When personal becomes professional

Three months ago, I finished my Ph.D. studying the spread of waterborne pathogens. My next logical moves would be to get a postdoc in a related field, publish extensively, and scramble like hell to try to get on the tenure track. Instead, later this month, I’ll be starting a postdoctoral fellowship studying chronic pain. So why am I drastically switching fields, potentially risking my academic career prospects to effectively start over again in a new discipline? It’s because I’ve begun to consciously make professional choices that are deeply tied to my personal life, incorporating past moments of struggle, joy, and clarity into my career development.

I didn’t always think this way. My plan going into college was to find a job where I could make plenty of money and live my real, meaningful life outside of work. I meandered through the first half of college with this plan, when suddenly my health started failing. I spent 13 months afflicted by mysterious pain that started in my hands and quickly spread throughout my body. I had trouble sleeping, and my mind felt foggy. I slogged through the medical system, received multiple unhelpful diagnoses, went to physical therapy and a chiropractor, changed my diet, and tried many other approaches to relieve my symptoms. Nothing really helped.

Finally, I received an accurate diagnosis: fibromyalgia, a lifelong pain condition. This diagnosis scared me but also came as a relief. Now there was a chance for effective treatment. Through trial and error, I started developing a toolbox of management approaches. I practiced yoga, worked on my sleep habits, and occasionally used medication. My health slowly improved. I finished college and started working at a private company, testing water filters. To sustain my health, I exercised daily; ate carefully; and, with my wife and friends, started a communal vegetable garden and raised chickens.

The experience gave me a better understanding of how health could be bolstered by the interplay between personal behavior and community support, which bled into my approach to my career. I decided that I wanted to focus on doing actionable research that is responsive to people’s needs. These goals led me to start an environmental microbiology Ph.D., which would equip me with tools to tackle public health challenges.

I also decided to learn more about fibromyalgia and realized that I was one of 100 million Americans with chronic pain. My struggles with the medical system were not unique, but commonplace. Inspired by this new knowledge, I decided to try to interweave my personal experience with my scientific life. I sought out a chronic pain researcher, and we ended up working together on a study showing that medical cannabis could improve patients’ quality of life and reduce their opioid use. This project allowed me to exercise both my personal and scientific voice, and I knew that I had found my ideal field. When I was offered a postdoc that would allow me to continue in this area, I jumped at the opportunity.

I had some misgivings at first, because making such a shift and allowing my personal life to guide my scientific path conflicted with advice I have heard throughout my career: Remain objective and become an expert in one discrete field of research. But I believed it was the best way for me to live a fulfilled life, both personally and professionally. And once I clearly communicated my personal connection to the chronic pain field, my Ph.D. advisers were supportive.

I’m excited to explore this new field and to continue breaking down the walls between the personal and professional compartments of my life. I’ve learned to be open to allowing my personal experiences to shape my work and career, instead of feeling locked into past trajectories or what is “expected.” I plan to continue approaching my career decisions in this holistic way so that my work will be meaningful, both personally and, hopefully, to society.

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