The Postdoc Life

I am not a scientist. But I’ve observed a scientist’s life—including late-night time points and stress over preliminary exams—since I first started dating my now-husband when he was a Ph.D. candidate at the University of North Carolina.

He’s currently a Research Scientist studying bacterial pathogenesis at Yale University, having started out as a postdoc. He began his stint there in 2008 and, while he is incredibly fulfilled by his work there, has been actively on the job market for the past three years, looking at both academic and industry posts.

I’ve been living the life of a postdoc spouse since we arrived in New Haven, a strange and transient lifestyle with the constant awareness that our family, which includes my husband and I, three children and two dogs, may need to relocate for his profession.

It means maintaining a holding pattern in ways that are both meaningful and trivial; I love my oldest daughter’s elementary school, but I’ve never gotten involved with the PTA or even tried too hard to get to know many other parents, despite the fact that I’m a very outgoing person. “What’s the point?” I ask myself.

On a much less serious note, we waited until last year to replace a subpar dishwasher (it somehow made our dishes dirtier), thinking, “We can survive with this one. After all, we’ll be moving soon.”

Our situation also means answering questions from bewildered family and friends, because although it’s familiar territory for the scientists involved, the postdoc stint and challenges of the associated job search are foreign ideas to nonscientists. “Why can’t he stay in his current position?” they ask. “Doesn’t he like it there?”

We live near family, who are a tremendous help with our children. We invested in the purchase of a small, but lovely house. I have a job I love. We’ve made good friends. I get it: why would we move?

But, I explain, we undertook this life knowing it was temporary; that even in the unlikely event that we ended up staying local, my husband’s job wasn’t meant to last forever.

I guess we just thought it would be, well, more temporary. Three years, maybe five, tops. But postdocs, according to newspaper pieces I’ve read and anecdotal evidence I’ve heard from other researchers, are getting longer and longer. The months in New Haven marched on. Then the years.

I began echoing a familiar refrain with friends when they asked questions like, “What are you thinking for kindergarten next year?” or “What about summer camps?” I’d tell them our plans, adding, “If we’re still here then, of course.” But lately, I’ve grown tired of constantly repeating the sentiment. Once an exciting prospect, it’s now an overdone refrain.

The limbo is difficult, and it’s unsettling to be in the seemingly helpless partner role, waiting for someone else’s life to so radically shape my own.

But that’s what love and marriage means, after all, and our life story—ever-so-slowly revealing itself—isn’t one I’d change.

Our postdoc life has, indeed, provided myriad benefits. I’ve stretched the boundaries of my own tolerance, and have increased my sense of adventure, too. Although it’s tough to continually ask, “What’s next?” I realize that we’re so very lucky to sit on the brink of that question. In our late thirties, having already had children, the journey is still far from over.

Scientists, I’ve learned, are patient people. They are quiet optimists. Concocting experiments over days that carry out over weeks and then, it turns out, reveal nothing particularly interesting. Still, they carry on, awaiting that one outstanding outcome.

“I could never do it,” I say to my husband and his coworkers. “I’d give up the moment I experienced my first failure.”

Perhaps I’m more resilient than I give myself credit for, though. I’ve grown much more accepting of the waiting game over the years, recognizing that a long-awaited result could be just around the corner.

And knowing that the effort spent getting there will make it all the more wonderful.

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