Surrounded by half-unpacked boxes in my new home, alone in a new city, and just starting to get a feel for a new job, I was plagued by suspicions that I had made the wrong choice. Maybe the naysayers were right. Maybe I was crazy to leave my tenured post in the Midwest, not to mention my friends and colleagues, for a job as the executive director of a small nonprofit organization in Washington, D.C. But I had spent a lifetime in academia, and I was excited to explore this new world.

I had started thinking about leaving academia shortly after receiving tenure 7 years earlier. I had achieved the ultimate prize for most academics, but I feared boredom—and eventually felt it. I tried to push those uneasy feelings away and find peace in my research and service to the university. But satisfaction was fleeting. By the time a sabbatical rolled around, I had decided that I needed to try something entirely different.

I wasn’t sure exactly what that should be, but I figured that applying for yearlong fellowships that required a Ph.D. would be a good start. Most of these were in public policy, and I envisioned using my scientific approach to help address policy issues as a natural extension of my experience doing basic research. So, I submitted my applications—and watched the rejections stack up.

Then a friend suggested that I contact my congressperson for help. Surely he wouldn’t talk to me, I thought. Even if he did, he wouldn’t have a clue as to what I should do. But to my surprise, he agreed to a phone call. After I gave my speech about who I was and what I wanted to do, he simply asked, “Do you want to come work with me on a peace initiative?” At first, I was speechless. Then I blurted something like, “Yes, yes, yes!”

I had to make a new life and figure out how to fit into this fast-paced world, where many of my colleagues were the same age as the students I had been teaching. I was encouraged, however, when I met people like me but a step further: scientists who had found happiness in “nontraditional” jobs. When my sabbatical ended, I returned to my university post, but my experience had confirmed that it was time for me to find another career path. I had made many friends over the years and built a laboratory from the ground up, but something in me said that it’s now or never.

A few months later, I got a call about a job in Washington, D.C. With the wind at my back, the interview felt like one of the easiest I had ever done, which I took to mean that the job would be a good fit. When I got the offer, I didn’t hesitate to take it.

The transition had its challenges. At my university, I had been established and respected; now, I felt like I was starting over. But it didn’t take too long to develop a vibrant new community, and I felt renewed energy for my work. At times, it was scary to be doing something that felt so foreign, but the skills and approaches that I had honed in academia helped me figure out how to get the job done. And a few years in this first job led me to an even more fulfilling position, at a different organization, which I have now held for more than a decade.

In talking to other faculty members over the years, I found that some wished they had other career options, but most keep such thoughts to themselves. It is simply in the culture of academia to covet a tenured position. But if unhappy academics would move out of those jobs, opening niches for newer Ph.D. recipients, the world could be a happier place. We tell students to take risks and try new things, and there is nothing like doing it yourself to see how hard that can be—but also how rewarding. Above all, there is no shame in wanting to leave academia, no matter your career stage, and then actually doing it.

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