## Space for an Imposter

A piece of advice I've sometimes offered to help others with imposter syndrome is this: 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 whenever the topic comes up. While I don't actually follow this advice myself, it's, in a way, part of a two-step process I seem to practice on a near-daily basis with varying levels of efficacy. From my impression, most grad students feel imposter syndrome, and some post-docs and PIs have admitted it never truly goes away. Many of us feel like we don't belong here and we're not smart enough (though, 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 perhaps I would be an 'imposter'. Until then, however, I'm here. Maybe they made a mistake admitting me, maybe they didn't, but either way, let's see if this gamble pays off, right?

I've met some truly remarkable people in academia so far. I've encountered many students I'm supposed to advise or supervise in some manner, and I'm consistently impressed and intimidated by how much they know. I've had mentors who 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 by comparison. I'm not as good as them. I haven't worked at an Ivy League school while completing groundbreaking experiments, raising kids, maintaining a family and house, being actively involved in outreach projects, and somehow also being a cool and friendly person on top of all that. My days often consist of a little bit of coding, then I 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 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 or time. Sometimes I accomplish impressive things. Sometimes I don't suck.

I'm not saying I'm not an imposter; maybe I am. But I see four 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, but I'm actually awesome, 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 regardless, 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, 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, does that mean 'I belong in academia' or not necessarily? My argument is for the latter. While the 'walks and talks like an academic' argument might hold some 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 focus is on people who belong here but 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 individuals improve the science as well. But is there room for an imposter? Someone who 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 fewer people will experience 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 perhaps, if there were more transparency, we would simply see that success looks like many different things.

I often feel like someone who doesn't belong. Sometimes I don't feel that way. Sometimes, when I solve a problem in the lab, or I finish writing a script, or I just generally feel good about myself, when those things happen I can feel like the smartest person on the planet. In those moments, the dumbest thing about me seems to be the very idea that I don't belong. So maybe when I'm feeling down, I need to remind myself that I belong by humanizing everyone I feel I don't measure up to. Maybe sometimes I can feel better by convincing myself that it's okay to be an imposter. But what helps the most is realizing that there is no single definition of "belonging" in academia. I can't thank enough the wonderful scientists who have shared their experiences with me, either personally or by broadcasting them to the world, who have shown me that there is no single right path in science, no one way that success looks. There are 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 incredibly lucky 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.