

By Ananya Sen

# The problem with ‘follow your dream’

I walked into my adviser’s office, overflowing with frustration and confusion about the advice I had received at a recent career development workshop. It reiterated what I had heard so many times before: I should follow my dream, and if I didn’t yet know what that was, I should live with career uncertainty until I figured it out. But as an international student working in the United States, taking time to explore wasn’t an option for me. After listening to me rant, my adviser calmly looked across his desk. He told me that instead of focusing on finding a dream job, I should think about what I am good at and what makes me happy at least 80% of the time. This advice surprised me at first, but it ended up being exactly what I needed to hear.

I had spent the previous 22 years following my childhood dream—becoming a professor of marine biology. However, in grad school I saw how applying for grants is a constant source of worry for many professors. I realized I did not want to be responsible for the salaries of my hypothetical lab members. About 4 years into the program, I decided I did not want to pursue a career in research after all.

I began to attend career panels, which all followed a worryingly similar template. I would walk into the room with other excited graduate students and collect my free cookies and coffee, confident that the panelists would have the magical answers I needed. Instead, they would talk—again—about following their dreams. The message: I just needed to find a new dream.

It would mean taking time off from work to self-reflect and discover a new path. But I couldn’t stay in the country without a visa. For most academic researchers, obtaining a university-sponsored visa is relatively straightforward. But outside of academia, it is infinitely more complex, requiring a company that has a job opening and is willing to foot the bill for a work visa. As well-meaning as the panelists were, they fell silent when I brought up this dilemma. I felt totally lost.

Finally, I went to my adviser for help. We hadn’t talked much about my career plans over the years, but I felt I needed a new perspective from someone who knew me well. When he offered his advice, I was taken aback at first. What happened to “if you love what you do, you’ll never work a day in your life”? My adviser assured me there is seldom such a job. Every job has its ugly bits. But as long as you’re happy most of the time, you can struggle



**“I should think about what I am good at and what makes me happy at least 80% of the time.”**

through the parts you don’t like. He also said it was important to find a job I was good at, especially because my visa applications required me to make the case that I would benefit the country.

I was relieved to finally have helpful, practical advice. But I discovered that finding overlap between what I like and what I’m good at was not easy. I love scuba diving, but the physical demands are a challenge for me. I’m good at teaching, as evidenced by my friends nagging me to teach them chemistry and microbiology during my high school and undergraduate years and getting rave reviews from my students when I was a teaching assistant, but I don’t like repeating the same content every year. Through my teaching experience, however, I also learned that I love

telling stories about science. Maybe science communication would offer the overlap I was looking for.

To test the waters, during my “spare time” in grad school I started a blog about the history of scientific discoveries. I found that I loved the freedom to choose what to write about, and I never encountered a challenge I didn’t enjoy. As for whether I was any good at it, the signs were promising. My writing got noticed, eventually by people at my institution, and I was given opportunities to write press releases and stories for the university’s news bureau. After 3 years of writing, I was offered a position as a science writer. It’s nothing like my childhood dream. But I am happy—more than 80% of the time. ■

Ananya Sen is a science writer for the Carl R. Woese Institute for Genomic Biology at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Send your career story to [SciCareerEditor@aaas.org](mailto:SciCareerEditor@aaas.org).