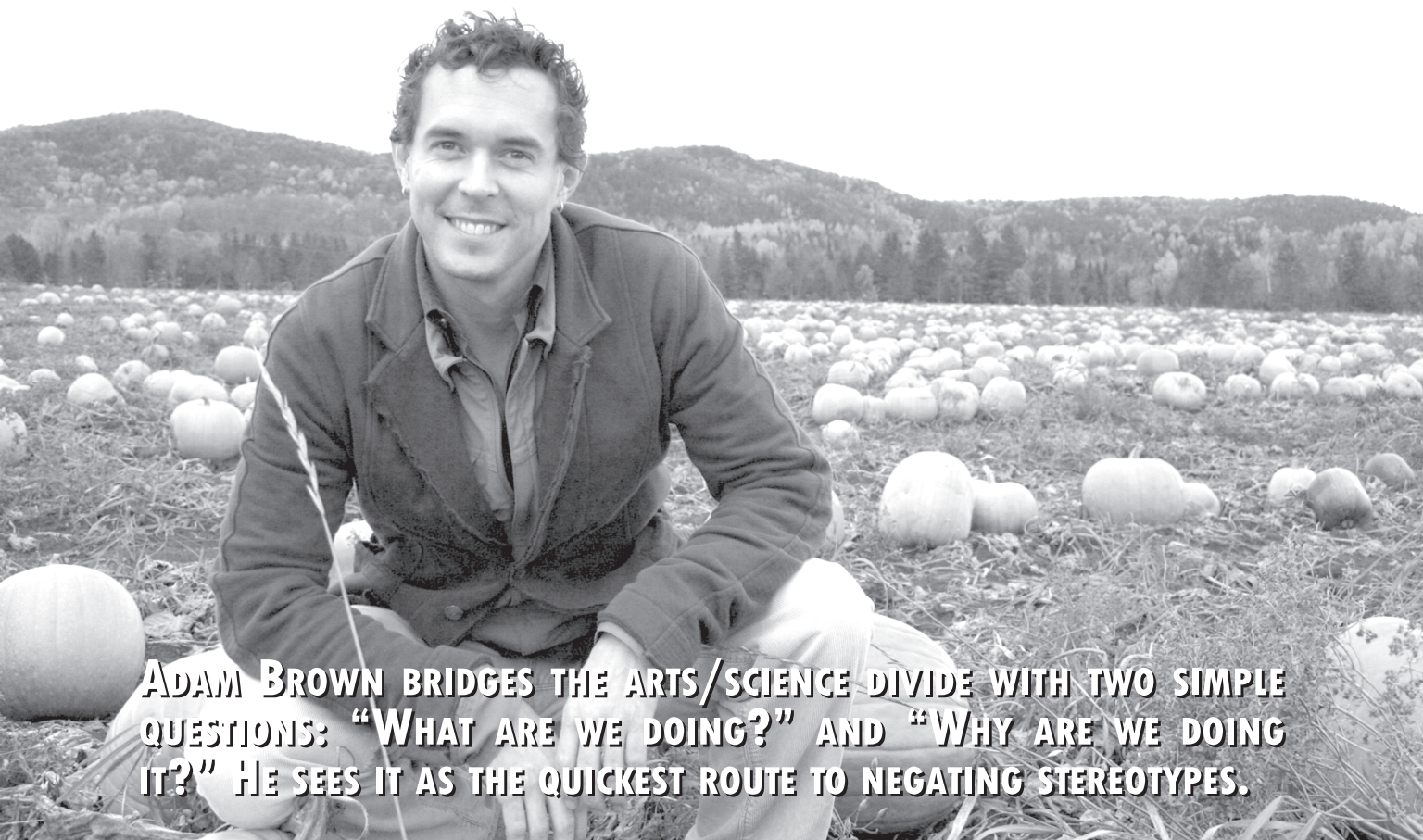


# A CLEAR VIEW OF COMPATIBILITY

BY KATE ALEY



**ADAM BROWN BRIDGES THE ARTS/SCIENCE DIVIDE WITH TWO SIMPLE QUESTIONS: “WHAT ARE WE DOING?” AND “WHY ARE WE DOING IT?” HE SEES IT AS THE QUICKEST ROUTE TO NEGATING STEREOTYPES.**

