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Working Life

Trailblazing But I’m on Fire Too

Sitting in the bar for my friend’s 21st birthday I feel a buzz in my pocket. Its an email—glancing at the name and subject line my heart races, I feel my face go all so slightly pale (it probably would have been more pale sans the apple pie shots). I look up to make sure I’m not missing something important amongst the drunken chatter… and the coast is clear. It starts off as you expect: “thank you for your interest” and a “the deliberation process too longer than expected as we received so many highly qualified applicants” and ends with a “we are sorry to inform you” which causes my vision to blur. I quickly scan the rest of the email and shove my phone back into my pocket so I can rejoin the conversation albeit distractedly. I eventually excuse myself to walk home where I can cry in my bathroom and craft a response to thank them for the consideration.

Finding my place in science to where I am now was quite the winding road. As a little kid I always said I wanted to be a “scientist”, envisioning myself as an adult with a lab coat and googles in a lab with smoking test tubes. Beyond that vague vision I didn’t have much other direction in mind. I started off at university as a biology student but very quickly felt unwelcome amongst the competition between the premed students. I tried out physics and spent a semester virtually alone unless MasterPhysics can count as company. Finally, by somewhat random chance and suggestion from my Mom I ended up in geology. It was my junior year and feeling the pressure of graduating with a degree I didn’t care for I changed on a whim and promptly fell in love. I finally found a place where I loved the science and the community that came with it. Looming graduation felt less scary but my impending deadlines for my honors thesis still scared me. It wasn’t until I came across an REU to measure soil respiration in the Namib Desert did I have any inclination what I wanted to work on for my thesis.

The professor had joint positions in the school of life science and the school of earth and space exploration—where geology lived. I really felt like this program was exactly what where my current path was leading me, I spent hours on the application and scheduled time with career services to practice my interview skills. When I didn’t get it not only was I crushed but I felt incredibly lost. It was now the spring semester of my junior year and I had no direction for a thesis. This was the first time I had felt like I knew what I wanted. There was one thought that kept repeating in my head: “What if I know what I want but I just can’t make it?”. Not knowing what I wanted and not getting anywhere was fine. Knowing where I wanted to be and trying so hard to get there and failing was completely different. Being a geologist felt like this far off goal that I couldn’t even make the first step towards getting to.

I can’t say that this failure lit a fire beneath me to keep trying because it didn’t. There was no phoenix rising from the ashes of my bathroom floor breakdown. I mourned this loss for a long time. It wasn’t even the feeling of not being good enough that kept me down. It was the feeling of maybe *being* good enough but just not having the luck to make it work. Just like every other time my dramatics take over, life goes on. I replied graciously to my rejection email and met with the professor about volunteering in her lab to learn more about what goes on there. I also ended up hearing back from a job I’d applied to back in November and, implementing the skills I learned from all my interview prep from the career center, I had a summer internship lined up. That job and the work I ended up doing with the professor led me down a totally different research path that kept altering. Soil respiration turned into geomicrobiology which turned into environmental robotics which turned into remote glacial mapping. Now in grad school I’m looking at using AI to study sediment core relating to icesheets.

That initial rejection allowed me to be okay with changing course. It turns out my scientific interests are painfully interdisciplinary and a randomized winding road was maybe the perfect road to follow. Not feeling like the dice would roll in my favor allowed me to take the opportunities that were offered to me even if they didn’t sound perfect. I think there’s a lot of value in taking chances trying things you never thought you’d do, there’s less pressure when you erase the vision of a perfect future. I think my career path will continue to feel random and scary but being ok with marching forward, blind to where the end of the tunnel is leading, makes me feel allowed to be uncertain and lets me be curious about all opportunities whether they are what I think I want or not.