

By Tracy Evans

# Heed the call to change

I needed a change. Just a few years earlier, I stood at the edge of the swamp under a massive hollow cypress tree reading *Winnie-the-Pooh* to a group of 5- and 6-year-olds. As a naturalist at a state park, my goal was to introduce these children to the nature found in their own backyard. I played a tape of owl calls to accompany the story. Just then, an owl swooped down over our heads, startling and delighting us. “I can’t believe I’m actually getting paid to have this much fun!” I thought to myself. But over time, my job changed. Sitting at my desk, staring at environmental impact reports and grant applications on my computer screen, I began to think, “They cannot pay me enough to do this job.” It was another turning point in the winding road that led me, at age 66, to earn a Ph.D.

My first career had been audiology—a pragmatic choice based on job opportunities in a rural area, and one that allowed me to work part time while tending my growing family. But when my children grew up and left home, I found myself longing to be outside, not in a soundproof room in the hospital basement.

I began attending ornithology classes at the local university, hoping that might lead me to new career prospects. I also went to see a career counselor, offered as part of a university program for nontraditional students. “What gave you pleasure as a child?” the counselor asked. I thought for a while before responding, “Playing outside in the woods.”

Our discussion eventually led to a second master’s degree, this one in zoology, and the job as a naturalist at a state park. It was an entry-level position. I was 44 years old. And I was delighted to once again experience the joy of being outdoors that I had felt as a child.

But as I climbed the career ladder at my state’s Department of Natural Resources, from naturalist to grant compliance officer to managing environmental reviews of publicly funded conservation projects, my time in the field diminished and finally disappeared. I was chained to a computer screen. In the back of my mind, the career counselor’s question smoldered. “What gave you pleasure as a child?”

As my discontent grew, life went on. At a dinner party, my friends and I discussed the perfect retirement. We agreed that, if money were not an issue, we would each purchase a home in a different part of the world and rotate among them. Shortly thereafter, an opportunity presented itself: a 4-month sabbatical at a university in the Netherlands as



***“I was 60 years old. ...  
But I wanted to follow my  
new passion.”***

I figured that I could work full time at my day job in the state government and conduct my research during evenings and weekends. Still, my colleagues raised their eyebrows. “What do you intend to do with a Ph.D.?” they asked. “It is all about the journey,” I responded.

I successfully defended my dissertation 6 years later, 3 years after retiring from my government position.

My career path has taken some sharp zigs and zags over my 40 years in the workforce. And each decision I made was the right one for me at the time. But when they were no longer right, I changed direction. No career decision has to be final. As one of my favorite authors, Ursula K. Le Guin, wrote, “It is good to have an end to journey towards, but it is the journey that matters in the end.” ■

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# Science

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