

By Ainissa Ramirez

The making of a science evangelist

I have wanted to be a scientist ever since I was a little girl. I got the idea from a television program called *3-2-1 Contact*, where I watched a young African-American girl solve problems. I saw my reflection in her and was transfixed. As time passed and my science career progressed, I saw that reflection less often. Now, years later, after a stint in industry and a negative tenure decision, I'm putting myself out there so that others can see their reflection in me. It's a precarious path, exposed and vulnerable, but so far the fruits of my journey have exceeded my fears.

Great teachers nurtured my interest in science. There was Kathleen Donahue in fifth grade, who stoked my passion. There was Jean Howard, the unflappable high school physics teacher who urged me to apply to top colleges.

At Brown University, there were Edelgard Morse, the chemistry professor who rescued me when my grades fell, and also Anne Fausto-Sterling—my learned mentor, professor, and North Star. With a strong sense of purpose, a hungry mind, and a willingness to work hard, I assumed my success was assured. It wasn't; I could easily have been one of the many nameless casualties science routinely sheds. Wary and battle worn, I made it through.

I continued on to Stanford University to seek a Ph.D. As the only black student in the materials science department, I felt lonely and lost. But two good things happened there: I was awarded a AAAS Mass Media Fellowship and spent a summer writing for *Time*. (AAAS is the publisher of *Science*.) And I taught an introductory materials science class at a local community college. I was smitten with science communication. My students were smitten with science. I learned that I loved teaching science and that I have a talent for reaching apprehensive students. There was a third good thing: I finished my degree.

I took a research position at Bell Labs. There, I was in constant contact with other minority scientists. I saw my reflection again. My creativity flourished. I was awarded a spot on *MIT Technology Review's* Innovators Under 35 list. I wanted to stay forever, but the telecom bubble burst, and my job ended.

So I landed in a tenure-track faculty position at Yale University. I established a well-funded lab, earned top teaching scores, and maintained a respected research program. I hosted a fun lecture series for kids called *Science Saturdays*. Children loved it and I did, too. In fact, I loved it more than



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it in her poem, *The Summer Day*. It was time for me to discover my true vocation, which Aristotle supposedly said could be found at the intersection of the world's needs and my passions.

By now, I knew my passions well enough: science, teaching, sharing my love for science. So I looked at the world's needs and figured out my vocation. In the time I had left at Yale, I produced some science videos and posted them on YouTube. It felt good. Things opened up. TED invited me to give a talk. Dignitaries invited me to meetings. Random House published my book.

I'm now happier and healthier. I'm following a path worn by Isaac Asimov, Carl Sagan, Neil deGrasse Tyson, and Bill Nye: lecturing, writing, and publicizing science. My new vocation offers less security than the old one did, but that seems fitting somehow. It's wilder and more precious. ■

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