

By Edmond Sanganyado

My path to contentment

I leapt into the air, screaming at the top of my lungs with tears rolling down my cheeks as the news sank in. I had lost both of my parents when I was 16 years old, and I had often been sent home from school for unpaid tuition as I worked my way to a bachelor's degree in my home country of Zimbabwe. But now, I was a Fulbright fellow. I was convinced that the award would propel my career to unconceivable heights. It was all the sweeter when I thought of my mother and how she used to cry over my report cards. At the time, I thought it was because I had not done well enough, but I later realized she was crying because she could not bear the idea that her poverty would keep me from reaching my full potential. I carried the burden of wanting to do her proud, and the fellowship was a huge step in that direction.

It would also help me prove to the world that I was more than my family's poverty. The numerous first-time opportunities the fellowship afforded—flying on a plane, staying in a hotel, moving to the United States—earned me respect in my small farming town. The chance to study and work abroad raised my own expectations sky-high as well.

But as I completed my Ph.D. about 5 years later, it became clear that, even with a Fulbright fellowship, I would not achieve all I had dreamed of. A degree from a solid but not world-renowned university and publications in journals with middling impact factors were not enough to secure the prestigious postdoc I thought I needed to achieve my long-term goals: opening my own lab and securing tenure. So, on 4 July 2016, while the rest of America celebrated its independence, I took a flight back to Zimbabwe—jobless, dejected, and hopeless.

Back home, people respected me. A bank teller insisted on putting “Dr.” on my ATM card. At community gatherings, elderly people offered me their seats when they learned I had a Ph.D. Yet, as I continued to unsuccessfully pursue a postdoc at a top-notch institution, I was haunted by the feeling that I was a failure.

I was eventually offered a postdoc position at a university in China—but it was not at a top school like Peking, Tsinghua, or Fudan University, so I ignored it. About 2 weeks later, I was invited to an onsite interview at ETH Zürich in Switzerland. Finally, I had an opportunity to work with famous researchers at a world-class university! I was elated. But I didn't get the job.

With that, my desire to be respected and valued by top



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researchers died. I was done trying to join the elite. After all, I couldn't change the grad school I attended or the ranking of the journals in which I had published. And I remembered the words of my mental health counselor in grad school, when the stress of writing a dissertation, job hunting, and trying to be there for my young family had driven me into depression: “Edmond, you do not need documented validation for you to know your worth.”

At that time, the advice didn't make sense. After all, I needed good publications to graduate. I needed better publications to get a postdoc and ultimately a tenured position. But now, it finally sank in. The rat race had to stop. I resolved that what mattered most was my commitment and diligence rather than what others thought of my scientific contributions. I could do great science at a small, unknown university. So I decided to take the position in China.

I've been here a year now. Navigating the language and cultural barriers has been an enjoyable adventure. Focusing on what excites me rather than trying to fulfill the expectations of academia has been liberating. And whenever I find myself slipping back into old ways of thinking, I remember my wife's question: “How many orphaned kids from an unknown farming town graduated from high school and have an undergrad degree or a Ph.D.?” With that, I am proud of what I have accomplished, and that is enough. ■

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