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## The accidental science writer

When I returned to my graduate-school stomping grounds at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, last month, I was reminded of what I now recognize was a critical career juncture. University officials and biotech executives asked me about my connections to the Badger State — and how I reached my present position.

My stock answer for such questions always begins: “I got hit by a nun.” While eking out an existence at a small Wisconsin daily newspaper in the late 1980s, my career was in danger of stalling. Newspapers in the United States were merging and down-sizing, and no one seemed to be hiring. A mentor from my undergraduate days suggested graduate school and, although I didn’t exactly relish taking a few more years out of my working life, I applied.

But my decision to attend was made for me when, on the way to my normal reporting duties, a nun smashed into the rear of my car as I was signalling to turn into the county courthouse. The impact hurled me and my car into the other lane of traffic, where I got smacked again, writing off the vehicle.

A few weeks after I walked away from the accident, I was accepted into the University of Wisconsin’s mass-communication programme. A small cheque from the insurance company financed my move, and a part-time job as a teaching assistant provided some income. As well as experience in front of a class, my spell at university allowed me to learn about biomedical research, ethics and history; write about intellectual property and technology transfer; and publish my own research on interactive health communication.

All of those experiences gave me skills and knowledge that at the time I never thought I’d use again, but which I now draw on nearly every day. And the circumstances taught me to take advantage of opportunity — even when it hits you, unawares, from behind.

**Paul Smaglik**  
Naturejobs editor



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