

THE ROAD TAKEN

by Susan Fitzpatrick, PhD

Balancing Competing Demands

Snapshots from an Autumn on the Road



Like many of you, I increasingly find the time between Labor Day and Thanksgiving — what many of us who spent the better part of adulthood on college campuses continue to think of as the beginning of a year rather than the end — is increasingly jammed with travel to meetings, workshops, and conferences. Despite the hassles of traveling, I enjoy these trips. Working in a small office, I value my many opportunities to engage intellectually with groups of people representing diverse experiences, expertise, and perspectives. I even find that a workshop less than thrilling from an intellectual perspective can often be fascinating from a sociological view!

This autumn, I decided I would also make a special effort during these trips to ask colleagues and friends their views on aspects of life and career issues they thought were of particular concern to women pursuing careers in science and technology. In particular, I was curious to hear about the different “roadblocks” they may have encountered (or are encountering) and the strategies some may have used (or are using) to navigate successfully. In this column I share with you a few of the “tidbits” I picked up on the road.

The good news: the majority of the scientists I encountered believe that this is a terrifically exciting time to be engaged in science, be it in academia, industry, non-profits, or government sectors. Acknowledging that funding and economic issues remain a challenge — most were optimistic

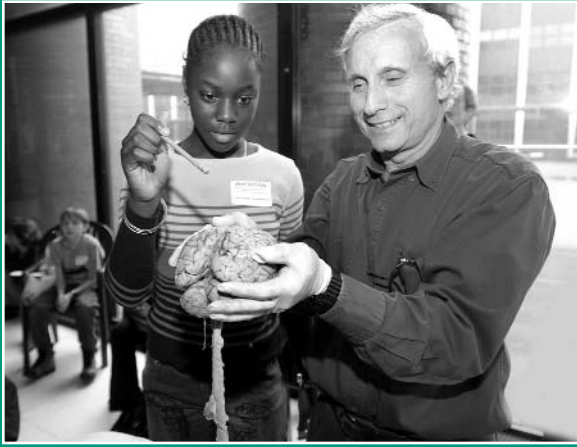
that there will continue to be a growing market for workers with scientific and technical expertise (see http://www.wi.mit.edu/nap/features/nap_feature_mbc.html). One cautionary note expressed by a number of scientists: individuals currently training in and/or working in the biological sciences need to make an effort to update and expand their mathematical skills. Computational modeling and bioinformatics tools will play an increasingly important role in the biological and biomedical sciences. Biology is no longer a place where the science-interested but mathematically-challenged can hide out.

Unsurprisingly, another generality I encountered was this — regardless of where we work we all feel incredibly pinched for time. Oddly, I didn’t get the sense that women with responsibility for children feel more intensely time-crunched than women with dependable, full-time childcare (such as a spouse at home full-time) or women without children. Everyone feels like some fundamental constant has shifted and the days have become truly shorter. It was hard for me to discern whether perceived expectations, rather than bona-fide requirements, were driving this stressful sense of busyness. Women seem to have a hard time saying no. Many of us feel that it is hard to turn down attending meetings or serving on committees when there are only a few potential women candidates, especially at higher levels. Having a list of alternative names of women who might not have been considered initially, for

whatever reason, is one way to gracefully protect your time. Over and over, senior women advised me that it is never too early (or late!) to acquire sensible time-management skills to help develop principled and consistent ways to make decisions. We can’t be 100% efficient every minute, but keeping an eye out for bad habits that are obscure time thieves is one way to “steal” back some of our day!

Future “Road” columns will incorporate a number of the “tidbits” I picked up while on the road. I encourage you to consider using a small amount of time during your own business trips to talk explicitly with your fellow professionals about how it is they deal with the thorny issues of balancing life’s demands. The more strategies we share — the more likely we’ll have the right one to fall back on when we need it! In this column I want to introduce you to two people I have long admired for their efforts to balance life’s competing demands.

During a visit to New Haven, fortuitously coinciding with peak fall color, I reconnected with Bob Wyman, Professor of Molecular, Cellular, and Development Biology at Yale University. Bob served as one of my “informal mentors” while I was a post-doctoral fellow in the Department of Molecular Biophysics and Biochemistry and was supportive of my decision to pursue a non-academic career. Bob always struck me as having an interesting model of how to structure your life in science. He keeps his lab small and manageable so he remains



Bob Wyman



Kathy Spiegel

actively engaged in research and he excels at teaching, embracing opportunities to teach new and challenging courses rather than recycling old material. He looks for interesting and important ideas where the field is not “crowded.” In this way, he makes original, meaningful scientific contributions while maintaining control over the number of people in his lab and the number of grants he must maintain to keep everyone funded. Most of all, he takes full advantage of the fact that an academic, scholarly life affords one tremendous freedom and control over one’s own time. He can spend late nights at the bench, and he can cut out on days when wind-surfing conditions are too good to pass up. He makes time for friends, colleagues, and students. Being with Bob is a refreshing pleasure. He is interesting, interested, enthusiastic, and relaxed. A geneticist, Bob attributes his cheerful temperament and optimism to his genes — I think it may also be a reflection of the effort he puts into balancing his life.

