

By Maria Ter-Mikaelian

Why our ways parted

My father has been a scientist for almost 40 years. I hadn't planned to follow in his footsteps, but to my surprise, I found myself drawn to research as an undergraduate. I went on to earn a Ph.D. in neuroscience, but I grew disillusioned and ultimately changed careers to become a science writer. Recently, I sat down with my father, who is currently a senior scientist at the Ontario Forest Research Institute in Canada, to reflect on what influenced his decision to stay in academia and mine to leave it. Our conversation has been translated from Russian and edited for brevity and clarity.

Michael Ter-Mikaelian: When I started doing research, it captivated me. While I was working on my first mathematical problem, I would ponder it for hours while walking with you in the stroller—and suddenly, I solved it! I was so excited that I couldn't sleep that night. Having once experienced that, you want to keep doing it. I've never felt the same elation again, but there is definitely still enjoyment. To a large extent that's what drives what I do.

Maria Ter-Mikaelian: When I started doing research, I had the feeling that the people around me were such idealists. They just wanted to know the truth about how the world works, and they would have done it for free. One of the things that disillusioned me later, during my Ph.D., was the impression that to stay afloat in academic research, you have to constantly think about what will be “sexy” and what your brand is.

Michael: I know what you mean. A certain pragmatism is definitely necessary. But still, the people I know don't choose their research direction based on what is sexy. That was my downfall, in a way. I got interested in something; I did one project on it. All my life, I jumped from one topic to another. Mostly, I do it for my own enjoyment and for the respect of the small circle of people whose opinions matter to me. They certainly aren't pragmatists. They do what they think is interesting. If my goal had been international recognition of my brand, then I would have been constantly disappointed.

Maria: When I was finishing my Ph.D., I had the feeling that I was just mucking around. The problems I was working on were so narrow and esoteric, and they were using up so many resources—if not money, then my time



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and effort, and the effort of other people who were reading my work.

Michael: Quite a while ago, I came to the conclusion that that's how science works. There are lots of people, each doing their own little thing, like ants laying little bricks. There is not much use or progress from any of it. Then, someone comes along who synthesizes it all and makes a leap. Even then, some of the bricks will turn out to be completely useless. That's how it has to be. I accepted the fact that I probably won't be that synthesizer, and that's OK. I still believe that the work of those little bricklayers is important. It's necessary.

Maria: Maybe you stayed in science because you believe in that more than I do—that our petty little activities are neces-

sary in the grand scheme of things. I just felt that I was going to be the bricklayer who was doing something silly off to the side that wasn't even going to be part of the building.

Michael: It's not that I believe it more than you do. It might be that it's enough for me, but not enough for you.

Maria: Particularly when I was finishing my Ph.D., there weren't many people who I could talk to and see that big picture. The grad students and postdocs I was friends with all had the view that academia is hopeless, and they were all very disillusioned in research as a career.

Michael: What you were exposed to, that's what you based your conclusions on. Life is not always a result of a conscious decision. You look back and think, “It could have turned out completely differently.” ■

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Science

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Science **359** (6380), 1186.

DOI: 10.1126/science.359.6380.1186

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