablemates. I helped pull together our first Three Cultures Forum, focusing on the promise and perils of metaphors across all fields of knowledge, tapping into the expertise of Arie, Leor, and Oren (thanks!). I'm also writing an article for the *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* on this subject (thanks, Daniel, for the idea and encouragement). In the spring I got a little obsessed with Piotr Kropotkin and his influence in ecology and beyond, a topic I plan to pursue with Wiko colleagues in the near future. Finally, I signed a contract in late spring for a book that I never intended to write. In the final few weeks of my fellowship, I sat down with many experienced Fellows and staff members to discuss how to best structure my time to accomplish this task. Thanks especially to Thomas, Franciscus, Barbara, and Iris for their tips.

Wiko is the University of Heaven

At Wiko we were given the opportunity to absorb and process new ways of thinking, and then have them influence our own work, while being granted leave to pay minimal attention to university and department politics. Isn't that everything we once hoped academia would be? And didn't we hope that this University of Heaven would support us to live in fine style in beautiful environs in one of the most fascinating cities in the world, while being fed extremely well?

As someone who finds basically everything to be intellectually fascinating², my University of Heaven was (another metaphor coming:) an intellectual playground. It was actually a little random that I landed in science instead of history or literature; this year I had the chance to immerse myself in fields of study that might have been mine, and to learn from the very best. I can confidently say that everything I now know about pre-modern China, Balkan nationalism, the Babylonian Talmud, Kenyan death culture, the Peasant's War, Russian theater, the history of economic thought, German law, and Middle Eastern political art was learned this year. And I learned much more about the few things I did think I knew well (evolutionary biology, in particular – thanks, Curt, Lynda, Dieter, Giovanni, Daven, André, Oren, Benny, Camilo, and Michael and Barbara T.).

2 “There is nothing I am not interested in. That's my strength. My weakness is there is nothing I am not interested in.” (Stanley Hauerwas)

But exposure to the co-faculty of the University of Heaven also changed the way I think about my own topics of study. Here are some key things I learned from other Fellows this year.

- “The tragedy of the commons,” a foundational idea in ecology, has its roots and shoots deep in white supremacy. (Thanks, Danai.)
- “Truth” is the foundation of science, but truth is also a philosophical problem. (Thanks, Gunnar.)
- Like my desert home, the sea has been treated as empty space ripe for exploitation. Like the desert, it needs legal protection long before we achieve an understanding of its many mysteries. (Thanks, Surabhi.)
- One way or another, every Fellow this year was studying Nature. How we conceptualized Nature, though, was highly divergent, in some really intriguing ways. (Thanks, Karin, for giving me the opportunity to develop this idea in my introduction to your fascinating colloquium.)

Wiko is a present-tense verb

When I wasn't working I was very, very busy Wiko'ing. In early autumn, my weekly schedule looked so empty! There was the Tuesday Colloquium; beyond that, there was mostly a lot of time for eating (and eat we did). Then the days filled up. There were German classes. (Sadly, the language of my own present-tense verbs stubbornly remained English.) There were Thursday events, ranging from the Three Cultures Forums to extra colloquia and workshops. There were Fellows' performances and readings, dance parties, holiday parties, and good-bye parties. And there were, and always will be, the Wiko Ducks, waddling around Blue Tit Lake on Friday mornings (thanks, Insa, Joyce, and Claudia).

Once we settled into Grunewald, we started to Wiko around Berlin. My more memorable activities were the outings to street markets (thanks, Claudia, Lynda, and Curt), museums (thanks, Sultan), many, many wonderful concerts (thanks, Barbara and Michael Taborsky), and even more restaurants, including the single best meal of my life (thanks, Tim Raue). There was also a killer birthday trip spent biking and eating in Potsdam with Claudia, Peter, and Lynda. The best, though, were the quiet walks Goggy and I took together in Grunewald's neighborhoods and forest paths.

And then the trips further afield started. For Goggy and me, Wiko'ing abroad meant Amsterdam, Prague, Rome, Pompeii, and a trip down the Danube that was weighted

down by Barbara's incredible volume on Maria Theresa. (Yes, I took my playtime a little too seriously.)

Wiko is family

My own Wiko was a nested set of individuals. At the nucleus of this Wiko was, of course, my rock and my support, the wonderful Goggy Davidowitz, the quintessential Fellow partner. Goggy could always be found at the center of every conversation, activity, excursion, dance floor, and clean-up crew. Goggy offered us a particularly memorable Thursday Colloquium with themed hors d'oeuvres, thanks to Dunia's extraordinarily quick thinking on how to cook insects for a crowd. Moving out further, we have my dearest friends among the Fellows and Fellow families and staff. You know who you are. I hope you'll always be in my life. Thanks for keeping me laughing about everything, including, when needed, about myself (which was often – yes, thanks, Joyce). Surrounding this core Wiko was my extended Wiko, the remarkable staff who made this year a reality along with all of the Fellows who brightened my days at meals and events, put up with my altogether-too-intense questioning, and lent a hand when things went awry in one way or another in Villa Walther. A family gives you the confidence to try things you've never dared before, in the knowledge that if you mess up, they will always be there for you. Such was my Wiko.

Wiko is a window on the world

Peering through this Wiko, much of my complacency about the world was challenged. I would like to think it's gone; at the very least, I am aware of my privilege more profoundly than I have ever been. Like all American scientists, I spend too much time bemoaning the size of my grants; this year, I learned how knowledge can be acquired with effectively no grant money at all (thanks, Raghavendra). Like most scientists, I've been a snob about the value of hard and objective data. I was challenged this year to contemplate how objective our data actually are (thanks, Rose), as well as to recognize the scholarly value of simply asking people about their lived experiences (thanks, Joyce, Insa, Katya, and many others). I did my best to absorb from our Fellows from the arts how truth can be captured on a more emotional, intuitive level than I've been comfortable with in the past (thanks Maria, NoViolet, Katya, Lucia, Sultan, and Njoki). But most importantly, I began to grapple with what it means to be an academic or a writer in exile. I learned that being brave also involves getting mad (thank you, my dearest Elçin, for that lesson). My

admiration for our Fellows who face these challenges continues to grow, and it humbles me.

Peering through this window in a different direction, I see that I learned much about grace in handling family hardship. More than our fair share of Fellows experienced crises and challenges and losses this year; hopefully, we were able to offer some solace while they were far from home. But there were also the joys that came with watching recovery take hold. (I'm thinking of you, brave Pia, and your wonderful parents Peter and Claudia.)

Wiko is a memory

Metaphors help us organize and conceptualize more abstract ideas and events. For ten months of my life, leaving Wiko was an abstract event. Now, it's hard reality.

Wiko lives on – but our Wiko is done. It lies within us now, and it has changed us.