Separation from loved ones during postdoctoral training is practically a rite of passage, among other sacrifices supposedly proving one’s commitment to science. There is a persisting culture in academia that holds that training should be a struggle, perhaps even a hazing process; that declares that because some in the past succeeded through suffering, others must continue to do so in the future.

My own experience challenges such assumptions. For example, beware anyone who claims to have worked continuously for more than 15 hours a day, 7 days a week, in the lab. No one spends that much time in the lab throughout their training, no matter what they might tell you. During my Ph.D., I would sometimes work strenuously for a month, but then I would make sure to take a long weekend off, visiting friends, taking a complete break. Falling into this rhythm, I achieved a level of productivity that everyone involved in my training, not least myself, seemed happy with.

Now that I am married, I continue to work hard, but I also have other priorities. My hours in the lab are variable; I get in, do all my lab work, and get out, doing my writing and reading at home and on my commute. I am now split between two labs, and my efficiency is improved. With a commute to deal with, I don’t want to spend time in the lab procrastinating on a computer, and I’ve never been a fan of being in the lab all hours just to be seen there. I only stay late if I’m actually doing an experiment.

That strategy may not be heroic, but it is rational—and, I am confident, not unusual. As a medical student, my husband frankly has the more realistic prospect of a job. We want to have children, and to afford to do so, we can’t depend on my uncertain career prospects alone. Our status as a gay couple also enters the calculations. More than half of U.S. states provide no employment protection for LGBT workers, and a larger gray area surrounds the rights of private religious institutions to discriminate. Other aspiring scientists must contend with factors such as their race, socioeconomic status, or gender. The idea of the noble struggle for an academic position ignores such confounding variables.

In my postdoctoral work, I have focused on securing training and credentials. Beginning as a chemist who moved into biochemistry and developmental biology during my Ph.D., I discovered my love of proteins. My first postdoc was in proteomics, learning how to experiment with mass spectrometry. My second has focused on developing my understanding of cell biology, as well as learning quantitative imaging techniques. And (shock, horror) I am considering a third postdoc. I enjoy doing practical science, and, frankly, it’s a convenient temporary position while my husband does his residency. Our timelines don’t match perfectly; with luck, future prospective academic employers will understand that, but I have been looking into other career paths in case they don’t.

I’ve had a lot of fun so far. I’ve used nuclear magnetic resonance and mass spectrometers—and even a synchrotron. I’ve done work in the United Kingdom, the United States, and France, and in my long association with the frog Xenopus, I’ve discovered the joys of developmental biology and trying to combine it with my background in the dark chemical arts.

I haven’t made it yet, whatever “it” turns out to be, and everyone’s secret sauce for success is different. But my own suggestion is to follow your own path by reading around widely and dipping your toe into the various pools of different activities before you throw yourself in. Enjoy what you do, strive to do it well, and have no regrets. Most of all, aim to love what you do, but don’t jeopardize ties with those you love.

Gary McDowell is a postdoc at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts, and a visiting scholar at Boston College. He is also a co-organizer for the 2015 Boston Future of Research meeting. He would like to thank Jessica Polka and Zachary Marcus for comments. For more on life and careers, visit sciencecareers.org. Send your story to SciCareerEditor@aaas.org.
Why not have a life?
Gary McDowell

Science 349 (6247), 554.
DOI: 10.1126/science.349.6247.554