

Letters to my younger self: Female scientists share their wisdom

Accomplished female scientists at Novartis share their wisdom born from difficult moments in life.

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If you could talk to your younger self, what would you say? What wisdom do you have now that you wish you had then? These are exactly the questions asked of female Novartis scientists through Letters to My Younger Self – Women in Science.

Launched by Susan DiClemente, Director of Communications at the Novartis Institutes for BioMedical Research (NIBR), the program takes inspiration from Ellyn Spragins' "[What I Know Now: Letters To My Younger Self](#)," a collection of letters from famous women sharing wisdom gathered over the years.

So what would female Novartis scientists tell their younger selves? What can women in science learn from the triumphs and tribulations of the scientists behind our walls? Here is what five women had to say.

Renee's story

Renee Bergeron, Executive Director of Preclinical Safety Assessment at Novartis, faced a dilemma that many women can relate to: She wanted it all, but wasn't sure she could have it. So she chose to focus on her career, not believing that marriage or children were a possibility until she knew she was headed in the right direction. It wasn't until she was 38 that everything began to fall into place. Renee found her balance and she and her husband decided to start the adoption process. After eight months of waiting, they welcomed their adopted daughter into their family.

Now in her 40s, Renee is writing to herself on her first day back in the office following the adoption of her first daughter:

Dear Renee,

You can't have it all be a super-mommy and a super-career person. I know it sounds harsh, especially now, when you've just come back to work and you're wrestling the urge to cry every time you think about your daughter. You held your daughter, literally, 20 hours a day except during that heart-wrenching trip to Japan. Small wonder that the empty hole where she used to be makes you feel gutted.

Now, by going back to work, you've sentenced yourself to an always-guilty feeling. You'll never feel you're doing enough, at work or at home.

Still, Renee, you're doing the right thing. Why? Because inside you know it's best for her and for you. If you stayed at home much longer, your emotional tsunami might have overtaken everything. You could have become one of those mothers that suffocate their kids with their love. You really don't want that for her.

And you? Call it blessed hard luck to have two such magnificent compulsions in your life: your daughter and your career. You waited a long time to find work that you love and that challenges you to exercise every part of your potential. Now you have it, and by acknowledging it with this decision you are – in some way – ensuring

that your daughter will have the choices that you've had.

Right now, and for the next few years, it's the hardest that it's going to be. Leaving her, wondering if she needs something from you. The angst continues.

But once she and her future sibling are in school, happy, that anguish will lose its sharp edge. As they need you less, you'll be so glad to have engrossing, fulfilling work. You'll finally find time to do something for yourself.

All of that is more than enough. But there's something more, too: a gift hidden inside this decision that you won't see for another 20 years or so. You'll have children that grew up with a mother whose talents and love were fully engaged. That's indelible.

I applaud you,

Renee

Amber's story

"You just have to do it." Amber Cai, Head of the NIBR Shanghai Operations in China, routinely gave herself this order during key moments of career stress, including when she was asked to spearhead a new initiative to set up NIBR offices and labs in China. This was the first time that a big multinational pharmaceutical company had invested significantly in an R&D center in China, so she and her team had to deliver results while learning on the fly. The pressure was on.

Her daughter was still quite young (only 3) during the planning phase. And soon after Amber moved to China, she became pregnant with her second child.

Amber has now been in China since 2008. Here, she writes to her younger self when she first arrived in the country:

Dear Amber,

You may have thought that playing such a role in the China initiative at Novartis was tough – being so highly visible and pulling so many moving pieces together to get it to the finish line. But you are realizing that test was only the start of a series of high-intensity, stressful situations.

Now the challenges are huge, no matter which way you turn. You are alone in China, essentially a single parent. And though you grew up in this country, it is all so very different now after being away from it for so many years. Nothing comes naturally. Finding a home, doctors, and the right school for your daughter ... every piece of ordinary life requires effort. And your job is demanding. You are essentially running a startup, getting the new company registered, dealing with the government permits, finding and negotiating for the office and laboratory facility, hiring the first group of local employees, and so much more.

You've made your choice, and I know you just couldn't resist this great opportunity. However, before you go too much further in this new life, I want to ask you to do something that will seem impossible: Slow down and try to actually enjoy the journey rather than rushing through your to-do list and trying to meet one deadline after another. This will help you become more calm and less emotionally stressed, especially when encountering difficulties or hurdles. It is easier said than done, but try not to let those bad days get you down too much.

Right now, to you everything is a priority requiring perfection, whether it is being a mother, launching this new

business, or being a boss. But try to take all of your challenges and uncertainties with more tranquility. How? Prioritize. I'm not suggesting that you list your tasks in order of importance. No, do something much more against your nature. Prioritize by letting go.

Not every task needs to be pushed to perfection. First of all, so many things that you want to make happen are not under your control. It actually will be better if you focus your energy on a few of the more critical pieces of your life. The goal is to best utilize your skills and energy to do the most important things.

To do this properly, you must ask yourself what you want to get out of life. Stop thinking, "I just have to do it," about every single responsibility in your life and start saying, "This is most important and what I can do best."

With insight,

Amber

Ann's story

At age 38, Ann Taylor, Global Head of the Program Office at NIBR, was trying to start a family with her husband. At the same time, she was offered a new job in Chicago. So what should she do? Did she have to choose between her family and her career?

Here Ann, now in her 50s, writes to herself at a younger age with some compelling advice on the age-old push and pull of women in the workplace:

Dear Ann,

This job sounds really fun. Fun, different, and a little thrilling. Much of what you've imagined for yourself, especially the part about having a big impact on the world, seems possible with this next step. Everything inside has been urging you to accept the offer.

