Important dates during my PhD

Maybe the dichotomy of an experience??? A song sometimes for both the good and the bad, and maybe sometimes even the neutral.

TODO:

I have some ideas for images for a couple of my analogies, need to add in spots for those.

Think of a way to present the quote and song title (formatting of this thing)

**Why I’m writing this chapter**

A PhD ends in a finish full of triumphs: a published paper that will be used to inform the world of your research, a final defense that allows you to showcase all you’ve learned, and acceptance as an expert in your field. These triumphs are the fruits of intense labor and rigorous mental fortitude, but more often than not research is presented without mentioning the many arduous struggles that it took to succeed. I write this chapter to identify with anyone who has ever felt inadequate, who has suffered from imposter syndrome, and who throughout failure nearly gave up. This chapter highlights my journey into a world of knowledge and success that I never thought I would have, and I hope it gives you some perspective on the daunting process that it takes to become an expert in an area of learning.

More personally, I feel that I haven’t truly been alive for most of my graduate school career. I’ve ignored family, friends, and the world in a way that I’ve never had to do before simply to try to succeed. The rest of the thesis is research and work, and when I saw this opportunity to write a personalized chapter, I couldn’t say no. I wanted to have a way to share more of my experiences with the people who haven’t gone through it and anyone who is curious about the mental toll that it takes to complete a PhD. Of course this experience isn’t universal I’m sure, but if you’re at all interested in what a minority experiences or feels throughout a graduate school experience, I hope to give you a bit of perspective.

Before I started writing this chapter, I asked myself how I could best personify this experience in a form that I feel embodies what I have gone through over the past 6 years. For years now, I have utilized the beauty that is streaming on spotify to catalog the music that I’ve been listening to in a monthly playlist. I’ve come to find that the songs that are in each of my monthly playlists somewhat embody the emotions that I was feeling that month; whether it was after a breakup, starting a new relationship, or just feeling lost within my mind, these songs capture my experiences and allow me to reflect on that time. It felt only fitting for me to close out the chapter of my life that was my PhD with a playlist of its own. Alongside these songs, I’ve shared reflections on my journey filled with the joys, the learning, and the dispare that I’ve personally experienced throughout my PhD. Feel free to read this chapter however you like (I preferred writing them with the songs of interest on repeat!), and I hope you enjoy the songs and stories that I’ve placed here. Thanks again for reading, and best of luck on whatever journey you are currently facing :D.

**Guidelines for my writing**

* I think after here, it’s about getting punchy titles that work well with my song choice. It would be nice if the titles were tied to lessons of the stories that I aim to tell. This first example below is more of a lesson than a story, so I’ll have to change that around a bit.
* One thing that I’ve found myself not doing well is SHOWING the story. I think my memory right now is hinging on an experience rather than actually drawing out a specific portion of the memory. Draw out that first and then expound upon it.
* I think I figured it out. I’m going to picture I’m writing to TA, the person who I’ve wrote the most letters to in my life. I think that voice will flow out a bit more freely.
* And finally, end it with how the song fits by describing and picturing the sound (close your eyes, listen, and sing along)

**Definitions**

Imposter syndrome

Protein design

Atom

Training grant

**I have a voice (unsure if I’ll use this, but keep for now)**

I’ve never had the confidence to raise my hand in class. Throughout most of my life, I’ve never voluntarily shared my thoughts or perspectives in an organized educational environment. Instead I’ve just been that person who sits in the back on the room, listening to those around me, and taken in the knowledge that is given. But graduate school classes are much different than many classes I’ve taken in the past. In my first year of graduate school, I was required to take a class where we focused on discussing the ethics and morals of doing research and of working in a research environment. During one of the early classes, the professor asked us if we had any goals that we wanted to achieve with the learning that we gain through graduate school. Some people answered to progress research, to get into industry to make money, or to mentor students in a teaching environment. But when I was called on, I didn’t have a straightforward answer or thought in my head. I said I wasn’t sure, but he encouraged me to say anything that felt right. Emboldened by this I remarked that I would like to come up with an alternate way to present things other than powerpoint. The idea was somewhere in my mind, but I never had an opportunity to voice it out loud and to share it with a group of intellectual thinkers.

I look back on that day with both a bit of fondness and some fear. Although I’m not revolutionizing the way that presentations are being done, that opportunity to speak my mind and to share something wild and against the grain in a public space gave me confidence to share my thoughts and ideas. I discovered that I have a voice and that I can share my ideas freely, even if they’re half baked or if they might be wrong. But at the same time, I felt different. Why did this idea feel so absurd to me? Why did I feel like I was being alienated for saying something like that? I remember the quiet of the room, and imagine the looks of other students. Why do I think of myself and my ideas so negatively that I portray this negative aspect on myself?

