It wasn’t always like this. In the Swedish village where I grew up, I was proud to be the class bookworm. As a student and postdoc, it was exciting to satisfy challenging (yet clear) expectations. When I became a faculty member, I was full of passion and confidence and was eager to fit in and measure up. But faced with the politics of being an assistant professor, I couldn’t discern what was expected of me. I couldn’t understand the implicit messages, which led to embarrassing mistakes such as the equipment funding incident. Another time, I enthusiastically developed a new course to fill a gap I had noticed in the curriculum. But the subject area was not a good match for my department, I realized after doing the work, so I didn’t get any credit. There were also smaller incidents: simple things like not understanding which meetings I was supposed to attend and who to go to for advice. Every time something like this happened, it stripped away a piece of my self-worth. My passion for science faded, and I did not feel like I belonged anymore. The more overwhelming that feeling became, the more I distanced myself and my research group from the rest of the department. Hiding my shame was a way to survive. But without a connection with my fellow faculty members, I crumbled.

After almost 3 years, when things seemed as dark as they could possibly be, I found a potential escape: a 3-year international career grant from the Swedish Research Council. I would be able to keep my appointment at my home institution and continue as thesis adviser for my students while working elsewhere. My department head was supportive, and I worked out strategies for staying connected with my research group while I was away. Whatever the drawbacks might be, I was convinced that anything would be better than carrying on as I was. So, after much discussion with my husband and three sons, we moved from northern Sweden to northern California. That was two and a half life-changing years ago. The lab that I’ve been working in has offered me a place where I feel I belong as I am, flaws and all. During our weekly lab meetings, for instance, the lab head generously shares incidents when he was not perfect, such as safety blunders he made, and he freely asks questions when he doesn’t know or understand something. These simple actions encourage others to speak up as well, which helps create an inclusive atmosphere and allows us to learn from one another’s challenges and missteps. Now, instead of struggling to read hidden signals and fearing that I’ve missed some crucial details, I’m spending my energy on expanding my skill set. I intend to carry this new confidence back to my home institution when I return in a few months. I’m facing a very empty lab, but now I know how I want to contribute to my academic community. In addition to my chemistry research, I’m committed to fostering an open, supportive, inclusive environment like the one I’ve experienced during my stay abroad. I also have a newfound determination to clarify expectations before they become a problem. And when I make mistakes in spite of all my efforts, instead of hiding them in shame, I will accept them and, most importantly, share and learn from them.

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Figuring out how I belong
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