Working Life – Maria Paz Tapella

I was starting my third PhD year in Argentina when I was invited to spend one semester visiting the University of Vermont. It was a really great opportunity, and I was excited looking forward it. But several things did not went as planned and ten days before the start of the program I was wondering if I should cancel it.

I start my PhD just before the covid-19 lockdown got to Argentina. During the first year I only worked in my proposal and took online courses. It felt nothing like what I had in mind when I decided to pursue a PhD and I felt frustrated. It was not until the second year that I could start lab and field work. By then, my advisors had accepted a position in the University of Vermont, moved across the continent and invited me to spend some time working with them there. There, I could take some great courses, attend to some big conferences and meetings and be around new colleagues. I felt that this experience would greatly enrich my work and me personally and did not hesitate to accept it.

As soon as the invitation became official, I started to plan everything. There was a lot to be done: filling forms of the university, getting a VISA, buying airplane tickets. At the same time, I planned to do several lab experiments to get data to work with during the semester abroad. I also had to work on a poster I was presenting at an international meeting happening right after I get to the US. It was a lot, but I’m a persistent and a methodical – almost stubborn and obsessive – person when it comes to get stuff done.

At that moment, I ask my advisors for a meeting to discuss with them my tasks for the next two months in Argentina before leaving to the US. The night before the meeting I worked late. I decided to go to sleep and a second later I was lying on the floor calling a friend to take me to the hospital. I had stayed so quiet and focused on the computer that my leg had fallen asleep, without me noticing it. It happened in a second and I heard a loud and clear "crack". In the hospital doctors convinced me it was a minor injury and sent me home with pain killers, even though they didn’t take me any test. The next morning, I was assuming that my foot pain wouldn't last long and had the meeting while putting ice on my foot. My advisors where excited about my advances and my plan, and their comments made me feel proud and motivated me to get done as much work I could before leaving to the US.

After not being able to stand or walk for a few days, I went back to the doctor. After an x-ray test he confirmed that I had a fracture, and that I would have to wear a walker boot for at least a month, in addition to the crutches I was already using. I wouldn’t be able to go to the lab for several weeks, and that was different from what I had in mind. I had a hard time accepting my condition and rescheduling my plans for the month, but I had no choice, so I did it. I would have a month of quiet computer work, and then a month of hard lab work before I left. Again, I had a plan that keep me on track.

By the time my foot was better, I had not only accumulated a lot of work for the only month I had left in Argentina, but I had also postponed personal stuff. I was completing the VISA and travel paperwork, doing my PhD lab work, and getting my annual medical check-ups. I was sure I could handle it, as I usually work well under pressure. But one week later, my gynecologist was recommending me a series of tests because she had seen something suspicious in an ultrasound test. I started to have plenty of medical appointments, and this scared me a lot. During that week I felt my plans crumbling. I began to have doubts about if I would be able go to the congress and start the semester abroad.

I had again to review my priorities and reschedule my plans. At that point, deeply inside I new that it was impossible to get everything work related done without neglecting taking care of my health. I decided to ask for help. It may sound like an obvious and easy thing, but it wasn’t for me. I ask for help with the lab and with the meeting poster to my advisors and colleagues. I even asked my friends and family to help me pack. The last week in Argentina, I even had to get a breast biopsy done. The biopsy went well, fortunately, and I got to travel on time. The only reason that made the latter possible was the help I received from my advisors, colleagues, friends, and family.

It took a broken bone and a biopsy done for me to learn that sometimes things don't go as planned and that's okay too. I still start every single day doing a checklist and get through it crossing out one by one. But now I have learned that not every cross has to be done entirely by myself.