

Perspectives on discovery

*Cecilia Moloney
Faculty of Engineering and Applied Science
Memorial University of Newfoundland*

Abstract

This paper offers perspectives on discovery in poetic and narrative forms, juxtaposing self-discovery with research into the natural and engineered worlds.

Dream sequence

I.

They may yet demand
My head upon a platter
Not for heraldic failure
A mere by-product
Of their games of gain
Mine not the bloodiest
Nor yet the handsomest
Yet still in death ranked
In gruesome competition

And I have eaten their meals
For years
From an ill-assortment
Of chipped stained plates
As I fattened and bloated
On a diet rich unnourishing
And addictive

And all the while I eyed
From afar
The ancient platter of my desire
On which the wise ones ate

I held it in my hands
Yesterday
I polished it
Large rectangular fired clay
Hand-painted gold and purple
Fragile unstable alive
I rescued it

And set it carefully
Out of harm's way
As befits a valuable
Objet d'art
Of benign
Authority ...

II.

Away, away
Escape the house if you can
See this skylight here
Onto the roof
Over the snow
On skis waxed and ready

Down, down
This wild white slope
Air and wind and mind and heart
Tipped into movement
In a new born moment

Back, back
Through all the universe
And all of time
To a mansion looking out
Onto a wide granite terrace
A fitting bier for my body
For the bodies of the many

Let the birds be quiet now
And I wait ...

III.

A long wait
Torturous and boring
Through years and years
Of inactivity
Silent, compressed, frozen
To this slow awaking
Not by the kiss of a prince
By a slow spring
Of fickle winds
Occasional sun
Snows to crush the spirit

Of snowdrops
Yet life stirs up
To this tentative return
This big bang
That no one can hear
Not even I ...

Dream sequence narrative

In her memoir, historian Jill Ker Conway writes about her experience of choosing a topic for her Ph.D. thesis at Harvard University in the early 1960s (Conway, 1995). She was inspired by the seminars on American intellectual history given by Donald Fleming who became her thesis adviser. She writes of Fleming:

He was implacable in his insistence that one be committed to one's work, not just professionally but emotionally. ... "One's research should always involve some element of therapy," he said smiling. "It only counts if it's really close to the bone." I agreed, knowing that I had found someone who could help me to find an intellectual vocation. (p. 34)

This passage stood out for me when I first read Jill Ker Conway's memoir over ten years ago. I could envisage how it might be applicable in history or in most of the humanities and social sciences—and especially for Conway who went on to research women intellectuals of 19th century America, a choice significantly motivated by her need to understand her own non-belonging in academic life in the 1950s. However, it wasn't clear to me how the principle of research close to the bone might apply in the natural sciences or engineering. Specifically, it was not clear how it applied in my case.

In the years since reading Conway's memoir, I have come to understand research as discovery more deeply, not just as the discovery of facts and principles of the natural and engineered worlds, but also and substantially as discovery of myself. I have struggled with this understanding alongside my engineering research, but over time have come to appreciate their interconnectedness, sometimes with what I take to be clarity and at other times only dimly through the fog of day-to-day concerns.

The dream sequence speaks to this slow evolution or growth in self-knowledge, including in my own case insights into myself as a researcher and why I was drawn to research. Ultimately, while the process of self-discovery (and of scientific discovery generally) may have its Archimedean moments, the evolution in understanding is surprising both in its slowness as well as its ever-unfolding newness. It is like a big bang that can only be heard by very careful attention.

Reference

Conway, J. K. (1995). *True north: a memoir*. Toronto: Vintage Canada.