A science career story

I was valedictorian of a large public high school in Florida, attended a top liberal arts college—Swarthmore—and majored in physics. After a short, post-college stint as a small-town journalist, I entered the physics Ph.D. program at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. I connected early with a research project that allowed me to publish often and well, although I did not love the work. I finished my Ph.D. fairly quickly—faster than I needed to really because my wife, a chemist, was still in graduate school. So I stayed in the same lab for a postdoc, doing the same work, funding the position with a grant proposal written by me and submitted in my adviser’s name. From graduate school on, I do not remember receiving a single piece of career advice.

A year or so into my postdoc, my adviser retired. I took over his lab, earning a very long title: visiting research assistant professor. I inherited some ‘80s-vintage electronics and a ‘60s-era lab with a desk in the corner.

As my wife approached the end of her Ph.D., we began to consider our “two-body problem.” We agreed that we would accept the first good offer either of us received.

My job-market timing could not have been worse. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc sent many physicists and other scientists streaming west. Big corporate labs were downsizing and moving away from basic research, sending veteran physicists onto the academic job market. The early ‘90s employment crisis made news. (You can read about it in Science at http://scim.ag/1qg8PzT.) I appeared successful. I was running my own funded lab and publishing in good journals.

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Yet, I soon realized that I wasn’t competitive for tenure-track positions at the institutions where I wanted to work, including the one where I was already working. One rejection letter among the many I received thanked me for being part of a “remarkable cohort” of more than a thousand applicants for a single faculty post. I believe the number actually exceeded 1300.

My wife applied for just one job and got the offer. I became the trailing spouse, following her to Maine, where she took up a faculty post. I took pride in defying science’s gender stereotypes.

It was surprisingly easy to walk away from the career that I had worked so long and hard to attain. The hard part came later as I lost my knowledge of science and saw my mathematical facility dwindle, and as I struggled to fashion an identity that wasn’t linked to professional attainment.

I turned to writing, and when I wasn’t writing, I was repairing and maintaining a passive-solar house in the country: shoveling snow, hauling tons of firewood up a steep hill, planting a vegetable garden that didn’t get enough sun, and fulfilling various back-to-nature clichés. For a while, I taught writing part-time to undergraduates; it was ideal training for the work that would come later. We soon had a son, and (except for the breastfeeding part) I was the primary parent.

In 1999 I founded an Internet publication, The Post-Careerist, which was focused on living a rich post-professional life. Through connections I made online, I became science editor at a pioneering Internet publication, BlueEar.

Then, via an acquaintance in Pakistan—this was early online networking, before LinkedIn and Facebook—I heard about a writer/editor position at Science’s Next Wave, Science Careers’ predecessor. I sent an e-mail and within weeks found myself with a full-time job for the first time in years. A few years later, I became the editor of Science Careers.

My science career story is hardly unusual. Indeed, what’s remarkable is how much it shares with so many other non-traditional career stories: uncertainty, exploration, a difficult transition, self-invention, and (eventually) satisfaction.

So what’s your story? Send stories, perspectives, opinions, and observations on careers in the sciences to me at SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.

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