

COLUMN

Birth and rebirth

Even if one PhD experience turns sour, another could offer the right opportunity, says **Susie Crowe**.



CARLA CASTAGNO/SHUTTERSTOCK

On the day I met my future husband, I confirmed the start of my PhD. Those two events would set my personal and professional lives on a collision course.

We were both in North Carolina, at a beach house full of windsurfers, as I decided the next four to six years of my life. With him in earshot, I made the call that initiated my PhD, probably hoping that I would come across as impressively intellectual and sexy. That call would keep us five hours apart — me in Toronto, Canada, him in Ottawa — for a year.

Long-distance relationships are common in academia. It is the nature of the beast: highly specialized and sparsely studied topics can take us just about anywhere, often away from significant others. Some couples can make this work for a while. We could not.

Relationship woes compounded a feeling that I was on the wrong track. My research proposal stalled. I fell into a depression. My topic was at odds with my new goal of a family-oriented, non-tenure-track job with work-life balance. And the person I wanted to share my life with was losing faith in us.

There were positives: a supportive supervisor, a challenging teaching-assistant post and a colony of Madagascar hissing cockroaches (every girl's dream!). But it was not working.

So, after much soul-searching, I took a job with a non-governmental organization closer to Ottawa, where my boyfriend worked and where both of our families are based. And I did the unthinkable: I quit my PhD.

It was excruciating. I thought that my doubts would make me look weak. My

adviser was empathetic, but I could not bear to tell him that I had made the wrong choice by joining his lab.

I wonder if there should be an 'academic redirection office' in every university, specially designed for students who want to withdraw. I can see the pamphlets: 'So you're considering leaving your PhD...' Pictured would be a perplexed and dismayed 20-something. Inside would be lists and tips: typical reasons for wanting to quit; pros and cons; reasons you might have started in the first place.

However, even after I had boldly gone where no one (that I knew) had gone before, my academic career did not end. Soon after quitting, I discovered a landscape ecologist in Ottawa whose work fascinated me. Her work had the practical applications and ties to public-sector priorities that my previous field had lacked. I disclosed my fickle past, and she still accepted me. With high hopes, I marched headlong into a new PhD project.

I would like to say that quitting never crossed my mind again. In fact, my qualifying period included episodes of frantic job-searching fuelled by self-doubt. But I jumped that hurdle. I finished two field seasons of data collection, and I am one statistics project away from being 'all but dissertation'. I am in my third year, and the journey is far from over. But I am committed, and I know what is required of me. I will finish this.

A few months after my wedding, I had taken to wearing baggy sweaters. I walked hunched over. I bit my nails. Finally, in a meeting with my supervisor, I blurted it out: "I need to tell you something... I'm pregnant."

"That's wonderful!" she responded warmly. "How much leave would you like to take?" I blushed, embarrassed at having been worried about her reaction.

My PhD is no longer something that I am forcing into my life. I have made decisions that allowed my training to mesh with my other goals. A few semesters from now, I will be in the ranks of women who did not feel compelled to choose between doctoral research and starting a family. I cannot wait to hold my daughter proudly while wearing my graduation robe. ■

Susie Crowe is a doctoral candidate in biology at Carleton University in Ottawa.

DATA-SHARING

Open data get more use

Scientists who share their data get a boost in citations, says a study (H. A. Piwowar and T. J. Vision *PeerJ* 1, e175; 2013). The authors examined citations of 10,555 papers on gene expression published between 2000 and 2009. Those for which the data were freely available received 9% more citations than those with restricted data. Reuse and citations of the open data continued to rise for six years after publication. Co-author Heather Piwowar, co-founder of open-metrics service ImpactStory in Carrboro, North Carolina, says that early-career researchers have good reason to share their data: "It will increase the impact of their research and that's good for their citation statistics and visibility." Piwowar recommends that researchers store their data in well-known, easily accessible repositories.

CANADA

Postdocs dissatisfied

Nearly one-third of postdocs in Canada are ambivalent about or dissatisfied with their experience, a survey finds. For *The 2013 Canadian Postdoc Survey*, the Canadian Association of Postdoctoral Scholars and Vancouver-based non-profit research organization Mitacs polled 1,830 postdocs at 130 institutions in academia, government and the private sector. Nearly half were dissatisfied with benefits such as insurance or leave time, about one-third with training opportunities, and more than one-third with pay. Postdocs must negotiate for pay and benefits and seek out extra training themselves, says survey co-author Robert Annan, vice-president for research and policy at Mitacs.

UNITED KINGDOM

Rating exercise assessed

Nearly two-thirds of survey respondents think that the UK system for assessing research harms working conditions and career development, and creates unreasonable expectations, finds a poll. The survey, by the University and College Union (UCU) in London, received responses from 7,000 academics. More than half say that the Research Excellence Framework, which will inform funding allocations for 2015–16, should be changed. The UCU seeks to reduce paperwork and cut the number of research products required for a positive evaluation, says Stefano Fella, the report's author.