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Educated Woman, Postdoc Edition, Chapter 15: This Strange, Funny Feeling

Micella Phoenix DeWhyse
United States
25 April 2008



I'm sure there were good things about the whole Ph.D./postdoc experience, but apparently I don't yet have enough distance to know what they are.

At long last, it has finally happened. I have been blessed with a job opportunity (which I have accepted), and I am *damn* happy about it. For a while there (as many of you could see; it was raw and in the open), I had no confidence, little hope, lots of numbness, rage, angst, and dread that my life would suck forever. I know, it sounds like hyperbole or extreme neurosis, but from the e-mail I get I know I'm not alone. Anyway, now that the guilt about leaving academic-type science has lifted and I have a new and shiny place to go (that I actually want to go to, instead of just fleeing from the current place), I feel like a new human being.

I'm giddy. I haven't been giddy like this, well, *ever*. I didn't know it was possible. Who is this person who smiles at her co-workers and bops down the hall to happy music from her MP3 player? Who isn't disturbed by the stress she should be under because she has a lot of things to finish before she departs? Who revels in her days, exploring her surroundings

with gusto, doing a few wild and crazy things--not so that she can force herself to feel something but because she is actually, for the first time in a very long time, enjoying her own life? Shock. Awe. Amusement--giggling?

It is not only me who has noticed this change in countenance. People I've known for the past 7 years (has it really been that long?) have noticed a change in my voice. If I weren't me, I might get on my nerves with all this stinking glee.

I am wholeheartedly enjoying these moments in the final chapter of this dark book (which I didn't enjoy reading) knowing that a different book awaits like a shiny new gift, full of possibility, ready to surprise, disappoint, amaze, and derange me all over again.

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There will be no more [sacrifices to the laboratory gods](#) so that my experiments will work. No more nights in the lab spent switching samples in and out of some finicky apparatus that only I know how to fix, stumbling home delirious as the sun rises. No more dodging professors/supervisors in the hallway lest they ask, "How's that paper coming?" or "Did you do that experiment yet?" or "I need slides from you in an hour for a talk I have to give," or "Why can't you get it to work?" or the superficially innocuous, "What's new?" For those of you not yet in the know, "What's new" can be translated as "Justify your existence--now, lest I (a) lower my opinion of you because I deem you not hardworking or smart enough, (b) change your project (again), or (c) fire you."

From now on, there will be a whole lot less doubting my ability to make a useful contribution to the world.

I'm sure there were good things about the whole Ph.D./postdoc experience, but apparently I don't yet have enough distance to know what they are. I'm having a really hard time remaining positive as I advise the prospective students my grad-school adviser keeps sending my way. I grill them none too gently--as I wish someone would have done for me--about (a) what they want and expect from a scientific career, (b) where they hope to end up, (c) whether graduate school is the best way to get there (even though, yes, goals change), and (d) whether they understand that they will be forgoing a lot of things that might not bother them now--raise your hand if you're not ready for kids!--but may feel differently about in 10 years, having left their social lives on the sacrificial Ph.D. altar and wasted time they may never recover?

You may think that sounds a little harsh, but I'm doing well to keep myself from screaming "RUN! IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK! THEY ARE ALIENS OUT TO BEAT YOUR BRAIN TO MUSH AND STEAL YOUR SOUL!"--which of course is insane. But it's how it has felt at times.

Having been through all this and come out the other side, I am *not* running away from the evil aliens. I'm not running *away* from anything. For the first time in years, I'm running *toward* something, a place where I can make myself useful doing new things that utilize not so much the skills but the experiences I've acquired. I won't be the person who cures cancer at the bench or finds technical solutions for our burgeoning alternative-energy economy. My fantasies about these things are passing.

In this new book that I'm beginning, I will make my contributions in a different way. I'll still be intellectually stimulated; I will still learn, but the learning will be about something completely new. I have the opportunity to stretch myself into a different form and see if it fits.

I wonder: Will all of this career-related joy (it's disgusting, isn't it?) trickle over into the rest of my life? I'm smiling at the possibility.

After reading a draft of this column, my editor said he thought there should be more gravity in the announcement of my new shininess. After all, he said, I'm approaching the end of a long story, published on this site for more than 6 years. But for the first time in a really long time, I have been able to muster *happy*, and this week, I just want to share that with you. We'll get to gravity as this column winds down over the next 2 months.

Malaise, over and out. Giddy taking up residence. Speaking of endings, is there anything you, dear reader, would like me to address before I move on? Any burning questions about my experience that Micella should answer before she rides off into the sunset?

Comments? Questions? Need to take me down a notch? Try me--I'm perky ;) micella.phoenix.dewhyse@gmail.com

Micella Phoenix DeWhyse is a pseudonym. After more than 6 years, she'll publish her last installment in 2 more months, on 27 June.

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

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