

## **DILIGENT PROTRACTED INVESTIGATION**

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by Dorothy Allen

Since coming to Bennington, I have picked up a mild academic obsession: looking up, in dictionaries, words that I already know. This has become an integral part of my work as a maker of things—of poems, of objects—and also a good way to scratch around for inspiration when I can't settle into a project. Usually, a definition will either confirm or deny my present understanding of a word, but on certain delicious, serendipitous occasions, the phrasing of a definition will unlock in me a whole new understanding of the ideas hidden in language. In a recent word hunt, I looked up *research*. Suddenly, all of the meaning contained in my four years at Bennington, everything I've learned about myself, my work, my community and my world—all was present in this listing.

As defined by the Funk & Wagnalls Practical Standard Dictionary of 1943, research is, simply, 'diligent protracted investigation.' Diligent. Protracted. Investigation. A found poem. A concise description of what we have each, in our own ways, learned how to do these past four years.

Looking back to my freshman year, I can pinpoint the moment when I came to understand that this college is a place of diligent protracted investigation. Experiential Anatomy, taught by dance faculty Peggy Florin, was one of the first courses I took. We spent the semester learning about human bone structure through movement, scientific readings, and the Anatomy Coloring Book; for our final work, Peggy asked each of us to design a creative or research-based project that addressed our studies of the skeleton.

Over the course of the semester, I had become more and more interested in the words for the bones—where they come from, what they mean—and fell in love with the metaphors embodied in our language. For my final project, Peggy allowed me to research the etymology of these words and knit them into a collection of prose poems where the spine is a column of ‘thorns,’ the skull is ‘a bowl,’ the fingers and toes are ‘soldiers in close order,’ and the tibia is ‘a flute.’ I have always been fascinated by language, but for the first time in those elongated fall months, I had permission to come to a new understanding of a typically scientific subject by looking at something other than facts and figures. It hits me now that there are few other places in the world where a professor would encourage a student to access the subject at hand from such a strange angle. Peggy knew, as other Bennington faculty and students know, that each of us would learn more about the skeleton by researching it from our own direction than simply by memorizing the names and locations of bones.

So when I opened the dictionary to look up research, I found an articulation of something I learned four years ago, and have been trying to examine and understand ever since. When I take these three words—diligent, protracted, and investigation—and look at them separately, I find a collective definition of the Bennington experience.

*Diligent:* Even the sounds of this word enact its meaning—it rolls over itself, implying labor, care, evenness. A diligent person is ‘industrious’; a thing done diligently is ‘steady and earnest in application.’ When we arrived here as seventeen and eighteen year olds, we looked around us and saw upperclassmen laboring in their studios, in the library, on the stage, practicing diligently whatever it is that they loved. We saw our professors teaching and practicing those subjects about which they are most passionate.

This is like no other place I know. Working and living are inextricably bound because of the diligence with which we labor.

*Protracted:* From this word, we learn that research is a process ‘drawn out in time.’ This definition conjures up the image of a small piece of elastic that, when pulled, can stretch to any number of lengths. There is so much action implied here—a protracted thing is not elongated by its own agency, but rather drawn out by the power of our own hands. Thus, the work we have done at Bennington is also the work we will continue to do in the hundreds of different places we are aiming for. Many of us began our pursuit of research long before we arrived here and will, with the tools we have acquired, pursue these questions and many others long after our departure.

*Investigation:* This word finds its roots in the Latin word *vestigare*, meaning ‘to track.’ Again, this is no passive undertaking: to investigate is ‘to examine; to search; to inquire into systematically.’ It is certainly here at Bennington where I learned what it means to hunt knowledge. Not to timidly request that it sit still while I tie a collar to its neck, nor to wait with open hands for it to come to me; rather, I have learned to stalk ideas, to come at them from all sides, to make my environment full of traps in which to catch all kinds of thoughts and bring them together. *Investigation* summons up images of dissections, of private eyes snooping around crime scenes. Here, though, many of us have expanded our understanding of what it means *to investigate*, developing a process of investigation in all of our areas of study. That we can all undertake these investigations side by side, learning from each other’s methods and sometimes following along behind each other, is one of the things I have loved about living here. None of us inquires into our subject in the same way; each of us has something to teach about our process.

When composing this speech, I began laughing to myself when I realized that I am researching the word research as a way to discuss the research I have done while in college. This kind of meta-realization seems particularly Bennington—with all the time we spend thinking, talking, and writing about our own education, whether during the Plan process or at the dinner table or in our advisor's offices, it's no wonder that inquiry becomes as familiar as breathing. After a good chuckle, of course, I continued to look up the word research in several other dictionaries, just for comparison's sake. In one of those other definitions, I found that to *diligent protracted investigation* one can add: 'in order to discover facts, to establish or revise a theory, or to develop a plan of action based on the facts discovered.' This last bit is our present challenge. We have spent the past several years discovering, establishing, and revising; we have developed plans of action and begun carrying them out, and now it is our responsibility to extend what we have done into the world beyond Bennington. I look around at all of us, and am so eager to see what we will do with our research.

And that brings me to this, a final dismantling: when we take apart the word research itself, we are left with two components. *Search*, which roughly matches the definition for investigate, and *re-*, which implies something 'done again, and done again in a different way.' This is the part that I find exciting for us now, for whom this moment may feel like an ending. Because if research is what we have learned to do in the past four years, however we each define that act, then this is no ending. We will take what we have done here, and do it again, and do it again in a different way.