Must one go through a traumatic experience in order to better process and understand oneself

**Kind of a transition one-maybe into the woods for this transition or for all?**

In graduate school, the preliminary exam puts into a room with 5 professors who each have many, **many** scientific publications to each of their names. And you’re expected to talk about the beginnings of a project that you’re supposed to be the expert of AND complete within the next 4-6 years. They ask you questions about tiny details you hadn’t yet thought about, and they expect you to tell them the right answer: what’s the definition of van der Waals? What will you do if this experiment doesn’t work as you expect? If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? After an hour and a half, you leave the room, deflated, exasperated, mind afloat. You remember to breathe. Other students pass you by in the hallway and congratulate you, telling you the worst is over. You’re ready to move on and get back to doing the science that you love. You walk back into the room to hear how they felt about your project, your presentation, your ability as a scientist…and they begin with “Thank you for the presentation. We think your progress has promise, but we can’t give you a pass at this time. There are some weaknesses…”. They didn’t say the word, but in your head you’ve tuned everything else out and you know what it all means. You’ve failed.

**Atlas-keshi**

For some prelim exam failures, there is no second chance. You’ve had your opportunity to prove your ability to move forward to your independent research, but you didn’t do enough to show that you had the potential to succeed.

“…However, we do think that you’re making progress and look forward to seeing you have another opportunity next year.”

Not a pass, but not a complete fail. I couldn’t have expected it at all. But maybe I should have.

Are you glad that we have the ability to reason?

A logic knot. Imagine your thoughts are written along a straight piece of rope. When two separate thoughts collide, a knot starts to form. Any thoughts in the middle are stuck within the knot and you can no longer proceed to the next thought. Stuck in thought.

The prelim led me to finding myself in a logic knot based on my identity and ability to succeed in graduate school. A lot of the suppressed observations start to creep into my head and don’t leave:

* I’m one of the few black people in my research program
* I’m one of the few people who failed prelim
* I’m one of the few people who get’s a second chance
* Could I be one of the few to be kicked out of my program after a second chance?

I sometimes wonder what life would be like if we didn’t reflect on our thoughts. Being born with the ability to reason through thoughts like these is a such a beautiful thing that can lead to immense pain and agony. It’s like looking at yourself in a mirror, breaking it, and then it putting itself back together again, forcing you to look at yourself.

This song felt right. “I don’t belong here, let me start over I wanna sleep so wake me up when I’m older.”

After failing my prelim, these words pulsed through my head constantly. Have you ever experienced something that changed you as a person? Something that shook to core of your being, altered your foundation, breaking and molding you back together into some slightly misshapen version of yourself. I’ve viewed my identity, my culture as something to be embraced and celebrated. But moments like this make me question my ability to succeed. **(I think I need to write out more of the main thoughts that I got from this experience here. They’re not coming to me right now, but I think it’s close to finished)**

**Black in STEM/Imposter Syndrome/Burn out**

**Key questions:**

* How does it feel to almost receive a PhD as a minority in stem? What would you say surprised you the most about the experience?
* When did you most feel like an imposter?
* What did you learn from yourself whenever you burned out?
  + Kind works of encouragement for myself are needed/talking to myself through my problems and issues

Imagine that you’re in a room with … At the end of my first year in graduate school, I applied for a program that would fund my graduate research. The application and interview process were quite interesting, asking me to give an elevator pitch on my research. I had friends who also interviewed for the program and eagerly awaited the response, hoping that we’d all get in. When the email arrived, I scrolled down to the accepted names and saw mine, but no names of any of my friends. The next time I ran into one of them, we chatted about this and the interview process and how the first meeting was, and they wondered aloud why I was accepted instead of them.

**Becoming an idea person within Scimed**

**Prelim 1**

* Secret for the Mad-Dodie
* I promise you it’ll all make sense again, And there will be a day when you can say okay and mean it
* Talk about prelim day, how it felt, what to feel. Then talk about the repercussions:
  + Massive imposter syndrome

I love harmonies. As I prepared for my preliminary exam, I found this song …

**Post prelim I always wanna die sometimes**

The other day as I was waiting for the bus, I had this dark notion. My head felt heavy and everything appeared to go black. I could feel that my eyes were open, yet I saw an empty all around me. A pulsing thought flitted back and forth in my head:

“What if…”

You’re just tired

“you could…”

you’ll be okay soon, “just” a bit longer

but it’s more than a bit

“jump…”

there’s a lot left “…in front of …” to do

should you eat today

“…the bus” is here

And the color came back. A typical cloudy, desolate gray reflecting off back and forth between the clouds and the cement road.

I’ve had a variety of small bouts with depression in the past, but this one was different. Stronger, more empty. I’ve wanted to disappear before, but never to the extent that the little evil thoughts in my head were able to come out so clear. After a month or so of these thoughts, I returned to therapy.

