

By Megan Keller



Finding my joy

“We have officially been scooped.” I woke up to this dreadful news in an email from my adviser midway through the third year of my Ph.D. I was devastated. Just 6 months earlier, after 2 years of failures and dead ends, I had finally found a promising research direction to follow. Now, after dedicating all my efforts to characterizing an unknown gene with an intriguing phenotype, a preprint showed someone had beaten me to it. I began to panic. Was my Ph.D. not meant to be? Should I cut my losses and leave my program?

Desperate for perspective, I sought advice from far and wide—family, friends, classmates, students who had left my program, trusted faculty members, and former advisers. In the end I realized that no one could make the decision for me; I was the only one who could choose my future.

So, in the words of Marie Kondo, I began to look for things that sparked joy. I thought about how, ever since learning why clouds form different shapes in the fourth grade, I can’t help but share fun science facts with friends and family. I remembered how watching the movie *Twilight* as a young teen had introduced me to mitosis and cellular division and spurred me to pursue molecular biology. I thought fondly back to the statewide conferences I loved attending as an undergraduate, where students presented all sorts of research and every interaction left me refueled and eager to learn more about different fields of science.

I had embarked on a Ph.D. because I was excited to solve mysteries of the natural world, and I had dreams of becoming a university professor, igniting curiosity in young minds. But after reflecting on what gave me joy, I saw a new career path: informing and inspiring the public about scientific knowledge as a communicator.

I still had to decide whether to finish my Ph.D. I had no clear research project and would probably have to start from scratch. If I continued, would I be able to finish “on time”? And if I did, would that set me up for a better science communication career?

Knowing my future did not include research, my adviser and I discussed how we might scale back our ambitions for my Ph.D. project. I also sought advice from professionals working in science communication. Some said having a



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Ph.D. could give me an advantage with potential employers; others said all that mattered was whether I could effectively communicate complex scientific topics. Again, only I could decide.

It was a risk, but after much debate, I decided I would rather spend a few more years trying to get the Ph.D., in case it turned out to be an asset in the future. In the meantime, I sought every opportunity I could to explore science communication and develop my skills. I joined my university’s newspaper, took classes and online certification programs, and completed a communications internship at a journal. It wasn’t easy to convince my adviser that these were worthwhile endeavors. But eventually he came around and became my biggest supporter—and even started

to work on becoming a better science communicator himself.

Two years have passed since I got scooped. I’ve spent long hours brainstorming for project leads and testing simple hypotheses in the lab. I’ve reduced the scope of the research to be publishable in smaller journals. And thanks to a project that yielded quick and promising results, I will soon finish my Ph.D., with plans to find a role in science communication after I graduate.

In conversations with my classmates, I’m finding that many have postponed addressing the question of what they will do after grad school, which often leaves them scrambling toward the end. I probably would have been in the same boat if I hadn’t been scooped. So, with the benefit of hindsight, I’m grateful it happened. Losing my project forced me to reflect on my desires—and find an unexpected direction toward a brighter future. ■

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