GRADUATE JOURNAL

The science of religion

Last night, my wife took me to a gospel concert commemorating the 9/11 World Trade Center tragedy. I hadn't been to church in a while, and the atmosphere moved me — almost to tears. As we left, I wondered why I had been so affected. Then I realized that it was the first time in a while that I had been in a room of people who held the same beliefs as I did. You see, I was raised as a Christian in an African-Methodist Episcopal church. I have yet to meet someone in a laboratory with the same religious background.

Most of the folks I've known in science are atheists or agnostics, so I've always been in the minority. As we live in a time of extremism, I am careful not to talk about my faith in the lab for fear of being lumped in with fundamentalists. However, my time as the lone 'believer' has made me wonder, "Is science hostile to religion?".

Religion and science are, by nature, antithetical ideals — one requiring proof, the other, faith. So it makes sense that people are often at odds over them. I still wonder, though, if my belief will work against me on the scientific career track. Will some people think I am not an objective or serious scientist because of my beliefs? If so, amen (so be it)! I will let my data speak for me, and hope that everything else will fall into place. n

Tshaka Cunningham is a fifth-year graduate student at Rockefeller University in New York.

NUTS & BOLTS

Totally stumped?

With Deb Koen
Careers consultant

The zinger, the poser … It's that dreaded question that seems to come out of left field in an interview. It's one thing to present your achievements, but the ultimate challenge comes in dealing with a question that you have no good answer to or would rather not have been asked. To avoid a 'rabbit in the headlights' response, anticipate potential stumpers and keep cool when they present themselves.

Everyone has their own most dreaded questions, but stumpers tend to fall into one of two categories: either totally open-ended or probing a sensitive area. Open-ended questions leave you wondering where you might possibly begin. Enquiries such as "Tell me about yourself," and "Why should we hire you?" are perfect examples. But these questions also present the perfect invitation to shine.

Before heading to an interview, settle on three key points you want to make. Then respond to open-ended questions with success stories to highlight your key messages.

For those questions to which it seems there is no good answer, remember that your approach to the question is as important as the specific content of your response. "Why did you lose your last job?" may be a sensitive subject. But preparing an honest yet concise and positive explanation can help. And illegal questions, such as "Are you married?" or "How old are you anyway?" are best met with a curious and non-defensive question in reply, such as "Why do you ask?". This lets the interviewer put underlying concerns on the table.

Anticipating diffficult questions allows you to plan your responses. Once in the interview, remember that impressions are formed more by tone and non-verbal cues than by specific words. Even if you need a little time to respond, an upbeat tone and open body language will show your interest and enthusiasm.

Use the closing moments and a friendly follow-up letter to express your interest and reaffirm important considerations. Regardless of the difficulty of the question, the approach you take in the preparation, delivery and follow-up will let you shine throughout the process. n

Deb Koen is vice-president of Career Development Services and a columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*'s CareerJournal.com.

MOVERS

Nouria Hernandez and Winship Herr, professors, Center for Integrative Genomics, University of Lausanne, Switzerland

If you are a couple who both work in scientific research, you probably know how hard it is to find jobs in proximity as your careers progress, and almost impossible to find such a situation where you have family roots. But Nouria Hernandez and Winship Herr have beaten the odds.

The biologists, who met at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory (CSHL) in New York, last month moved to a new centre in Switzerland, where Hernandez is a citizen and Herr lived as a child.

CSHL helped to set them on their path, but they agree that they had reached a point where a move was necessary. CSHL is geared towards helping scientists start a career. "It's not the kind of place you retire," Hernandez says. "You're always imagining your exit strategy," agrees Herr.

The couple stayed there longer than most because they found CSHL an exciting place to do science, and because Herr got involved with developing, then running, the Watson School of Biological Sciences, CSHL's graduate school.

Realizing that Lausanne would help them focus on their family as well as their science required a certain amount of introspection. Herr recommends that all scientists apply that to their career trajectory.

Students and postdocs should always be thinking about where they want to be in five years' time, Herr says. Mid-career scientists need to be equally forward-looking. Scientists need to realize that opportunities arise when things go well experimentally and when good publications come their way — but such moments aren't always guaranteed.

Both emphasize the importance of good mentors. Herr also notes the importance of factors beyond science in making a career decision. He gets recharged by doing science "in beautiful places". At Lausanne, he can stroll along Lake Geneva or hike in the Alps. And when he or Hernandez hit a snag, they can find each other on the same floor and commiserate, before returning to their respective labs. n

CV

Nouria Hernandez
1987–2004: Professor, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, New York
1983–86: Postdoc, Yale University, Connecticut
1983: PhD, German Cancer Research Center and University of Heidelberg

Winship Herr
1983–2004: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory (postdoc to dean of the Watson School of Biological Sciences)
1982: Postdoc, Medical Research Council, Cambridge, UK
1982: PhD, Harvard University, Massachusetts