Stating things is freeing. Much of the time I’m able to listen to the thoughts in my head, rationalize them and reflect enough where I’m typically fine. Able to enjoy life rather than simply existing in it. But this time was different. After failing my prelim, I was more of a shell of myself than ever before. I lost both the desire and motivation to live, so much so that in times where I had nothing pressing to do or scheduled, I would literally be unable to get my brain to move my body. To be able to think “Move”, “get up”, “go over there” but my body in an unfunctioning state.

After a set of sessions, my therapist was able to get me back to myself with just two words of advice: “Take risks”.

It allowed me to move past it by asking myself the following question: Is it riskier to remove myself from this difficult situation and leave research OR to trek through the difficult road I have ahead? It pushed me to not be satisfied with where I’m currently at. Rather than continuing to just try the same thing, remaining complacent, I know that I should take risks to try to be more satisfied with where I’m at in life. Whether or not I pushed ahead and failed the next time, I will have learned a lot. I love learning, and losing that valuable experience and knowledge was riskier in my opinion.

I’ve learned to accept myself at a deeper level, and I now know the limits that I can push my body and mind to accomplish learning something. (examples?)Outside of the obviousness of the song title and the lyrics alluding to suicide, the sounds of this song are what really resonate with me. The strings fill you with this hopeful melancholy that is accentuated by the (harmonizer? Piano like thing?), and the chorus bursts it all into this sound with the guitar while countered by the (harmonizer thing) that makes me picture as the first stages of growth of a daisy where the seed roots out of the ground and the petal take shape. Before bringing it all back to earth with the ending strings where rain start to pour on the sprouted plant and the daisy bulb is now depressed into a drooping motion because of the intensity of the rain drops falling.

**First day my design program worked**

* Details:
  + Days I would lay on my floor, imagining how atoms move and then crying because I’m unsure if I understand things properly

During the pandemic, I was pretty fortunate to have

**Prelim 2**

* 5 year plan-Chance the Rapper
* Time has come, take it all in
* Details:
  + Post prelim, seeing friends again and feeling a relief

This song came out shortly after I passed my prelim, and I identified with it immediately. The chords remind me of a sunshower; the sprinkle of refracted sunlight, dancing on your skin.

While I was out for a walk an hour before my prelim, I thought of the following question: Did you ever think of how you could impact humanity as a child? I remember wondering how I could make some contribution, if that’s even possible for me to do. What does it take to do that and how do those people feel?

It’s not the biggest thing, and my research likely isn’t going to be used for anything impactful. But it’ll be a small bubble on the expansion of human knowledge.

Know what you don’t know. This was the motto that Alessandro preached to me as we got closer to my second prelim. …details on this here…maybe just what it means to me and how it helped me? With the addition of defining it properly and how it’s been impactful?

**Admissions committee**

**Off day by Lyn Lapid**

For a couple of months during my final fall semester at UW, I felt a haze. My brain was deep in fog, causing me to actively search for a way out. It was constantly active, thinking of new ideas and wanting to work. And so I began to realize that I couldn’t sleep.

After a couple weeks of being unable to sleep well, I gave up. Instead of sitting in bed and doing nothing, I succumbed and decided: welp, if I can’t do anything else right now, might as well get some work done in lab.

I’ve been in during odd hours before to finish experiments at times when I’m not satisfied with my work, or when things have gone wrong, filled with anguish and hoping things work. But this time I didn’t feel stressed or in a rush. I felt calm. Like just knowing there’s an ending to this research, this experience, is allowing me to look back on these days a bit more fondly. Yes, the work is always on my mind, preventing me from thinking about anything else or not thinking at all. But it’s almost over and I’ll miss these moments.

I’ll miss taking days to think and test different ideas, to decide when to do an experiment, the freedom to work these odd hours.

Graduate school is quite a special place. This environment pushes you towards discovery: time is given to allow your brain to acclimate to the idea of working at the boundary of human knowledge, allowing you to excise your biases in pursuit of truth. Do you remember any days when you were a child? When you could just take the time to stare at the sky, and let thoughts freely flow in and out of your mind? I feel like graduate school harnesses this latent ability, allowing you to explore deeper within your current understanding of some subset of knowledge. More often near the end of this tenure I’ve wondered if I would recommend graduate school to others. I think it definitely depends on the person, but if you enjoyed those childlike moments of discovery and the time to think, it just might be for you.

This song to me expresses the current bout of feelings that I’m going through during grad school: the hook is particularly connecting with me, “you don’t cross my mind, you live in it”. It feels like it bundles you up in a freshly washed and dried blanket on a cold winter day. Comfortable and calm, reassuring warmth. My work is always on my mind, but the coziness of it fading allows me to reflect as if these are moments where I’m at peace.

**When you’re breaking my heart**

Maybe when I got that poor data from sort seq the first time? Everything feels right and is so close with my first set of big data,

In a lot of ways, I’ve begun to picture my PhD as a person. In over 6 years, I’ve learned a lot about myself and it, while