

Cathy Walker

## The fun of science

**R**ecently, I was reminded that my job as a graduate student in a science lab is actually “really cool.” I was in need of a reminder. I was nearing the end of my fourth year, and I was in a research rut I couldn’t seem to escape. A group of friends from my undergraduate days invited me to spend a late-spring weekend at a lakefront cabin. Our plans to enjoy the lake and the lengthening daylight were dashed by a cold front that came through, bringing 2 days of rain. We still managed to enjoy ourselves, though, by playing card games, making ridiculously good barbecued pork, and reminiscing.

The weather changed eventually, and on our last night at the cabin, we were able to spend some time outside. We built a bonfire. One of the guys went to look for wood and came back with a butane torch. He discovered that he could melt holes in empty aluminum beverage cans. (I quickly located my cellphone in case I needed to call 911; even on weekend trips, apparently, I cannot escape my role as safety officer.) One of the guys asked if I wanted a turn, but I declined. “No thanks,” I said. “I get to use one of those at work.”

After a short, puzzled look, my friend replied, “Really? Why?”

Me: Usually to make sure our glassware and sample pans are clean and dry.

My Friend: Cool. And nothing melts?

Me: No, it’s either glass or platinum. The metal gets all glowy. (Clearly my public-outreach vocabulary needs work.)

My Friend: What else do you get to use?

The conversation continued along those lines. I learned that my work—with torches, liquid nitrogen, reagents, and a bunch of solvents and, especially, the fact that I get to make things—is impressive to people who spend 40 hours a week in an office. True, they are impressed by different things than I am: To me, fluorine-19 NMR is really cool, but that one didn’t rate so high with my nonscientist friends. They preferred the fact that we occasionally use liquid nitrogen to make ice cream.

Refreshed from the trip, I returned to the lab and tried to convince my lab mates that, according to some people, doing science is cool because we get to use butane torches and do other interesting things. I’m not sure they were convinced, but for me the message really hit home a few weeks later, as I was reading a post at the blog *Tenure, She Wrote*. The



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post I was reading (which I highly recommend) was about the reasons why it’s good to be a woman in science (<http://bit.ly/1kJ5zT>). Number one is, “We get to do science.” The writer even describes science as “kick-arse.”

I hadn’t recognized it until that reminder from my friends, but it’s true: We get to do cool things, and it’s not just playing with torches. Whenever I decide that my work is getting boring, I can go and learn a new technique. I’m encouraged to argue with my lab mates and my adviser, and I win praise for making things up—that is, for coming up with ideas and solving problems in creative ways. We make things. We play. And the people we work with are great.

Shortly after my return from the cabin, I started working with two

undergraduate students who were participating in a summer research experience. Having their fresh eyes and energy in the lab served as a further reminder that I had chosen an interesting and exciting career. Furthermore, the added responsibility forced me to organize my work and manage my time more effectively; I had to be sure that the undergrads’ project stayed on schedule and that they always had something to do. Being a mentor while completing my own assignments raised my confidence. I escaped my rut.

It’s true: Being a scientist really is “kick-arse.” If you ever forget that, go spend time with friends whose jobs don’t allow them to make things and play with cool toys. They surely will remind you.

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# Science

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