June 27, 2010

Wondering How You Stack Up Intellectually?

By Rachel Toor

There are days when I wish I had a job driving for UPS. The idea of being responsible for discrete tasks where you either deliver or you don't is appealing, given the level of uncertainty that surrounds academic work.

How do you know, really, if a piece of scholarly work is any good? How do you measure up? Whose opinion can you trust? How much success can you attribute to luck or good timing?

A long time ago, I believed scientists had it easier than other academics on this front. With the naïve breeziness of an angsty humanist, I thought: The experiment either works or it doesn't. Then I watched a friend in the final throes of getting his Ph.D. in physics. A standout in his department, he was—and still is—one of the smartest, most reasonable people I've ever known. But when he was about three weeks from finishing his dissertation, he decided to quit. He had never given up on anything. He had always worked hard and had always been successful. But graduate school had beaten him down.

As a scientist, he was accustomed to having his ideas knocked around. But graduate school can be demoralizing. You're with a cohort that is just as serious, smart, and hard-working as you are. It's difficult to be a star. You are asked to master information, to consume the best that has been thought and said in your field—all while struggling to be inducted into a trade guild with unspoken rules and rituals, arcane language, and secret handshakes.

And you're constantly being told that your work is not good enough. You want to be with people—professors and peers—who will push you to think harder. Part of the excitement of learning is finding out how much you don't know, even if the discovery is accompanied by a stinging "ouch." Graduate school can instill insecurity in the sturdiest of egos.

His work, he said, stunk. His adviser had suggested his own dissertation research as the source of a topic for my friend. Not knowing what else to do, he had agreed. But ultimately, it wasn't
interesting. It was, he said, with three weeks to go, meaningless and stupid.

Worse, after his adviser got tenure, he stopped paying attention to his students. My friend, by nature reticent and respectful, complained that he had to beg the guy to talk to him. There was, therefore, no one to help him think through what he was doing, to see how it fit into a larger picture, and to remind him that the dissertation was the end of a process, not an end in itself.

He had an uncharacteristic meltdown.

So I drove him three hours to the beach, let him talk, and asked a few questions. If you dropped out, what would you do? How do you know your work is terrible? Why not let your committee tell you that? It was their job to teach you—why not let them take responsibility for showing you how you've failed?

I took my friend's concerns seriously—even though I knew they were nutty—and let him wallow. Considering quitting seemed to be liberating for him; he'd never tanked at anything in his life.

A few days later, he decided he would finish. A few weeks later, he won the biggest prize in his department. After a dozen years, he was running the research arm of a large high-tech company. He still has never had a major professional failure. But he—like everyone else—has had moments of self-doubt.

We are all capable of feeling, at times, like impostors, promoted to our level of incompetence. Anyone who doesn't cop to that is a big fat liar. Or a deluded narcissist.

In some jobs, there are objective, quantitative measures of achievement: How many ball bearings have you produced? How big a pile of cash do you have at the end of the fiscal year? In the arts and sciences, it's more complicated: How many great painters languish without ever being "discovered"? How do master carpenters know their work is really masterful?

In academe, the big (unspoken) questions are: How smart are you? How fresh are your ideas? How interesting is your thinking? Those are not easily measurable values.

It's easy to confuse professional success with quality. Having been a part of the publishing process at two excellent scholarly presses, I know that a fancy imprint, while one indicator of worth, doesn't tell you everything. Sometimes books get pushed through because of personal connections and a stacked deck of readers' reports. Sometimes a project is approved but the topic ends up being more
interesting than the book. Sometimes, I hate to tell you, publishers make mistakes. How do you know if the decision to print your book was a mistake?

A colleague at a state university press who had built an exquisite list of authors liked to taunt me at conferences. "Rachel," he'd say, "you'll never know how good you are until you come out to the sticks. You don't know if people want you as their editor or if they just want that big old Oxford imprint." The unassailability of the challenge propelled me to want to prove myself in the sticks.

Many people cover up fear with a thick layer of bravado. One of the skills I developed in college—where, like everyone, I panicked about not being smart enough—was how to disparage books I hadn't read.

Eventually, most of us learn to embrace our ignorance for the sake of acquiring knowledge; we become more adept at accepting criticism. What I found, as an editor, is that the grace with which writers accept a critique is often in direct proportion to their intellectual security. The best authors were the easiest to edit, appreciative of comments that made their work stronger. Those whose books were not so good would throw a hissy fit if you pointed out a misused semicolon.

I remember a water-cooler conversation at Oxford University Press a long time ago about a talented author who was particularly insecure. We wondered: Is there anyone who is totally intellectually secure?

"Yes," said a colleague. "I know someone." He named a famous editor. That guy, he said, never doubts himself. My colleague wandered back to my office a couple of hours later. He remembered hearing from a friend who had found a trivial technical error in something the famous editor had proofed and wrote a friendly little note pointing it out. The editor sent back a three-page jeremiad.

I think often about professorial Mr. Ramsay from Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. His, she writes, was "a splendid mind. For if thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order, then his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say, the letter Q. He reached Q. Very few people in the whole of England ever reach Q."

But the question that plagues Mr. Ramsay: What if he never gets to
Most of us wonder how we stack up intellectually—not only against others, but on some grand and objective scale. Graduate students can feel that most urgently, where each day they must make the decision to continue on a path that is difficult and frustrating. They learn to puff themselves up by attacking others; it’s easier to deploy a snarky put-down than to do the hard work of constructive criticism. But, as we learn on the playground, most bullies are just plain terrified. Arrogance is the conjoined twin of insecurity.

For some, glittering prizes, dazzling reviews, and bravos from colleagues may never be enough to quell self-doubt. What you can hope for is to understand what you are good at and be able to admit your faults instead of scrambling to cover them up.

Rachel Toor is an assistant professor of creative writing at Eastern Washington University, in Spokane. Her Web site is www.racheltoor.com. She welcomes comments and questions directed to careers@chronicle.com.