

## CAREER DEVELOPMENT : ARTICLES



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### Educated Woman, Postdoc Edition, Chapter 12: Reflections

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Is there really such a thing as a perfect postdoc? That exquisite transitional period during which you move from peon to almost-big dog?

Given my recent experience, and the letters I've received in reference to this column, I would have to say "no." The same variables and vulnerabilities that exist during graduate school also lurk in postdoc land: funding/no funding, research success/failure, adviser sanity/insanity, adviser visibility/invisibility, colleague helpfulness/sabotage, your own ambition/lethargy, your intellectual and emotional health, among others. The only things

you can control are yourself (to some extent) and your reactions to the changing variables in your life. So, in a sense, it's possible to have a perfect postdoc, but you might have to ignore or suspend your belief in reality (or have a lobotomy) to make it happen.

With a disappointing and unsatisfactory year of postdoc-ing under my belt, and no particularly fond memories of my graduate career, I've made a firm (I'm serious, no waffling!) decision to leave the bench. This should surprise no one who has read (or written) this column regularly, especially me. I've spent this year hemming and hawing about what to do, when to do it, and where on earth I might be going. My decision to leave research, and possibly science entirely, is not one I've taken lightly; I have written 66 chapters exploring the inanities and insanities of the research-based life I've been living for the past 7 years.

If you started reading these columns from their naive beginnings, you may have noticed that all along the plan was [to leave eventually](#). All along I've wanted to explore policy as a career path, and I even found a way to do it with a brief summer/fall fling in D.C. while I was in graduate school. This idea was squashed by my then-untentured adviser, who didn't want me wasting my--oh, wait, his--time. And so I put my desires for outside exploration on the back burner for the good of the adviser and to the [detriment of myself](#).

I tried diligently to focus on the tasks at hand. In the process, I was influenced heavily by the pervasive aroma of academic culture that says, "Yes, you, too, want to be a professor, and yes, you still want to work at the bench." I kept in the background my longing to get out and tried to force my way through, hatchet in hand. If I wanted a policy job, I still had to understand the inner workings of research, so I put my little nose to the grindstone and worked to get out of graduate school degree in hand.

I got more than a little lost during graduate school, listening to the voices that wanted me to become a professor "because you would be so great at it," "because you love students," and "because it's a great lifestyle." These voices didn't quite turn me away from my initial, nontraditional leanings, but they did cause me to question my judgment. Horrible, really, how someone who was so confident and self-assured was broken by the system and made to question her own reality. I should have quit long ago, part of me thinks, but I didn't want to let my adviser down. Twisted, isn't it?

I'm quite sure some of my dissatisfaction with my professional life bleeds over from the complete failure of my personal

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life. By my age (30), my parents, each for 5 years, each held a master's degree, and their first child (me), was on the way. That was the life I grew up wanting, and it has not appeared. I was fun-loving, ambitious, caring, overachieving, giving, and driven--all of these things I get from my parents. I thought I was cruising down a road that would bring me the relationship and life they had. Instead, thus far, I've got a degree, some friends, some frequent-flyer miles, and a therapist. (For the record, I know that well over half my graduate department was in therapy, and the rest should have been, and you're unlikely to convince me that your graduate department/group is any saner.)

It doesn't get any easier when I consider that many of my friends who didn't go to grad school (or who went to business school) are married, the tidal wave of babies has begun, and I'm no farther along than I was when I graduated from college. It's not even that my biological clock is ticking--I get my baby fix every now and then with other people's children--it's just that there are some personal mile markers I thought I would at least be able to see by now.

As researchers, our nature and training encourage us to be logical, not emotional. The only emotion allowed is passion for work, and if you don't have it, no one wants to hear about it. We are supposed to value the intellectual and ignore the emotional aspects of who we are and our experiences. Through this valuation, we create highly developed intellectual selves while stunting and blunting our emotional growth. (Hello, alcohol!) And the more senior members of our environment don't recognize this as a problem or attempt to correct this [emotional ineptitude](#).

I've realized that I've been trying to exclude the emotional parts of myself in my work. I tried to ignore the impact my lack of personal success had on my professional life.

Thankfully, times for me have changed, somewhat. My hope of finding what works for me has been restored. Even though this little episode of postdoc-ing was more taxing (and less rewarding) than I anticipated, I think I needed it as an opportunity to rediscover my own reality, to wipe the fogged-up mirror and see again who I am.

As I've begun to write letters and application essays these past 2 months, I've made a lot of progress in clearing the fog. Having to articulate where I want to go, trying to persuade someone that they want to hire me, support me, and so on, is very different from writing papers, grant applications, and reports. All the data that must be mined for those projects is external; I can read and explore. I am getting better at mining what's inside of my head and putting it on paper (to advance my career, not just to purge the angst).

Now I'm playing the "apply and wait" game. I have applied for policy fellowships. I've also started applying for other jobs because putting all of my eggs in one basket would be silly. I'm working on reassembling my network, reaching out to old and new contacts now that I know (and can tell them) what I'm looking for: a position that allows me to use my analyst brain and my advocate heart without constricting either.

One other thing has helped move me along. I've read some of the letters of recommendation my current and former advisers wrote for my fellowship applications. Seeing yourself positively through someone else's eyes (and words) can give you a boost. My graduate adviser, now that he's got tenure, has come to accept that I'm not going to be him. The "parent" (Ph.D. adviser) has finally come to accept the "child"-- me--as the black sheep of his academic family.

I'm finding more joy in my days--even though it is winter and the weather sucks, and even though things in my personal life haven't quite improved--and I have hope for a new beginning lurking around the corner. Until then, I'll keep you up to date because the adventure is never over!

Reflections of your own? [micella.phoenix.dewhyse@gmail.com](mailto:micella.phoenix.dewhyse@gmail.com)

Micella Phoenix DeWhyse is not really Micella Phoenix DeWhyse, but, rather, someone else.

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