*Photo by Bethan Nodwell*

**A**dam Brown is a self-professed oddball, seemingly a misfit in both spheres of his life. He’s a pollination ecologist and lecturing professor at the University of Ottawa, yet his field studies and class work book-end another path as an artist, performing music, theatre and dance internationally. The two spheres are not mutually exclusive, nor completely compatible.

“People are told: ‘you have to do this, you have to be like that’, but why should anyone be pigeon-holed? There is no reason why working in a field should define you. I was raised to think that

you can be good at more than just one thing. I want to do whatever I do, well.”

His mother is a photographer, his father a musician; both are dancers. Much of his childhood was spent attending concerts and festivals with folk band The Friends of Fiddler’s Green, of which his father was a founding member. Brown felt he was expected to take up music or dancing professionally, but at the country festivals he awoke to an emerging love of nature, a reflection on his personal impact on others and on the environment. It led him to a compassionate aspect

of ecology: environmental science. "I turned out to be a scientist, the white sheep in my family. I have had a long history of trying to explain myself."

He reacted by taking time off after his second year at university, disillusionment making him want to experience a different life. He travelled - working in bars and forming bands that played music throughout Europe, "getting it out of my system" - and then realized university was where he wanted to be all along. Returning to the University of Ottawa, he spent the next 15 years evolving from student to professor. "I realized that I wanted to be both of the things that I loved, a hybrid artist/scientist; but it's hard to be a professional artist and a professor on the side. I found it's easier the other way around."

Brown perceives that stereotypes about artists and scientists are misconceptions, and therefore limitations: How could a scientist be creative? How could an artist think rationally? Societal pressures - politics, religion, the media - tend to confine individual thinking. "There is the preconception of Morris dancing (which Brown teaches) as being all about tankards and pot bellies, but it is powerful and energetic, hardly just prancing," he says.

Morris is an English folk dance based on rhythmic stepping and choreographed figures using sticks, swords and handkerchiefs. By disassociating its historical symbolism, dancers can rationalise what they are doing to make sense of their actions. "What are we doing and why are we doing it? What do you think? Why do you think it? I ask these things to help (my students) search for the reason behind the thinking process. Often they already do know the answer; they just don't yet know that they do," Brown says.

He is also sure that scientists are not

necessarily dull, uncreative people stuck in labs. He is eager for his students to delight in their studies, to dance while waiting for test results to come in. Both processes are about identifying patterns that reveal meaning and bring understanding - a search driven by curiosity and creativity. "My approach in both art and science is to ask a question, test the hypothesis, try something new and go with what works. The best artists work through this process too, experimenting and practicing. You need to do what you do well and appreciate why you do it. The best scientists are those who are not only curious but also creative enough to think beyond time-worn, accepted parameters. Thinking like this can't help but influence the way people lead their lives."

If art is an evolving tradition and science an ongoing search for the truth, then both hold the potential to maximize knowledge through the diversity of ideas. Brown claims scientists admit when they may be wrong and keep seeking answers. The same is true of art's path. "You can't be static, or you lose the potential to advance. You have to stay a participant in the process. My style is to do something well, but do it seriously. However, I don't think you have to be serious while you do it. I refuse to accept the dichotomy that work can't be fun. Have fun, but know the reason for it."

He's proud to be an oddball in both arenas, long ago giving up the idea that his passions are often seen as incompatible. Choosing to create his own spheres, he urges others to think and decide for themselves, to navigate their lives with certainty. If you do well whatever you love, the question of compatibility becomes irrelevant.



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