

Whither genetics?

By Marjorie Dunlap

A few months ago, for a fleeting moment, I felt like a child again. At the dinner table, my parents began to argue about one of their students. I traced a tiny pink flower on the pattern of my plate and for an instant didn't feel like a college student home for the weekend, but like a little kid sitting at my childhood kitchen table, at a time when the only thing there was to talk about over dinner was my parents' lives—since mine and my brother's were not yet complex enough to warrant discussion. And my parents' lives were (and still are, in fact) consumed by one thing: science.

Over the last few years, as my brother and I have matured into more animated participants in dinnertime conversation, my parents' work has faded as a subject of discussion. It is rarely mentioned at all anymore. Or perhaps it's that my parents' roles as scientists on the faculty of Dartmouth Medical School have become less about biochemistry (in my mother's case) and genetics (in my father's) and more about their management of a lab and a department.

Footsteps: I have always been proud to have such smart, important parents. As a kid, I was sure I wanted to follow in their footsteps. Early on, I told anyone who asked that I was going to be an oceanographer. Then, after realizing that this long and impressive word did not actually mean what I had thought, I decided that "marine biologist" was actually my true calling. I spent quite a few years cuddling this ambition.

Soon, I had chosen the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (maybe influenced by a certain Flying Horses Carousel on nearby Martha's Vineyard?) as my future employer. I remember hearing that the University of Miami had an especially good marine biology program. Some time during my tenure as a biologist-to-be, I discovered that my father had spent his college years as one, too; it wasn't until he went to graduate school that his career ideas changed from Marine Biologist to Geneticist. (I'd begun to picture these important words with an initial capital.) It pleased me to no end to learn this.

But then, after having spent five years of my life—an important five years developmentally, from age five to ten—on these aspirations, I suddenly and inexplicably dropped them. What, you ask, was the even more exciting career choice that took my childish fancy?

The "Point of View" essay provides a personal perspective on some issue in medicine or science. Marjorie Dunlap is a first-year undergraduate at Dartmouth College. She grew up in Thetford, Vt., not far from Dartmouth, and is a 2004 alumna of Thetford Academy. Both of her parents are longtime members of the Dartmouth Medical School faculty: her father, Jay Dunlap, Ph.D., is chair of the Department of Genetics, and her mother, Jennifer Loros, Ph.D., is a professor of biochemistry and of genetics.



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The answer is that nothing specific did. I just felt as if a switch had been flipped. I felt as repelled by science as I had formerly felt attracted to it. It was not Marine Biology that disgusted me, it was the whole genre. I simply knew I wanted nothing to do with science.

Change of heart: More recently, I have begun entertaining thoughts of becoming a writer, a photographer, perhaps even an architect. It has just been in writing this essay, in fact, that I have come to realize the strangeness of this complete change of heart. I can't explain the root of the conversion; it's just that I no

longer saw any place in my future for science.

I don't know whether this disappoints my parents. Sometimes they have suggested a certain course of action ("How about chemistry? You seem to enjoy chemistry . . ."), but perhaps this is more because they have perceived a lack of direction on my part than because they have felt a compelling desire for a professional heir. And that's something they won't find in my younger brother, either, for his interests run more to drama and English than to algebra and biology.

It must be acknowledged that I have always been somewhat mystified by the happiness that my parents' chosen profession has brought them. Actually, "happiness" may be the wrong word—perhaps satisfaction would be better. Or possibly it's just a simple love of the FRQ protein that they study. I really don't know. Was it because I didn't actually see them at work—I heard only the arguments about graduate students, saw only the stress when grant-renewal time rolled around—that my career direction changed?

Contrarian way: What if my parents' occupational choices really have had everything to do, in a contrarian way, with mine? How many children, I wonder, rather than taking after their parents, are propelled in the opposite direction? And what catalyst is the cause? I was not tragically neglected as a child, abandoned for the highs of scientific discovery. Nor was I subjected to endless lectures about their work—say, the fascinating biological clock of honey mushrooms. My only conclusion is that, subconsciously, I must at some point have equated a career in science with stress, overwork, and paper shuffling.

I also wonder where my predisposition to the sciences might have taken me, given my early aspirations. Might I, like my father before me, have been inspired by biology and ended up in genetics? Perhaps, a few summers from now, I would have found myself analyzing dolphin blubber samples on a marine expedition rather than seeking the meaning of a da Vinci painting on a foreign study trip to Florence. People always tell me that I am so much like my parents; I wonder, had things been different, just how true that might have been. ■