



LAURA MALISHESKI:

In Pursuit of Happiness: My Transition from Neuroscientist to Career Counselor


My thesis advisor once described me as a “pit bull” because once I attack a problem, I don’t let go until it’s solved. This is often a laudable trait for a scientist. However, for me, an electrophysiologist with day-long experiments and a success rate of 10–15%, this unflagging persistence led to a great deal of frustration, anxiety, and even misery. Ironically, it was the misery—generated by my life experience as a graduate student and postdoc—that prepared me the most for my eventual transition to career counseling for graduate students and Ph.D.s.

In my current work as a career counselor, I often ask graduate students about their initial motivations for entering a Ph.D. program. Common responses include being strongly influenced by a professor, taking the path of least resistance (*i.e.* the logical next step after a B.S. in Biology), and fear of searching for a job in the “real world.” In retrospect, these were all reasons underlying my decision to pursue a Ph.D., although I was also overflowing with the energy and ideas of an academic, and I was truly passionate about neuroscience.

During my third year in the neuroscience program at a major research university, I began to question my decision to pursue a Ph.D. My self-esteem had begun to erode, and I felt

that I couldn’t compete with my peers who were all brilliant and self-assured. A fellow graduate student told me about the “imposter syndrome”—a pernicious feeling that I am not as smart as everyone seems to think I am and that someday I am going to be revealed as a fraud. My friend assured me that most graduate students can’t help but feel insecure and inferior while being surrounded by the intellectual elite, even though they may still appear confident. Bolstered, I persevered and managed to make it through grad school with a few publications, a prestigious grant, and a dissertation and a successful defense.

A year prior to my finishing, I was faced with a question I couldn’t escape: Should I continue my career as a scientist or embark on a new career? I questioned whether I was unhappy because my thesis project was particularly difficult and frustrating or whether it was experimental science in general that wasn’t my forte. Reasoning that I was still intrigued by the overarching theme of my research (developmental emergence of synaptic plasticity and learning), I decided to give myself another chance in science. I arranged what seemed to be the best postdoctoral position possible. I left sea slugs behind and studied neural mechanisms of song learning in zebra finches. I learned a variety of new

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techniques, published, presented at scientific meetings, and landed another grant.

Anyone looking at my CV would have thought I had a chance at a successful career as an academic scientist. For a while, I thought so, too. Not long after I had signed the pay back agreement on my fellowship, I finally had the courage to face the truth: I was on the wrong path. What a bind! I now had two more years as a postdoc, trapped by my own accomplishments, forcing myself to perform experiments that turned out to be equally as frustrating as my thesis research had been.

Those two years turned out to be, at alternating moments, the most depressing and the most exciting times of my life. I was plagued by lack of motivation—a pit bull who had to force herself to bite! But at the same time, I began to try to imagine myself in a different career, and I had an incredibly supportive family who never believed me when I moaned

that I had no skills and was trained only to be a scientist.

Taking advantage of my relatively flexible work schedule, I began to research “alternative careers” for scientists. I read about dozens of different paths Ph.D.s had taken, attended panels and seminars on nonacademic careers, and talked endlessly with my friends and colleagues, many of whom, I discovered, were equally questioning their situations and exploring nonacademic options too. After several months of casual exploration, I still hadn’t discovered my dream career. I was fascinated by all of the careers that I had read about, but I just didn’t want to do ANY of them!


I stumbled upon some “self-assessment” exercises in a book for scientists preparing for a career transition (“Career Renewal” by Stephen Rosen and Cynthia Paul). This was really the beginning of my career overhaul. I began to assess my skills, interests, and values, and I discovered two important things about myself: 1) I really did have a lot more skills to offer the world than pipetting and electrophysiological recording, and 2) I had been spending so much of my energy developing skills that I didn’t enjoy that I was forced to suppress my natural abilities such as my interpersonal communication skills. Finally, I

had learned to appreciate the skills that truly motivated and energized me: talking with people about their problems, organizing events, and teaching and presenting information.

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At last, I ventured to the career office to talk with a professional career counselor who became a wonderful mentor and friend. Within 10 minutes of our conversation, I had a revelation: I wanted to do what she did! The counseling session morphed into an informational interview, and I realized that career counseling, especially with grad students and Ph.D.s, was the perfect career for me. That day, I proposed a volunteer internship (6–10 hours/week) in which I would sit in on some counseling sessions and help plan a career fair. Through my relationships in this career office, I learned of the position that I now hold.

I still find it amazing that this Office of Career Services hired me (is that the old imposter syndrome speaking?). While I had strong application materials, life experience, and strong recommendations, I could not offer a degree in counseling or any real counseling experience. I think what really cinched the offer was my interviews. I was able to sincerely portray someone who really understood the pressures and concerns of young academics—I had embarked on an academic career, survived grad school, and engaged in my own career transition process that mirrored the approach that they espoused.

Having worked in my first “real job” for nearly five years, I am constantly amazed by the people that I work with: their stories and concerns, their strengths and insecurities, and their potential and their hesitations. I am a true believer in the process and power of self-assessment, and I guide hundreds of students through it each year as they embark on their own career exploration. Many of them will leave academia for a career better suited to them, and many of them will pursue academic careers, confident in that decision. But I love my non-academic job so much that, at least for now, the pit bull in me is not letting go. 

ASBMB 2007 ANNUAL MEETING OPENING LECTURE:
Herbert Tabor/Journal of Biological Chemistry Lectureship

Saturday, April 28, 2007, 6:00pm

FEATURING:

Tony Hunter, THE SALK INSTITUTE

Tyrosine Phosphorylation: From Discovery to the Kinome and Beyond

Tony Pawson, SAMUEL LUNENFELD RESEARCH INSTITUTE
Phosphotyrosine Signaling: A Prototype for Modular Protein-Protein Interactions

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