What makes a good PhD student? This is an intriguing question, and one that was addressed recently in a short article in Naturejobs (see Nature 441, 252; 2006). Georgia Chenevix-Trench, a research fellow at the Queensland Institute of Medical Research in Australia, wrote the piece and discussed ways in which PhD students can make the most of their studies. The article has since become one of the most popular ever to be published on our website. As well as enjoying a large readership, the piece has sparked an unprecedented amount of feedback, with a number of postdocs adding their voices to the debate on how to make science more enjoyable. Getting to know your colleagues as people, not just as scientists, is a good place to start, they write. They add that savouring your surroundings beyond the lab makes the experience that much more enjoyable.

These comments took me back to a turning point in my own graduate work. I was walking beside Lake Mendota at the height of a Wisconsin winter, wrapped up warm to ward off the freezing temperature. It was too cold to focus on anything except putting one foot in front of another, and keeping my nostrils — the only part of my body exposed to the elements — from icing up. I recall stopping to look around me and noticing that the sky was azure, the air crystalline. All thoughts of teaching duties, research problems and writing jobs disappeared in puffs of frozen air filtered through the burgundy wool scarf I had wrapped round my face. I was completely in the moment — and totally outside my responsibilities. It was then that I saw with absolute clarity how to resolve my research problems: the way best way to analyse my data and how to present them visually.

That moment was, for me, the epitome of what I believe the goal of all scientists should be: a synthesis of efficacy and enjoyment. Taking time to savour your surroundings — whether that means colleagues, friends, art, architecture or nature — can help nurture you, whatever stage you are at with your career. And it can make your work worth doing.

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