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Educated Woman, Postdoc Edition, Chapter 17: End of the Road

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United States
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Well, folks, it's finally time for me to say goodbye. It's been a long, rocky road since back in February 2002 when [I opened the window](#) to let you in on what life was like in grad-school land. I never imagined it would be so circuitous and winding. I never imagined that it would cause me to [question my talents](#) and [drive](#) on so many occasions.

Much of my research life--the papers (there were so many), the books, the drafts--is now off to be melted down, or whatever they do at recycling plants, and made into new paper.

This has always been just my story, a very personal but very public journey through one person's life in research. Yet, through the ups and downs, [job searching](#), graduating, and moving on to the [postdoc experience](#), you've been right there with me, letting me know in hundreds of e-mails that my experiences are not unique. The stories you've told me anonymously, the advice you've offered, and the "you're writing about my life; I'm happy I'm not the only one to feel this way" filled my inbox, reassuring me that I was not alone. Whether my struggles were with research, the heartbreak and frustration of graduate school, the quest for a job, or the decision to leave the bench, you, dear readers, have witnessed it all.

At first, I was naive, unaware of all of the things that could (and eventually did) go wrong. Whether it was [challenges with my graduate adviser](#) (though on the whole, he wasn't too bad; only occasionally was he repugnant), flunking a few of my qualifying exams, or shattering my self-confidence [on the cliffs of research life](#) and the [quest for success](#), I tried my best to be honest and forthright.

I often wondered why I didn't just up and quit science because I was desperately unhappy. My project [didn't excite me](#) (here's another [chapter on that topic](#)), but I got results. I wasn't enjoying graduate school, but I kept making slow, steady progress. The desire not to fail (I'm

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worthy, dammit!) and my lack of extensive experience with the alternatives (what, there's life outside academia/science/research?) kept me in a quagmire of doubt, regret, and disappointment. I didn't know which would be stronger: my anger with myself for quitting or my anger with myself for staying. If I could graduate, I reasoned (though I'm sure "reasoned" is not the right word), at least I would have a degree to go along with my rage. What was I trying to prove, and to whom? Everyone says that graduate school and research are tough. What's reasonable? What's not? When the passion wavers, how long do you try to make it work? Months? Years? Decades? Was that my error, trying to make it work just because that's what I had done all of my life--try to make things work?

There were successes and good times: [a fellowship](#), publishable results, [successful conference presentations](#), a paper here and [a paper there](#), [mentoring](#), community building, a [thesis written](#) and [successfully defended](#), and graduation, with [visits home](#) in between. My rational mind wanted to believe that these small successes would be enough to propel me toward a career in research and give me satisfaction. But something in this situation was never quite right. I did all the "right" things and eventually won the prize--the degree--but when it was over, I couldn't help wondering if I had left the scenic path. Is this all there is? Where is the passion? Where is the view?

As I made the transition to a government lab for my postdoc, I started reckoning what I "should" be doing, having been fortunate enough (and it is partly luck) to complete the elusive Ph.D. It was difficult to work through. So instead of jumping straight out of the bench science life, I agonized over things like: I have a technical degree, so I "should" continue in the technical realm and use all of the knowledge I've acquired. I "should" be a role model. I "should" go into academe. Because actual joy was so elusive, I think it was harder than it would have been if I had a proper joy-measuring stick. My standards for what constitutes an acceptable life had plunged.

A Chat with Micella Phoenix DeWhyse

On this week's [Science Podcast](#) (mp3), Micella offers a few parting thoughts after her 6 years of monthly columns as a grad student and postdoc.

"I should" should be stricken from the vocabulary of anyone contemplating a job outside their area of specialization, or outside of science and technology generally. It limits the imagination and causes strife. In the end, doing what you should rather than what you love (or at least like) is no way to live.

When you've been in research for so long, even if your initial leanings were to leave, it's difficult to combat these messages and the guilt of wanting to leave. It's like research guilt (I shouldn't be watching this movie, I have an experiment I could be running) taken to a much higher level. Fortunately, with time (and that therapist I mentioned), I have dealt with the guilt and the grief over time that I can never get back. I'm ready to move into a situation that I'm truly excited about.

As I was packing up my life and preparing for yet another move to the new job, which starts in a few weeks, I went through all my papers and files. I found my application for graduate school again. It's remarkable how much has changed since "I have enjoyed the challenges of research since I was in the 10th grade. ..." If I had only known about what surrounded the research--[the politics](#), [the egos](#), [the madness](#)--all of which cannot be ignored. I saved the application for posterity, but much of my research life--the papers (there were so many), the books, the drafts--is now off to be melted down, or whatever they do at recycling plants, and made into new paper.

Packing (and recycling) was the catharsis I needed to finally be done with bench science and be okay with it. It's like I had a "going out of physics" sale. Seeing so much of it go out my front door, knowing that it isn't following me to a new place, was the closure I needed on this chapter.

It is the end of the road, the end of an era, and the beginning of something very new. I hope that this column has been as helpful (and amusing) for you as it has been for me. Most of all, I hope that you'll learn from my mistakes and mishaps--and be happy. Thank you for taking this journey with me. Thank you for your kind words as I go--and I hope that you, dear readers, find your path wherever it be, in or out of science.

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Micella has always been a pseudonym. Don't ask where it came from, she's not telling. Just know that she's riding off into the sunset. She may, however, reappear every now and then to say hello. Goodbye letters? She can be reached at <mailto:micella.phoenix.dewhyse@gmail.com>.

Comments, suggestions? Please send your feedback [to our editor](#).

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