A few years earlier, I was an astronomer with a tenured position at a major international observatory, but something wasn’t right. I just wasn’t that into galaxies anymore. I had been living off the grid in rural Hawaii, raising animals, growing vegetables, and becoming increasingly curious about the science of sustainable agriculture—a topic that had been at the back of my mind since my childhood in the English countryside. I had never studied it formally, instead falling into chemistry for my bachelor’s degree and then—after hearing a fascinating lecture about nuclear fusion in stars—being drawn into astronomy for my Ph.D. But now I just couldn’t let go of this question: How can we have abundant food, happy people and animals, and a healthy environment?

After much thought—and some sessions with a counselor to make sure I wasn’t about to make a huge mistake—I decided that returning to school was the extended “sabbatical” I needed to figure out what to do next. I was fortunate enough to be able to make that radical change. I don’t have any dependents; my employer agreed that I could return to my old job if I had second thoughts; and my partner fully supported my decision, even though it would mean living apart. So, I left my secure career in Hawaii and moved to Vermont to begin a master’s program in sustainable agriculture.

Strangely enough, this transition didn’t seem so scary. It was a well-defined move: I would spend 2 years working toward a credential, and I knew I could thrive in an academic setting. I was looking forward to expanding my intellectual horizons, and the question of what I would do next—well, that could wait.

My El Capitan moment came as I was finishing my master’s degree. I had no clue how I would put a new career together, which was more than a little unnerving. I had new skills and knowledge and I felt like a much better scientist than ever before, but I didn’t know where I could put all this to use. The only things I was sure of were that I liked doing detective work, analyzing data, and figuring out how to handle complex projects, and I wanted to be in a position where I could make a difference.

I looked at all kinds of possibilities, including project management at a startup that uses blockchain technology to enforce food sustainability standards, a role at a company developing cultured meat, and a few postdoc positions. But I felt both over- and underqualified, not sure where my education and experience really fit. Judging by the number of rejection letters I received, others felt the same way. I was suspended in the void, not yet safely on the other side of my career transition but holding on to the belief that, somehow, I would get there.

Fortunately, there are people who see potential in unconventional career paths, often because they have followed them. One of those people is the physicist-turned-ecologist who helped me land by offering me an academic research position. He is now my mentor as I study how global changes such as rising carbon dioxide levels affect the nitrogen content of plants and what that means for people and animals who depend on these plants for protein.

My leap of faith was a lot less elegant than Honnold’s precise maneuver, and the route upward from here is less clear than his was. I’m 8 months into a 2-year appointment, and when that time is up, I may find myself facing another El Capitan moment. But I’ve made the leap before. It won’t be as scary the next time around.

Rachel Mason is an assistant research scientist at the National Socio-Environmental Synthesis Center in Annapolis, Maryland.
A leap of faith
Rachel Mason

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