

Autobiographical Essay of Abigail Barnes

Recently, somewhere in the vast ocean of content that we call the internet, I heard someone say: “Just be aware, the next worthy pursuit will probably appear in your periphery, which is why you should be careful of long-term dreams. If you focus too far in front of you, you won’t see the shiny thing out of the corner of your eye.” This struck me as good advice for anyone, but particularly for me. Science has been my long-term dream. I grew up with a firm belief that science was the best way to try and find any sort of truth in this muddy, perceptually-driven world we live in. I knew I wanted to get a Ph.D. by the time I was twelve. I knew I wanted that Ph.D. to be in Neuroscience when I was twenty. I was going to go into academia, start my own lab, and be a researcher for the rest of my life.

Writing is the shiny thing at my periphery, the shiny thing that has almost always been there and which I have fanatically ignored. Since the 8th grade, my writing teachers have been telling me my writing puts them in “English teacher heaven.” As a freshman in college, my English 102 professor schedule a meeting with me to suggest I major in English. I told him no, I was going to major in a science, because I wanted to find truth. Writers are too good at being convincing, and not good enough at knowing what to be convinced of. That is what I thought, anyway.

Now, at age 27, I am a year and a half into my Ph.D. program in Experimental Biological Psychology and realizing just how foolish I am. I thought the world’s problems could be solved by finding answers to questions. I thought the irreconcilable differences between people – the deep-rooted differences that were the fountainhead of the intense turmoil we’ve seen within the past year – were due to a lack of knowledge. We just hadn’t found the information that would bridge the gap. We hadn’t found the *truth*, the thing that would bring everyone to a sympathetic and forgiving view of each other.

Then I started reading science. I have read more primary source scientific articles than many will see in their lifetime, and have become convinced of only one thing: the problem is not a lack of information or answers. There are far too many answers, and way too much information. Instead of information bridging the gap, I see information falling into it, pushing the two sides further apart. People on each side reach into the chasm of information and pull out the pieces that best fit their ideas and throw it at the opposing side like a weapon, and the other side holds up their information like a shield; the information just falls back into the gap, and it’s a vicious cycle with no end in sight.

So, I am taking the advice that I heard on the internet, and I’m going to give up on long-term dreams. I will get my Ph.D., because I believe a Ph.D. in science does provide rare and important skills, like how to read scientific journals, how to process and distill large amounts of information into an understandable concept, how to critically think and solve problems, how to perform just about every computer skill there is, and, perhaps most importantly, how to persist through an incredibly painful and world-shattering experience.

After I finish my Ph.D., I want to start working in science writing. I don’t know how, or where, so I’m just going to start doing it. Because if the problem isn’t a lack of information, then its how the information is being shared. That’s another thing I heard on the internet, from the same source: “The arts and sciences need to work together to improve how knowledge is communicated.” I regret having ever dismissed writing. I think if we have any hope of bringing people together, we’re going to need talented science communicators, and I hope to be one of them.