The problem with ‘alternative’

For years after I dissected a fetal pig in ninth grade, I identified as an aspiring scientist. I was enraptured by the way that anatomical parts, unimpressive on their own, came together to form a living creature. I wanted to devote my life to studying such marvels by becoming a professor at the helm of my own research laboratory. Every step I made was toward that goal—until my second year of graduate school. I still loved doing science. But, through launching a blog and salon series called ArtLab, I found that I loved thinking and talking about science—unfundable dream projects, happy lab accidents that became historical breakthroughs, the latest sci-fi fantasy and its implications—even more. I realized that a traditional professorship was not right for me. But I feared that pursuing my newfound interest would mean that I was settling for an “alternative” to my ninth grade dreams. I was stuck.

Talking with scientists who had gone on to careers in science communication, while inspiring, in some ways reinforced my hesitation. Watching them wield complex scientific concepts to provoke thought and excitement helped me envision a future outside academia. But from time to time, I picked up on a verbal tic that nagged at me: They’d jokingly refer to themselves as failed-scientists-turned-blank. How could I, a career overachiever, opt to fail? I recoiled at the idea of turning my back on the path a “successful” young scientist is meant to walk. The word “alternative,” commonly applied to the types of careers that I was becoming more and more interested in, quietly rankled. I felt that to accept an “alternative” as my true aspiration would be to accept defeat and disappoint myself and all the mentors who had invested in my future as a scientist.

Nonetheless, I couldn’t ignore my growing interest in nonacademic career options. I flirted with the idea of cutting my losses and leaving my Ph.D. program. As ArtLab gained steam, my peers would even stop me on campus and ask why I hadn’t left already. But I didn’t want to abort my education. I knew there would be no other time in my life when I would have the luxury of diving deep into a single biological question, no other place that would give me the freedom to follow my curiosity, and no other occasion to meet some of the greatest scientific minds.

As my identity crisis quietly brewed in the pit of my stomach, I began asking the communicators I so admired why they had finished graduate school only to leave research. Many of them noted that their scientific training gave them tools and insights that they took into their professional lives. I began to appreciate that graduate school isn’t—and shouldn’t be—vocational training. Through my time in the lab, I have learned how to deal with failure and frustration. I have translated the jargon of my field into plain and vivid English. I have collaborated with my peers in pursuit of a common goal. These skills, and the many others that I have developed, will serve me well regardless of which nonacademic path I choose. Moreover, my pursuit of an “alternative” path doesn’t mean that the academic system has failed me. Instead, it has trained an ally. Armed with this new perspective, I finally got up the courage to tell my adviser that my plans for the future did not involve a postdoctoral position. I readied myself for her disappointed speech about what a shame it was to see me go. Instead, she beamed and said, “If we’re not sending our best and brightest out into the world beyond the bench, then there’s no hope for us here in the lab.”

Having defended my dissertation last month, I am now preparing to leave academia. Not for an alternative, nor to shed my identity as a scientist to become something less, but to pursue the path that is right for me.

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