How to rejuvenate yourself when your academic job no longer motivates you (essay)

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When the CIA tweeted recently about Lulu, a sweet Labrador retriever who washed out of bomb-sniffing school, I was amused at first by the idea of a creature with natural retrieving talents, plus many years of training, who slowly lost her motivation for the work she was eminently qualified to do. At the same time the story of Lulu was making the rounds, I read an essay from author John Coleman, known for his work on passion and purpose, advising on allowing meaning and purpose to develop over time in our careers and lives. With both Lulu's internet-viral story and Coleman's simple, practical advice on recognizing meaning in our lives, I see parallels to Ph.D. career decision making and ways to think about the choices we make every day -- in the work we do, the interactions we have and the plans we make for the future.

For the biomedical science researchers I advise, October has been a month of thinking about what matters in life and work. Over the past few weeks, a colleague and I held lunchtime career discussions with small groups of postdoctoral researchers, and we spent most our time talking about feelings of career burnout, overcoming obstacles and staying motivated. When I saw Lulu’s sad retriever face looking at a ball she did not want to chase (OK, maybe it was explosives she didn’t want to find, but nonetheless, she had lost her fetching mojo), it mirrored an expression that I’ve often seen on researchers’ faces. It’s appeared in conversations about continuing with work of many years (or not), feeling the need for motivation to continue, or looking for the opportunity to pivot and make a change.

If your tail has stopped wagging, or if it’s starting to feel like an effort to do the work you have for a long time been happily undertaking, take a short time-out to consider the reasons why. Don't wait until you are completely miserable to look at options or consider making changes, because you won’t make smart decisions when you can’t muster energy. You may just need a little rejuvenation break, you may need to focus on finding (or refinding) your purpose and meaning, or you may need to begin investigating some entirely new paths.

Take a Break

At the beginning of her training, Lulu’s energy was most likely boundless. She worked long hours and probably got up early and stayed late, putting in extra hours because she was so excited about her work. But then … a slump. According to CIA tweets, this is not uncommon in Lulu’s line of work, but the periods of blurred focus and lack of interest usually only last a few days for most dogs. It could have been that the job was boring; it could have been that Lulu saw endless repetitive years ahead. We’ll never know, given than Lulu can’t talk.
But I can assume that, as a retriever, Lulu’s life’s work and her fundamental canine identity were all about retrieving. So it must have been tough for her to come to grips with not wanting to retrieve, no matter the reason. This happens with many researchers who gradually (or sometimes suddenly) realize that their work topic or area or job tasks are no longer fulfilling, possibly draining.

If this happens to you, it’s important to figure out what’s really the cause and not take any immediate drastic action. Sometimes having time away from your work environment, such as when you attend a conference, allows perspective. Or you can just take a mental health day. Whatever you can do, a respite from the day to day can help bring clarity.

I like to imagine that Lulu and her handler had some direct and supportive (albeit one-sided) conversations as Lulu’s performance deteriorated. Maybe the handler asked if Lulu wanted to try some different tasks or needed a vacation, and then the handler helped Lulu figure out how best to get her professional focus back on track and bring more balance to her professional life.[3].

That said, Lulu’s inability to talk actually makes her story a lot like most Ph.D./mentor situations, where communication can be stilted or one or both parties don’t ever talk. So I can also imagine an absence of opportunity for discussions or supportive chats in the workplace, or at least a fear on the part of the student or postdoc to initiate this kind of talk. But talking it out is a necessary and important way to articulate what you are feeling and why.

Ideally, Ph.D.s could have initial conversations on a personal level with a friend or trusted someone (a graduate career professional, for example), to try to get to the bottom of feelings of work disinterest. It might be temporary stress, or it might be a deeper issue. If you have access to a professional counselor or adviser, take advantage of that person’s training and advice, too.

Then, once you are clearer in your thinking, you may be ready to talk about things on a professional level with your mentor or adviser -- a direct, calm interaction in which you state that you do love your work (if that is true!) but are feeling stuck, struggling with a problem or need some guidance on how to move forward. Or maybe you need to have the conversation in which you say you love your discipline but not the field, and thus need to explore some new options. (More on that in a moment.) If your direct supervisor isn’t available, find another sounding board, such as a member of your committee.

