

An occasional column, in which Mole and other characters share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Correspondence for Mole and his friends can be sent to [mole@biologists.com](mailto:mole@biologists.com), and may be published in forthcoming issues.



## Letting go

Dear Uncle Mole,

My goodness, it's been a long time! That's all my fault as I've been pre-occupied lately with the unpacking and resettling that comes with career transitions. It's been fun, don't get me wrong. We both know my shopping proclivities, and setting up a new place has provided opportunities beyond even my wildest imagination. If I do say so myself, yours truly has the most stylish office of any of my new colleagues (and I've already been told by everyone in the department that I have the best shoes).

The downside is that the unpacking process is a miserable undertaking of nightmarish proportions. Word to the wise: labeling boxes 'odds and ends' saves time up front but makes for an apoplectic Molette several weeks later when said boxes arrive. I'm still looking for a few of my favorite books, a folder of articles I'd been meaning to read and my martini glasses. I have also spent far too much money replacing

mundane items that I already owned but couldn't move. It's only now, several months on, that I'm finally able to think about things that really matter – the hypothesis of my latest project or the last few months of journals I have ignored – instead of the details that have filled my days recently: how do I get a parking permit and where is the closest 24-hour pharmacy? In facing the daunting task of relocating one's life and work from point A to point B, I think I have realized why so many of my peers often behave like potted plants when it comes to the transition points in our careers as budding scientists. Sometimes it's just easier to stay in one place.

After all, finishing a thesis or a post-doc can easily take an extra year or two, or even three. We all know those people who are determined to stay in scientific Neverland as long as possible. I had more than one colleague ask why I was so determined to give up 'the graduate-student lifestyle' when I was churning out data and planning for my thesis defense with the energy of a small tornado. At first I tried to explain what I thought was self-evident: who wants to remain

part of a stereotype that includes messy clothes, a pitiful income, and ramen noodle sustenance? Yet eventually I stopped trying to explain my enthusiasm for moving onward and upward because my attempts to do so were far too often met with either a blank look or a scowl of epic proportions. I suppose to some of my colleagues I was crazy to pack up and move as far as I did, as there's never any shortage of labs at the same institution (let alone the same city) for the young trainee to slide from senior grad student to junior post-doc to senior post-doc. The thing is, even if the grass isn't any greener on the other side, it's gaining the perspective from another view of the fence that matters.

I don't know if you remember my friend Beaver from your last visit before my thesis defense? Very nice guy and wicked smart too (I'll admit it – I am picking up the lingo here although I promise you this: I will *never* accept their driving habits!). Anyway, Beaver and I started our training together. In fact, I still remember our conversations at orientation when we were discussing our angst about finding the perfect lab. The thing is, Uncle Mole, I think he might still be looking. I finished my degrees, packed, moved, unpacked, and jumped right back into the training game, and Beaver is *still* trundling along building the flawless dam in his thesis lab. At this rate, I could be junior faculty by the time he gets out of there! Undoubtedly, the concluding chapter of his thesis will have less of a discussion of future studies – to be done

by someone else – than that of yours truly. But isn't part of our goal as young scientists learning when to spread our wings and take a chance flying solo out of the nest?

The more I've thought about it, the more I think that one of the hardest skills we scientists have to acquire – especially at the beginning – is learning when to let go. Quite simply, the perfect project, the perfect paper and the perfect hypothesis don't exist. There's always one more experiment that could be done before submitting a paper, one more specific aim to add to the grant proposal, one more technique that could be learned before leaving a particular lab environment. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with persistence or dedication. Those are probably two of the most valuable skills any scientist could ever have, especially as we often have to work so very hard in the face of the constant uncertainty that is the scientific enterprise. But life has this funny way of being all about balance. Black and white, Watson and Holmes, red wine and chocolate...they just go together, and one wouldn't be complete without the other. When it comes to science, I'm beginning to see that the skills we learn along the way are just as important as the milestones that people celebrate with us. No one cracks open the bottle of champagne for a hard week (or month or year) of slogging through the controls for a vexing experiment. But in the end, *those* are the skills that give us half a chance of making a go at standing on our own two paws

one day. And when the going gets easy – when we've maxed out on the learning in a particular training environment – that's when it's time to take the leap out of the nest and move on.

In the lab, I think the counterpart to dogged determination is the courage to let go – whether that be of an idea that no longer seems supported by the evidence, a manuscript that just needs to be submitted, a stage of one's career that might be comfortable but is no longer a challenge. Maybe I'm becoming a bit more contemplative about time these days because I'm approaching one of those birthdays that reminds us life is counted in decades and they don't go on forever. But it's also kind of liberating to realize that the goal is not to box ourselves into the corner of tying up every last loose end on a particular project. Instead, it's okay to look up, to dream big and to venture off into the unknown from time to time. He was talking about his art and not his science when he said this, but I think Leonardo was right: "...once you have tasted the taste of sky, you will forever look up."

And what do you know, amidst all of my chattering I think I just found the missing box with my martini glasses! Here's to fresh starts and new ideas...

Until next time,

*Molette*

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