

By Josh Shiode

My adviser's best advice

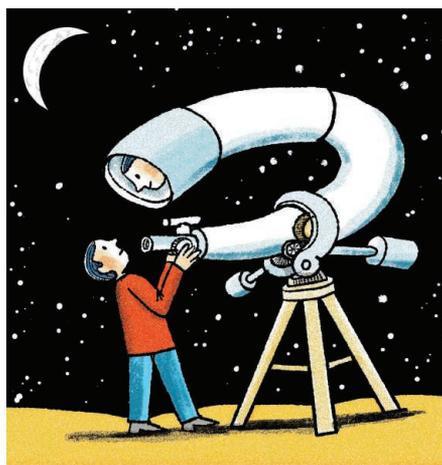
Among my fellow graduate students, we called it the second-year slump, an affliction characterized by paralyzing doubts about one's abilities and future prospects. For me, though, it persisted. Even well into my third year, I found myself spending a lot of time worrying about whether I was headed in the right direction and questioning why I had even come to graduate school. "Am I cut out for this?" I asked myself. "And more important, do I even want to be here?"

I also struggled with whether I should tell my research adviser. I did talk with a few classmates who shared similar doubts about pursuing a career in academia, or even being able to finish our Ph.D.s in some reasonable number of years with the necessary accomplishments to be "successful." We speculated about "alternative career" options—but mostly in the way someone who has never set foot on a football field might talk about running the perfect play. We all vaguely knew of people who had ventured beyond academia, and figured their paths were theoretically open to us too, but none of us had any idea how we would actually go about it.

I thought that maybe my adviser could help, but the idea of sharing my doubts with him made me incredibly anxious. On the one hand, I felt I was not living up to expectations—mine or his—and talking to him about my doubts could at least partially explain my performance. On the other, I worried that telling him how I was feeling might jeopardize my graduate career. I could imagine him asking, "If you aren't here to make it in academia, why are you here at all?" I certainly wasn't ready for that level of finality. Advice from my older, wiser peers came down on both sides, which only served to reinforce my internal dithering.

In the end, not talking to him was probably never really an option for me; I wear my feelings on my sleeve, if not plastered on my forehead. So, in late spring of my third year, I asked my adviser if we could chat about "career stuff." Feeling both nervous and relieved, I told him about my doubts and asked for some time over the summer to pursue a few potentially interesting avenues, including ventures into teaching and science writing. Both would take time away from my research.

I could tell that my confession wasn't a complete surprise to my adviser, but he welcomed my honesty and



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encouraged me to take the time I needed to explore other interests, as long as my research progress didn't grind completely to a halt. He basically told me, "I support you 100%. You need to figure out what you want to do and what will make you happy." But he also said, "I'm an academic. My parents are academics. I have literally no help to offer you."

He had no idea how untrue that last statement was. Just supporting me in my exploration helped me tremendously. I don't know that I gained much insight that day about where I would eventually want to take my career, but I did feel a whole lot better.

It also turned out that, through colleagues, my adviser did know people I could talk to about new career directions. As I spent the

next few years progressing through my Ph.D. research, he helped me connect with other Ph.D. scientists now working in policy, science communication, and tech companies in Silicon Valley. Through my own explorations and conversations with those people, I found that working at the interface of science and society—in education, communication, or policy—is what really excites me. After graduation I entered the world of science policy, where I continue to work today, almost 3 years later.

My adviser could have insisted that the only way to succeed in science was to keep my nose to the grindstone at all times, get a prize postdoc, and go on to a professorship. He could have told me he didn't want to work with someone who wasn't in grad school for the "right" reasons. But he didn't. He gave me room to find my own way as a Ph.D. scientist, and for that I'll be forever grateful. ■

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