In praise of slow

I huff and puff my way up the moderate slope. Even by my own abysmal standards, this is a poor run. In the past hour, I have been overtaken by both an octogenarian and a mum pushing her toddlers in a buggy. Yet I am smiling. I am a happy runner, despite my utter mediocrity at this sport. But at work, happiness had become elusive. After a relatively relaxed Ph.D. and postdoc, I had been thrilled when I landed a tenured job. But as I worked to establish myself as a group leader, I began to feel intense pressure to be more competitive and publish more. Recently, as I wondered why I felt so discontented at my job, I realized that I could apply some lessons from running to my research.

Lesson one: In the right race, your weakness can become your strength. For more than 30 years I equated running to speed and so, lacking the fast-twitch muscles of a sprinter, I chose not to run at all. But once I finally started running, I learned that not being able to sprint makes me a better endurance runner. Similarly, I often perceived my inability to focus on a single research topic as a barrier to success as an academic scientist. But I’ve found that my desire to branch out to different fields helps me make connections across disciplines and see my work in new ways, which has led to unexpected and exciting insights.

Lesson two: Choose the right pace for your race. Last Christmas, a silver-haired gentleman helped me beat my (lamentable) 5K personal best by whispering, “Go at your pace, not theirs!” when I got stuck behind slower runners. I now realize that this would have been excellent advice early in my career. Some Ph.D. students push themselves too hard and burn out, but I had the opposite problem. I was happy to trundle along at the slowest pace I could get away with—but it ultimately held me back. Even though I like my slow-but-steady pace, I still needed to learn to push myself rather than drag my feet.

Lesson three: An honest race is the only race worth running. I invariably finish in the bottom quartile of the local 5K run. All I would have to do to move up a couple of hundred places is take a shortcut through the fields. Yet I don’t. Nobody does. Scientists are usually like that, too—but not always. Principal investigators are pressured to keep their spot in the fast lane, postdocs are chasing the elusive permanent contract, and students are keen to make their mark. Several of my publications would have had a much easier ride through the reviewing system had I been slightly less honest about our findings. The temptation to cheat to get an advantage can be great. However, and this is something that is often overlooked, an advantage is only useful if you are, in fact, engaged in a competition. This brings me to the last lesson, which is the most important of all.

Lesson four: There really is no race. For me, running isn’t about being faster than other runners. Likewise, my goal in research is not to “beat” my colleagues. Mark Rowlands, a philosopher, academic, and runner, argues that running makes us happy because it is a form of play and as such has intrinsic value. I don’t run just to eat more peanut butter or to save money on psychotherapy (although these are strong motivating factors in my case). I run because doing so offers a glimpse of life’s real value. I now think this is the secret to being happy in research, too. I don’t do research only to get invited to conferences, see my name in print, or be promoted. Like running, research is a game with its own intrinsic value. Playing this game of discovery gives me enough joy to keep me going.

Do I recommend an academic career in the slow lane? It doesn’t work for everybody. Letting go of ambition in academia is a bit like leaving your GPS watch at home when heading out for a run. Scientists are ambitious; they want to be the hares leading the race ahead. But the tortoise’s secret is that there is a lot of fun to be had at the back of the pack.

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