



VARIATION, VARIATION, VARIATION  
LYNDA DELPH

---

Lynda Delph is a Distinguished Professor of Biology at Indiana University and a member of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences. She grew up moving around the world with her family as a child and traveled to New Zealand for her Ph.D. She specializes in evolutionarily based questions concerning various aspects of flowering plant reproduction from both ecological and genetic perspectives. On a more general level, her research focuses on understanding selective forces in natural populations and on speciation from the perspective of how/which traits lead to reproductive isolation. – Address: Department of Biology, 1001 E. 3rd Street, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405, USA.  
E-mail: [ldelph@iu.edu](mailto:ldelph@iu.edu).

When I arrived with Curtis Lively in September and we were shown around our apartment in Villa Walther, I found it monochromatic with Bauhaus furniture. It even had a metal-shelving unit in the living room that reminded me of a magazine-display area one would find in an airport lounge. But it didn't contain magazines. Instead, one of the shelves held about 20 or so Wiko Yearbooks. Later in the year, another Fellow commented, "Who even reads those things?" and Curtis pointed to me and said, "She does." He was right – I had read every one of the accounts (well, those written in English) in all the volumes on the shelf. I was fascinated by the different approaches past Fellows took with their essays and the experiences they had. Vera commented to me, "Don't even try to be novel when you write yours. It's all been done." Sure, to some extent I can agree with her. Plenty of folks had mentioned the warm welcome, the time to work and think, the great meals, the swan family, the nearby forest, and the trials and tribulations of adjusting to a

different culture. These are things/experiences that many Fellows share and are sufficiently struck by that they think to mention them. I am no different. Here are some of the things that struck me, with a common thread of “variation.”

**The people** – you walk into the restaurant at Wiko and see ~50 people, all strangers, and wonder how this is going to work. How will you ever get to know these people and get your work done? How does someone in the 6th decade of their life make new friends? How am I going to get past the previous 2.5 years of pandemic-caused isolation and eat in a room with *so many other people*? The answer, as the people who run Wiko know, is that it is easy. You can’t spend a minimum of two hours in colloquia and eat five meals each week together and not get to know each other – you recognize kindred spirits, and you get to know people you would otherwise never have the chance to meet. Wiko exposed me to more of the variety that is humankind than my regular day-to-day existence. And as an evolutionary biologist, I have always appreciated the importance of variation. So... my advice: Don’t worry about it. You will make friends and influence people. And you will hopefully, like me, meet people whose breadth of open-heartedness is breathtaking.

**The city** – I had never in my adult life lived for an extended time in such a big, multicultural city. I wanted to get to know Berlin BIG TIME. This took an effort. Covid was still sufficiently raging in the autumn that going indoors for extended amounts of time made me uncomfortable. I heard other Fellows talk about going to concerts with thousands of people and here I was masking in crowded sections of outdoor markets. So that meant I had to do things outside for the first few months, but that worked out. Just walking the streets in different sections of the city gave me a sense of the diversity/variation the city contains. I could hop on a bus, S-Bahn train, U-Bahn, or tram (my favorite) and go wherever I wanted. With the phone apps for how-to-get-anywhere-from-here capabilities, Berlin was my oyster. Did I do a lot? Well, more than many, especially in the last third of my stay, but I still have to say what’s in my heart, which is no, I did not do enough. So... my advice: Buy a monthly public-transport pass and get out and go. You could even try what my neighbors did – pick a number out of a hat and get off after that many stops and explore. I doubt you’ll be disappointed.

**The work** – I was fortunate to take part in a Three Cultures Forum (TCF) on the use of the word “gender,” along with Insa Nolte and Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, under the

guidance of Daniel Schönplflug. We compared how gender is used in biology and the social sciences and found some surprising connections. Using ping-pong paddles with male and female symbols attached allowed me to represent the variation present among flowering plants in their gender, and even got some laughs from the audience. And I think it might have made some Fellows look at flowers differently. So... my advice: the TCFs are well worth your time. Even those way outside your area are enlightening.

