

By Ranjan Mukherjee

The winding road

On a bright July day more than 3 decades ago, I turned up at the physics department of the University of Delaware (UD), Newark, hoping to meet my new research adviser. I was met instead with quizzical looks: The professor had died some months before I arrived. No one had told me. ¶ I had come a long way. After finishing a master's degree in physics at the University of Calcutta, I had become interested in biophysics. I had decided to pursue a Ph.D. studying the physical properties of nucleic acids and had won admission to UD, with a teaching assistantship. I packed my bags, got my passport and tickets, and said farewell to family and friends. Half a world from home, I was left scratching my head, contemplating my next step. What would I do? I had student visa requirements and little money. I taught physics labs that summer as I pondered my future.

A month later, I was taking a short cut through the biology department when I came upon an outline of a graduate cell biology course that would be offered in the fall. I liked it. I sought out the professor, told him my story, and proposed doing a biology Ph.D., even though I had never taken a college-level biology course. He looked at me as if to say, "You can't be serious." Still, he agreed, with conditions: I had to get an A in his course, and I had to take the biology Graduate Record Exam (GRE).

The fall semester was busy and tense. I was enrolled in the physics graduate program, taking a full course load, and I was teaching lab courses. I also took the cell biology course. I got an A. I took the GRE and was admitted to the graduate program in biology.

There were many new things to learn. I took makeup courses, taught lab courses, and did research. It was a wonderful experience. Toward the end of the program, I got married.

I finished my Ph.D., and my wife and I moved to France, where I did a postdoc at the CNRS-LGME in Strasbourg—again the packing of bags, obtaining of visas, fond farewells, the start of a new life on a new continent. I worked hard in Strasbourg but also had fun, traveling around, sampling the local cuisine, and traversing the fabled Route du Vin. Three years later, we returned to the United States, and I began my professional career.

I worked in metabolic disease drug discovery in the pharmaceutical industry for more than 22 years. I worked hard, published papers, presented at national and international



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conferences, and took fun vacations. Life was good. Last year, the company where I had more than 15 service years ended R&D efforts in diabetes and eliminated several positions, including mine. This was not as shocking as the news of the dead adviser, but it was a major jolt nonetheless. I took the severance package and found myself wondering, "What now?" for the first time in more than 30 years.

A committed traveler and avid reader of travel magazines, I decided to try writing travel articles. I wrote a few articles on Indian wildlife that I had photographed on safaris and a piece on an interesting experience I had when my car broke down on the freeway near Philadelphia. I sent them off to journals and blogs. Three have been accepted, one by a popular U.S. magazine, the second by a major newspaper, and the third by the Indian government for publication on a new government website. It's not a bad start to a writing career.

My career has taken several sudden, unexpected twists and turns. Careers are like that these days. I have accepted the challenges as they've come and done my best to overcome them, with reasonable success. I have always viewed my job as a means to an end, to enjoy life and work. Research offered those rewards—until it didn't. Now I have set off on another kind of exploration. ■

Ranjan Mukherjee is now a freelance writer. For more on life and careers, visit www.sciencecareers.org. Got an interesting career story? Send it to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.

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