Sailing through uncertainty

Growing up, I felt that I had no choice but to pursue science. My dad wouldn’t accept anything but a science degree. He told me in no uncertain terms that if I really wanted to be an English major or a writer, as I said I did, I would need to figure out how to pay for college on my own. I chose a school 2000 miles from home and overloaded my schedule with literature classes that I claimed were required, but I wasn’t brave or independent enough to squeak out from under my dad’s thumb. I trudged halfheartedly through the weeder courses in chemistry and physics, but during a marine biology class, I felt a spark. I was captivated by the quirky, alternative style of marine scientists, who braved the waves and conducted their experiments at sea. It was an adventure I wanted to be a part of.

I joined an oceanography lab as an undergraduate researcher, which propelled me to graduate school. I was passionate about my research, but niggling in my brain like a splinter was the constant fear that I was forging ahead toward a career I didn’t really want, still lacking the courage to make my own way. The splinter became harder to ignore as I progressed through my Ph.D. and struggled with questions about a future in academia.

Then, 2 years into my graduate studies, I flew across the planet to embark on a research cruise in the South Pacific with a team of French oceanographers. I was the farthest I’d ever been from home. I had left my partner behind and my barely affordable apartment empty. After waving goodbye to dry land and Wi-Fi for the next 2 months, I found that my high school French was rustier than I thought. I was feeling isolated, and my doubts about the path I had taken intensified. If I didn’t see a future as a scientist, what on Earth was I doing in the middle of the South Pacific?

The days at sea were grueling. Our course sent us into the path of a tropical cyclone, so I spent each day being pelted by rain and bracing myself against the pitch and roll to avoid being pulled overboard while I dragged a fine mesh net through the surface water to sample for phytoplankton. It was mentally draining, too. As I crossed off the days on my calendar until my return home, I grew more and more panicked and guilty, uncertain about what I would be returning to if I didn’t actually want to be a scientist.

Eventually, we sailed through the last tendrils of the storm. That first rainless evening, I found a place on deck to contemplate the sunset. Around the hull of the ship, a school of squid glided into view, bobbing gently along the glassy surface to feed in the waning light. It struck me as a hopeful omen. But as they drifted closer, I saw that they were not squid at all. They were baguettes. Too stale for eating, the steward had jettisoned them overboard with the rest of the day’s kitchen scraps. I laughed out loud and remembered what had initially attracted me to oceanography: the promise of adventure. And I realized that oceanography had given me a passion to write about. That night in my berth, I resolved to stop lamenting the past and second-guessing the future and to enjoy my journey as a scientist. Most importantly, I vowed that I would apply my experiences to a future career writing about science.

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