**Space for an Imposter**

Advice that I have given in the past to help others with imposter syndrome is, instead of building yourself up, tear others down. Not in a mean 'they're all stupid and don't belong here' way, but in a 'they're all human' way. This is probably awful advice, but it sounds moderately profound, gets a few laughs, and seems to just fall out of my mouth every time the topic gets brought up. Although I don't actually follow the advice myself, it is sort of part of my 2-step solution that I seem to practice on a near daily basis to varying levels of efficacy. From my impression, most grad students feel imposter syndrome, and some post-docs and PIs have said it never goes away. We all feel like we don't belong here and we're not smart enough (granted, not ALL of us).

But, if it walks like an academic and talks like an academic, does that sort of make it an academic? If I get kicked out of my PhD because my work is inadequate, then I probably would be an 'imposter', but until then, I'm here, and maybe they made a mistake, maybe they didn't, but either way let's see if it will pay off?

I've met some truly remarkable people so far in academia. I've met many students that I'm supposed to advise or supervise in some manner, and I'm impressed and intimidated by how much they know. I've had mentors that seem to know everything and somehow accomplish so much in the same days that I accomplish so little. Of course I feel like an imposter; I am an imposter. I'm not as good as them; I haven't worked at an Ivy League school, while **they** complete groundbreaking experiments, while raising kids and maintaining a family and house, while also being actively involved in outreach projects, and also just being a cool and friendly person on top of all of that. I do a little bit of coding, go home, drink beer, spend time with my partner, and sometimes cook a little. BUT, maybe that's okay?

Those students and mentors aren't actually superheroes; sometimes they make mistakes (like maybe hiring me). Sometimes I mention a paper that they haven't heard of (so even though it feels like they know everything, that's obviously **not** possible), sometimes I disagree on an experimental design, sometimes I'm useful, sometimes I provide insight, sometimes I'm not a waste of money/time, sometimes I accomplish impressive things, sometimes I don't suck.

I'm not saying I'm not an imposter, maybe I am, but there are 4 possibilities:

1. I am an imposter, I'll be found out, I'll be kicked out of academia, and then I won't have to struggle with 'imposter syndrome' anymore; I'll have my answer.
2. I have imposter syndrome, I'm awesome, I'm just like everyone else here, I belong, I'll be fine.
3. I have imposter syndrome, but I get kicked out of academia by mistake, and that's a problem for another time.
4. I am an imposter, but I'm such a good imposter that I trick everyone, get a PhD, and even stay in academia fooling people every step of the way.

Honestly, scenario 4 is what I hope for the most; that way I get to keep feeling the way I feel and nothing has to change, and I keep moving forward. If that is the case, then that's okay, right? If I pass the tests, if I get accepted into each stage of my path, then does that mean 'I belong in academia' or not necessarily? My argument is the latter. While the 'walks and talks like an academic' argument might hold truth, I also think that diversity of thought is critical to science and philosophy. Maybe we should let a dummy be a professor every now and then. As long as they're able to fake it well enough, if the students are passing the classes, if **their** lab students are accomplishing tasks, maybe let them sneak on by. I don't need to list the evidence that diversity improves science; I'm likely preaching to the choir on that topic and I'm no expert. But typically when I think of diversity in science, the whole point is that there are people that belong here and don't get the chance to show it. Who can argue with that? Not only should we ethically and morally try to recruit everyone who is smart, talented, and hard-working but those diverse people improve the science as well. But is there room for an imposter? Someone that doesn't belong but snuck in? I don't want to argue that smart, hard-working people should be replaced by lazy dummies, but maybe that lazy dummy can offer something too. Give that lazy dummy a job as a professor, and maybe no one will be experiencing imposter syndrome. Or maybe, that lazy dummy can get lucky by trying to fake it until they make it, and stumble upon tremendous success. Or maybe, if there was more transparency, we would simply see that success looks like many different things.

I feel like someone who doesn't belong. Sometimes I don't feel like that; sometimes when I solve a problem in a lab, or I finish writing a script, or I just feel good about myself, when those things happen sometimes I feel like the smartest person on the planet, sometimes I feel like the dumbest thing about me is the idea that I don't belong. So maybe when I'm feeling down, I need to remind myself that I belong by humanizing everyone who I feel like I don't belong with. Maybe sometimes I can feel better by convincing myself that it's okay to be an imposter. But what helps the most is just seeing that there is no such thing as belonging in academia. I can't thank **enough the** wonderful scientists that have shared their experiences with me either personally or by broadcasting it to the world, who **have** shown me that there is no right path in science, there is no one way that success looks like, there's just people invested in science. And I can feel like that. There is nothing I love more than the learning, experimenting, and troubleshooting that comes with science. I am SO lucky enough to have spent time in comfortable poverty, because I know what I want to do regardless of income. I'm going to do science, maybe as an imposter, but I'll either be a scientist or the best imposter I can be.