By the way, these conversations don’t go well if you have not preplanned or considered your own thoughts and your goals for the interaction. There are many career development resources available to Ph.D.s for navigating through this type of thinking and subsequent conversation, but the most helpful ones focus on positive communication and growth. Avoid scare tactics, negativity and promises of quick fixes[4]. A book I’ve read recently that I really enjoyed on this topic is Susan Scott’s Fierce Conversations[5].

**Investigate New Paths**

When Lulu’s story first appeared, others in the Twittersphere suggested Lulu might be happier as an artist, in the circus or as a hunting dog. Random career choice ideas from the internet are fine for a dog, but for trained and experienced Ph.D. researchers, resources like Versatile PhD[6], BioCareers[7], MyIDP[8] or the newly launched Imagine PhD[9] provide excellent career path overviews and information for both STEM and social science/humanities Ph.D.s.
It's best to begin thinking early about your options, even when you are happy in the work you are doing. Life throws curveballs that can affect job happiness and security. It might be a mentor losing grant money or moving to a new university, or personal reasons like a new baby, an illness or a spouse’s job transfer. Or, as in the case of Lulu, malaise may just creep up slowly, until one day you realize you dread going in to work every day. Investigating what else is out there can reaffirm you are in the right place, mitigate feelings of being trapped or provide an exciting new horizon.

Lulu’s professional team supported her career switch. She was moved to another environment to use her gifts and experience: backyard squirrel chasing. I will believe the people on her team didn’t judge her -- in fact, I think they cared about her happiness and have celebrated her transfer to backyard work. “We'll miss her, but it was the right decision for her,” the CIA tweeted.

If only all professional teams were supportive of these kinds of changes! If you expect to receive some pushback or disappointment in your own career decision making, one of the best strategies to counter negativity is to be confident and clear about your choices and rationale.

**Consider Purpose and Meaning**

Continuing my anthropomorphic/career metaphor, as well as some blue-sky thinking, I can imagine that Lulu’s managers understood that, after departing bomb school, it was important for Lulu to find a place where she could still use her training and talent because so much time had already been invested in her. Many Ph.D.s pursue a passion for a topic up to terminal degree level and have an innate love for a topic or research question, just as Lulu had skills and talent that found dedicated focus (or dogged attention) in her CIA work. But as we progress in our careers, transition points can bring realization that just because we are trained and even expert in certain skills, we don’t necessarily have to use them.

During your Ph.D. and postdoctoral research training, you will use, for example, writing, speaking, budgeting and project management or teamwork skills, along with deep knowledge in your specific subject area. But you will also come to understand which skills you prefer, which come most naturally to you and which skills you wish to develop further or perhaps leave behind as you take the next steps in your career.

Also, priorities change. The things we were once passionate about pursuing can become less lustrous over time. Or maybe we have achieved certain goals -- like publishing a book or a paper, winning a fellowship, presenting at an international conference -- and after that achievement, it might be time to regroup and figure out the next challenge.

Identify and understand your skills and talents, both the ones you want to take forward and the ones you are OK leaving behind. Think about the environment where you use those skills and the kinds of colleagues you most enjoy. Recognizing that you have talents that can transfer to other environments may lessen feelings of being trapped in work that you don’t enjoy. Or consider which aspects of your work make you feel most motivated and which give you the “ugh” response. Then adjust your work and your world, even if just incrementally. Purpose in our work -- and lives -- is not a treasure to be claimed but rather a slow gathering of understanding and awareness over time.

Unlike Lulu, graduate students and postdocs have the ability and agency to take charge of their career choices. Encountering obstacles or setbacks in your work is natural and ongoing, but simply waiting for a handler to reassign you is not likely to happen. Control your career choices and options, take advantage of available resources, and remember that while
not every day at work will be amazing, finding and keeping career motivation is up to you.

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