



CAREER DEVELOPMENT : ARTICLES

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Special Feature: Changing Careers, Following Dreams

Kate Travis United States 11 January 2008

Many scientists got into science for the sheer love of it. They were captivated and fascinated by the world around them and needed to know more. However, some scientists who started out passionate about their studies later decided it wasn't all it was cracked up to be. For them, a course correction--at least--is called for, but sometimes that's not enough: Sometimes, you need a fresh start.

The Science Careers back catalog contains numerous articles about changing careers. They suggest a variety of strategies for getting unstuck. But for this month's

feature, we won't suggest you take a battery of tests to measure your aptitude, take stock of your transferable skills, or set up a half-dozen informational interviews (although none of those are bad ideas).

Instead, think back to what turned you on to science, back before the tests and the admissions essays and the boring lectures--back, even, before pimples and dating. Was it dinosaurs? Bugs? Stars? A chemistry set? Or maybe it wasn't science at all--maybe you filled the pages of a notebook with poems or stories or sketches, or calculated on-base percentages for all the players on your favorite baseball team. Is there something in your past--a favorite subject or a hobby--that you put away with the rest of your childish things?

Sometimes, moving forward means looking back, especially if your goal is to recover some of the magic that was lost to publication pressures, overspecialization, laboratory politics, or the relentless pursuit of funding. Your reconnection with an old flame may not turn into a serious relationship--that doesn't happen very often--but it may be just what you need to get the creative juices flowing again. For this month's feature, we talked to people who came back to subjects that had captivated their interest much earlier in their lives. For some of them, it worked out; for others, it didn't.

Sarah Webb, the author of our first article, could have told her own story. Webb adored writing in high school and wrote for her school's literary magazine. "But by college, I abandoned journalism," she says. Instead, she majored in chemistry and pursued a Ph.D. "Five years into my graduate work, the relentless effort of building and characterizing molecules had left me neglecting my love of words and language." She finished her Ph.D. but also took a science journalism course and began writing articles for the campus newspaper. "It put me on the road back to my 'high school love,'" says Webb, now a full-time freelance science journalist.

Instead of telling her own story, in Finding the Way Back to a First (Career) Love, Webb writes about Sandeep Jauhar, a cardiologist and medical journalist who earned a Ph.D. in physics before turning to medicine. She also talks to Raven Hanna, a biophysicist who realized her interest was really in communicating science as a whole, not working in one small area of it. Her preferred medium? Jewelry. Finally, Sarah talks to Chris Reed, a mechanical engineer who tried to propel his love of art into a second career in computer animation but ended up abandoning it. No regrets; Reed got a lot out of the experience and is the wiser for it. But his tale does offer a cautionary counterpoint.

In The Accidental Palaeontologist, news intern Elizabeth Quill interviews Mike Taylor, a full-time computer programmer and a part-time Ph.D. student in palaeontology. As a child, Taylor was fascinated by dinosaurs, but his fascination with computers distracted him and led to a degree in mathematics and a programming career. In his 30s, Taylor started reading about dinosaurs again and was quickly hooked. "The Ph.D. was an accident," Taylor says. His dinosaur research is a hobby, and he plans on keeping it that way. The part-time arrangement means he's free from the numbing obligations of the science professional. "I am free to study what I am interested in at the time," he says.

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A lifelong love of baseball led Keith Woolner to baseball statistics. A software developer, Woolner read online forums run by baseball lovers and learned what writers and statisticians such as Bill James and Pete Palmer had done for baseball stats. He started creating his own statistics and posted them on his Web page and in discussion forums, which earned him a side job writing for a baseball publication.

After nearly a decade, Woolner landed a job working as a statistical researcher for the Cleveland Indians. "It's pretty much the definition of a dream job," Woolner says. He tells his own story in [In Person: A Career Home Run](#).

Finally, you can hear some of the folks in these articles tell their own stories in [Science's weekly podcast](#). [[Listen to MP3](#)]

You can change careers, you can turn a hobby into a career, and you can study anything you want as long as you have the passion and drive to make it work. But sometimes you have to look back to rediscover that passion and drive. Our stories this week show that it's never too late for a second chance at a first love.

Kate Travis is the <i>Science</i> Careers contributing editor for north Europe.	Comments, suggestions? Please send your feedback to our editor .
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