Over the course of several hours, our conversation ranged across numerous topics: liberal arts education, science workforce issues, looming threats to the environment, teaching demographics, what it means to be a mentor, how to think about linking genetic expression patterns to functional changes, the need for more diverse role models in science, current windsurfing conditions on the Long Island Sound, etc. We could have been continuing an ongoing conversation interrupted by several hours rather than 10 years. In the course of the morning’s ramblings he asked me a question he often asks

the students he mentors: What’s most important to you, feathering your nest or saving the world?

Remarkably, when Bob poses this question, despite the somewhat negative sound of “feathering your nest” it comes out sounding quite neutral — as though each is, to him, an equally valid choice. There is no implied judgment call; knowing your answer helps him suggest different courses of action. In reality, our goals are always too complicated and confounded to give a clean answer to this question, but its starkness makes you pause and consider. Bob often uses overstatement as a pedagogical tool, as a way of grabbing students’ attention. His tactic worked equally well on me! I realized I had never explicitly asked myself such a question — but I think it is the kind of thing we should stop and contemplate periodically. The exact phrasing of this question is not important. What is important is taking the time to ask yourself why you are pursuing a particular course and evaluating whether it is getting you what you want out of your life. Bottom line — be deliberate rather than adrift.

During another trip, this to one of those mega-professional society annual meetings where one mainly feels buffeted and hassled by triple scheduling, I roomed with a long-time, dear friend from our grad school days. Kathy Spiegel’s career turns in interesting ways, so it is always fun for me to catch up on where she is when we meet. Unlike many of us in the PhD program at Cornell Medical College, Kathy’s intention, from day one, was to work for a pharma-

ceutical company, rather than in academia. To be so honestly outspoken about wanting to work for “industry” in that environment at that time (1980-something) took courage. Many academic medical schools, particularly an elite, East Coast one, were viewed at that time as vaulted ivory towers pursuing science unsullied by commercial interests. That message has changed with the 21st Century — but it was a powerful element of the culture while we were in school.

Luckily, Kathy’s uncompromising confidence in her own motivations allowed her to shrug off the snide “selling out” comments. She believes that pharmaceutical work is where the “rubber” of basic science research in pharmacology meets the road. As she had planned, after a short postdoctoral experience to round out her molecular biology skills, she took a research position with Warner Lambert in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and never looked back.

A decade and a half later, Kathy still works in Ann Arbor, but a series of mergers and acquisitions means she is now with the pharmaceutical powerhouse Pfizer. Kathy’s own work has also gone through a series of transitions — and she now works on the clinical side of the business. After many years working in the “research” side of pharmaceutical R&D, Kathy decided it would be interesting to learn about the “development” side of the business. Her first transition was joining a medical writing group responsible for summarizing clinical studies and producing clinical program summaries for regulatory submissions. After almost four years of working on one

drug and getting to know it inside and out, she decided to move to Clinical Research on the same drug. In part, this decision was motivated by a desire to move closer to the science again and a savvy reaction to merger-related changes in job responsibilities. The upshot of risking these transitions is that Kathy has a broad and a deep understanding of basic research coupled with experience with the demanding aspects of drug development and the complicated regulatory processes pharmaceutical companies must negotiate — something she finds absolutely fascinating! Each time she steered a career-course correction, it was carefully considered for the opportunities it could bring for her to continue to build and sharpen her hard-won skills, and position herself to contribute to improving health and well-being — including her own! The confidence she showed in facing down the negative comments she weathered as a graduate student now helps her negotiate the intense, competing demands of mid-career life today.

Kathy is deliberate about how she

manages her personal time. Living with her husband Jim, a neuroscientist turned finish carpenter and boat builder, on seventeen acres in the Michigan countryside Kathy keeps busy with the demands of the land and her beloved animals. Kathy is also very involved with the lives of Jim's two teenage children. Professional opportunities and responsibilities are carefully weighed and considered within a holistic picture that includes her life in the outdoors and her commitments to family and neighbors.

What each of these two individuals emphasized to me is the importance of being deliberate in the management of our work/life. Without being able to completely predict the future, we must do our best to tip the odds of success in our favor. It is essential that we examine our options and choices carefully. A “what the heck, what ever happens happens” attitude may work some of the time — it is unlikely to be a successful long-term strategy for balancing the many demands of a professional STE life. We are bombarded with new tools, new technologies, ever-multiplying information

sources, endless piles of reading, and endless items to write. There is no natural end to the work day — the more we do, the more there is to do. It is only our principles about what is important to us — work, family, friends, health and fitness, connecting with art, music, the outdoors — that makes it possible for us to draw a line at how much we will allow work to consume us.

A very wise man told me that we have six really productive work hours each day, and from years of observing people, I believe his estimation is pretty darn close to the mark. There are those weeks when a project, paper, or proposal is due and we go into hyperdrive — but there are also many business as usual weeks where we have more flexibility. So, my advice is to be deliberate about how you extract those six productive work hours from the 24 we are given each day — and make the utmost of the ones you have left! ●

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