The best decision I ever made

What prompts a person to make a decision that will change their life forever? For me, it was being born a female in a developing country, India. I had a happy childhood filled with warm memories and a supportive family, but because I was a girl, it seemed that I had fewer rights than boys and couldn’t have the freedoms and education they were offered. My future was to marry a man as arranged by my parents, rather than have a full career. But I wanted something different. After spending a glorious summer at a youth World Wildlife Fund camp in Mudumalai National Park in the mountains of the Western Ghats when I was 13, I decided that I wanted to be an ecologist to study and preserve nature.

I undertook a bachelor’s degree in zoology at the University of Delhi, with the intention of going to graduate school in North America. But my family couldn’t understand why I wanted to live in the Western world as a poor graduate student when I could have a comfortable life in India. Elders clicked their tongues in disapproval, and friends thought that I had lost my mind when I told them about my dream to become a scientist. After I completed my undergraduate degree, I had the choice to either get married or leave home for a career. I took the latter option, and now, more than 20 years later, I know that it was the best decision I ever made.

But the path wasn’t easy, especially at the start. I moved to Canada with only a few hundred dollars and a suitcase full of books and clothes. I worked in retail, as a waitress, and other odd jobs for a few years while trying to get into graduate school. And once I began my master’s program, I found myself chronically behind my peers. I didn’t even know how to turn on a computer, let alone use one! Only after many years of hard work was I finally up to speed. Luckily, along the way I met wonderful friends and colleagues who gave me a sense of family and belonging, and helped me get settled in a new and foreign culture. I always had a place to go for Thanksgiving and Christmas, and when I married an American husband of my own choice, we started hosting at our home.

But developing confidence was a major challenge. Both as a graduate student and young faculty member, I caught myself trivializing my accomplishments when I was complimented. Slowly, I learned to take ownership of my successes. Yet it took decades to truly feel confident about myself as a scientist, and to not dwell on negative messages or the failures that are more common than successes in science. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my colleagues and mentors, who guided and taught me along the way. My mentors were patient; they believed in me and gave me opportunities to thrive in science. This is not an easy task, as I understand better now that I am a mentor myself.

Life is full of choices, and those dictated by passion, dedication, and perseverance are the ones that will make us successful. As I was establishing my career, I decided that I would move anywhere to pursue my dream. I wanted to see the world, pursue opportunities as they arose, and learn widely about ecological problems. Before we got married, I asked my husband if he was willing to move with me, and he agreed to follow me across the continent. So, I worked with various state and federal agencies and forest companies in Alberta, British Columbia, California, Michigan, Minnesota, and Ohio before becoming a professor and settling in Georgia. Working in many ecosystems gave me a unique perspective and appreciation for ecological problems, which brought depth and diversity to my research program.

Many times during graduate school I wondered if, by leaving home, I had ruined my life. But I found a supportive and nurturing community that made the challenges lighter and easier, and I am glad I stayed the course. After all, the biggest adventures in our lives are the ones we allow ourselves to have.

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