As an evolutionary biologist, I came with the idea that for my main project I would read broadly about intralocus sexual conflict, whereby alleles that are good for one sex are bad for the other. I wanted to explore the variable ways that different researchers approached this phenomenon and to come to grips with what was needed to definitively say when it was happening. I figured out that many researchers have vastly overestimated its frequency, in part because they want to take a particular – genomic – approach to the question, and this is not sufficient. Suffice it to say, my write-up of this investigation will not be something that everyone will want to hear. But I started writing it and plan to finish it. So... my advice: Leave behind any committee/other work from your institution. Just let it go. Save the easy, straightforward investigations for another time. Instead, give yourself the gift of floundering and finding your way with something that takes real effort. Establish working habits early on and stick to them. Take note: time passes quickly.

**The visas** – Before leaving for Germany, I contemplated traveling to the nearest embassy to get our visas ahead of time. That would have been Chicago for us, which would have been costly both in terms of time and money. So, when I saw on the US Transportation website that one could apply for a resident visa after arriving, I decided to go that route. It seemed like it would be straightforward, and I would have the help of the folks at Wiko to help me with the process. Perhaps in a normal year this would have been true, but with the war raging in Ukraine, many more immigrants were arriving and stressing out the Berlin office that deals with the visa process. Plus, Germany decided they would no longer simply put the photo/stamp visa in your passport during your immigration appointment, but instead would have a card issued, and that would take who knows how long to get to you (6 weeks, longer?). Without going into the nitty-gritty details of my situation (or that of other Fellows – there were a lot of us, and the particulars were highly variable), I can say that the process created a great deal of stress and caused sleepless nights. In the end it worked out just fine for us, but at one point I thought we might have to fly to Romania for a 10-day stay to prevent overstaying our visitor visas. So... my advice: No one

at Wiko is an immigration specialist. They have a lot of Fellows to assist and the whole process keeps changing from year to year. Get your resident visa BEFORE you arrive in Germany if it is at all possible.

**The must-see sites** – I’m going to keep this list short; it contains what I consider the must-sees, not the should-sees (with the caveat that our interests are so very variable...). 1) The *Türkischer Markt* held every Friday in Neukölln is worth the trip. It takes about 50 minutes by public transport from Wiko; I liked taking the U-Bahn to Kottbusser Tor (which by the way, has a Burgermeister with world-class burgers) and walking to the market. Bring plenty of shopping bags and maybe even a friend to help you get stuff back to Grunewald. The prices on the fruit and vegetables are the cheapest in Berlin, there is great food being prepared, and interesting people to observe. 2) The *sixth floor of KaDeWe* is a doozy of a food floor (you can get there on the M19 bus). I’ve been to many around the world and this one rivals the best of them. Who knew there was such a great one-stop shop for any cheese (bread, processed meats, teas, chocolates, olive oil, ...) you had ever heard of in your life and many that you will never see again. 3) The *Dog Beach* on the way to the Jagdschloss is such fun – the dogs romp off leash and jump in the lake. I recommend taking time on a nice weekend day to do the whole loop around the lake, and maybe have a bratwurst at the castle. 4) The *7 lakes boat tour from Wannsee* takes about two hours and exposes you to this different district. A whole bunch of us Fellows went one sunny Saturday for my birthday. Just hop on the S-Bahn at the Grunewald station and head south toward Potsdam. You barely blink and you are there. 5) *Potsdam* is just one more stop on the S-Bahn past Wannsee. Walk around the parks near Sanssouci, the largest World Heritage site in Germany. Eat at the one of the terrific restaurants. Maybe even buy a ticket and go into the palaces. 6) Are you interested in the best *Wiener Schnitzel* and *Kaiserschmarrn* in Berlin? Even if you don’t know what these are, go to the *Jules Verne Restaurant* near Savignyplatz and try them. It’s French and serves vichyssoise, but I recommend these German dishes. 7) The *Museumsinsel* is another World Heritage site worth a visit – there are plenty of museums to choose from, and everyone has their favorite. I really like the Bode with its funny, small rooms. 8) Last but not least, consider attending an opera in the *Staatsoper Unter den Linden*. It’s in the historic center of the city, and the tickets are cheap for the quality of the performances.

To end, I'll say that going to Wiko in 2022 was an excellent thing for me to do after the height of the pandemic. It allowed (forced?) me to emerge from my habit of being locked down and reconnected me with deep thought and with people. To quote a fellow Fellow (a certain German historian), "The more you get to know someone, the more you change yourself." It was great getting to know some people really well and being changed by them. And I hope some of my 2022 cohort take a little more time to look at the flowers as we all go our own way.