A career is like a love affair

I intended to become a researcher. Instead I became a science journalist, then an editor, and finally CEO of the American Chemical Society (ACS) before I retired in February. At a recent event at Columbia University, hosted by the organization Women in Science at Columbia, I told my career story and passed along lessons I’ve learned about how women can make the most of their lives and careers. Here is some of the advice I offered at that event.

Believe in yourself, and never take “no” for an answer. In graduate school, I loved reading Chemical & Engineering News (C&EN). So I thought to myself, “Why not get a job there?” I called Richard Kenyon, who was the publisher at the time, to ask for an appointment. “Dr. Kenyon is busy all afternoon,” his secretary said. “I suggest you send a résumé.” Instead, I took a bus to Kenyon’s office. “Do you mind if I wait?” I asked the secretary. “You can wait, but he won’t be able to see you,” she replied.

When Kenyon got off the elevator, I raced over. You can imagine the look of horror on the secretary’s face when he said, “Come right in.”

Never burn bridges, but know when it’s time to move on. I was the youngest staff member at C&EN and the only woman. I loved working there. But when I discovered that my salary was 30% below a benchmark, I left. There were no hard feelings; I just took a better job, at the National Institutes of Health, and then another, at the National Bureau of Standards. I loved them both—and then I encountered the Boss From Hell.

Take control. Instead of mentoring and supporting me, he stood over my shoulder micromanaging and yelling. I left as soon as I could but not before learning a key lesson: Take control of your career. I encourage young women to construct 5-year plans focused on their aspirations and how to achieve them. Don’t let others set the agenda, and never, ever let yourself be bullied.

Get a life. I landed at the Smithsonian Institution as chief science writer in the Office of Public Affairs. I stayed there 14 years. It was a wonderful place to work, but it was all consuming: It was not unusual to get calls at 3 a.m. asking about a new panda cub or a tornado at a storage facility. I sought a position where I could have a life outside of work. I returned to C&EN and soon became editor-in-chief.

It was a demanding job, but I was more in control of my time. When my beloved father became ill with lymphoma, I left work every day at 5 p.m. to visit him, for 5 months. I cherish the time I spent with him. Barely a year after he died, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I didn’t miss a day of work (except for the surgery), but I was grateful for the flexibility to fit it all in. My cancer has been in remission for almost 18 years.

A career is like a love affair. There are many parallels: Both have ups and downs, it can be hard to find the right one, and sometimes we don’t choose wisely. There might not be a single choice that gives satisfaction for a lifetime. To be worthwhile, relationships and careers must be rich and rewarding and provide an environment in which we can grow and learn. I can’t imagine staying in a relationship that didn’t have these qualities—and what else is a job except a relationship where you spend anywhere from 8 to 16 hours a day?

So, relationship or job, how do you find the right one? There’s a Cole Porter musical called Nymph Errant, about Evangeline, an adventurous young woman who aims to lose her virginity—pretty advanced stuff for 1933. In a song called “Experiment,” Ms. Pratt, Evangeline’s chemistry teacher, exhorts her:

To do what all good scientists do / Experiment /... / Be curious /... / Get furious / At each attempt to hold you down. / If this advice you always employ / The future can offer you infinite joy. /... / Experiment / And you’ll see.

A former editor-in-chief of C&EN, Madeleine Jacobs was CEO of ACS until she retired in February. For more on life and careers, visit sciencecareers.sciencemag.org. Send your story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.
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Science 348 (6230), 150.
DOI: 10.1126/science.348.6230.150