But now, at the last minute, you feel yourself braking hard. What about this baby you hope to have? Is this the kind of job, requiring days of being away from home, that you want as a new mother?

It's confusing to sort out because you don't truly know when a child will come into your life. It could take a while. Do you plow ahead with life as it is now – and accommodate the demands of becoming a mother when it actually happens? Or do you forgo this wonderful opportunity, trusting that you will be a mother very soon? Will you regret not grabbing such a great job?

I know it feels like a puzzle to you, but at some point if this is what you want to do, to be a parent, you do need to decide to make some sacrifices. And though this seems like a big one, your definition of sacrifice will change. Deciding against this job won't seem such an extreme loss once you're a parent.

The big lesson you'll take away from this sacrifice? You will have many more chances to make a difference in the world. As crucial as this opportunity seems, understand that you can almost always create another chance for yourself. And that's no accident. You deliberately chose medicine because you knew it could provide a lot of different career paths and allow you to take care of yourself. Now, trust that more prospects will come your way.

I'd also like to save you from a common misperception about motherhood. This won't be the first time you feel unclear about the best choice in the push and pull between parenthood and work. But knowing the best path is not innate.

People sometimes imply that you're born with this unerring instinct, that you should know intuitively what to do. But you won't – and most parents don't. Don't worry if those instincts are mute. You'll figure it out, situation by situation. Often it's just a matter of being a little bit fearless and making your best guess about how to proceed.

Ann

Jennifer's story

In 2001, Jennifer Leeds – Head of Antibacterial Discovery at NIBR – hoped her career in microbiology would lead to a faculty position in Boston. But instead, it led her to a biotechnology company in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Jennifer asked herself if she had failed. And when in 2010 she learned that the company was moving her group to California, Jennifer stood at a crossroads between her personal life and her career. She wondered more than ever if she had made the right choices.

Jennifer, now in her 40s, writes to herself at the career crossroads she reached several years ago:

Dear Jennifer,

When are you going to stop telling yourself, "This is just an interim position"? You are still – nine years into your career – measuring your success using an academic yardstick.

I'll just say it bluntly: You were brainwashed. Not deliberately, of course. But all of your advisors and mentors coached you to want and strive for academic positions so that you could pursue "true" science. The career focus for talented scientists from top schools and postdoctoral programs was so heavily geared toward academics that everyone believed all other career options were a "fallback" – a lesser choice.

That idea settled so heavily into your brain that you're literally unable to consider yourself successful if you don't ultimately end up in academia. The irony? You've been trained to use your powers of observation. Yet you aren't using them on the evidence before you. You've published dozens of journal articles. You've invented a new experimental therapeutic. Your name is on three patent applications.

Jennifer, those are all signs of great accomplishment.

Take this job in California. It will help you in two key ways. You'll start to understand the extraordinary merit of the work you and your colleagues do. You'll see that success comes in many forms and that you are worthy of it.

Also, much to your surprise, you'll learn that your greatest contribution in the years ahead won't be only as a scientist. It will be as a leader. What got you here – your technical skill – won't get you there. In fact, your technical skill alone could never accomplish the scope of what true leadership in the commercial world can bring about.

Apologizing no more,

Jennifer

Nirmala's story

N.R. Nirmala, Director at Novartis and Head of the Biomarker Analysis and Informatics Unit in the Biomarker Development Department, transitioned from academics to commercial research, which served her well – she has four patents under her belt. But success in the lab doesn't make you immune to corporate politics and the

“ins and outs” of learning to work through challenging situations. So when Nirmala’s department faced internal strain, she had to find a way to cope within an entirely new environment.

Nirmala, now in her 50s, is writing to herself at this juncture, when she was in her 30s:

Dear Nirmala,

Good for you. You have chosen the corporate world because you know that you don’t want to be stuck in a lab at 11:00 at night. You want better balance between work and your personal life. You have also recognized an unexpected bonus even in the early days of working at Novartis. You have chosen a career path where you are in an incredibly scientifically diverse environment – learning something new, relevant and important to your work almost daily.

You’re also extremely eager for more responsibility. It’s like a fire in your belly. And I’m here to tell you that you’ll get it. But there are a few things that you could be doing better.

Look at what’s happening at work right now. In this turf battle, you’ve taken sides, even if you are not aware of having done so. You have the feeling that the person vying for your group is too difficult to get along with – that your group should not move under someone like him. But pay attention: There’s a larger lesson here, about conflict at work. When two people disagree, instead of focusing on who is right, or which argument is correct, concentrate on the ultimate goal of the project.

In time you’ll learn not to take sides. Instead you’ll bring people who disagree together to speak, air their differences, and come up with a solution that helps the project.

In academia, where you spent so much of your young adult life, compromise and collaboration are viewed as weaknesses. In industry, they are essential strengths. In fact, the sooner you recognize key disparities between these two environments, the faster you will grow.

Remember three important things:

- 1. Trying to be independent and showing how important you are to a project – which led to advancement in academia – will actually impede progress within a company.*
- 2. Being competitive about your technology will hurt your project. No technology can answer all questions.*
- 3. In a multidisciplinary environment, you have a responsibility to harness your discipline for the good of the project – not to conduct the fanciest, most impressive experiment. It’s your job to simultaneously learn from and teach the chemists, biologists, physicians and other team members to benefit the project at hand.*

All of this, and more, you’ll master, while continuing to learn from others. Being open and genuinely sharing what you have might make you feel nervous at first, but it will ultimately make you stronger.

You cannot read the future from where you are right now, but I can let you in on a secret: –yYou will learn to reveal yourself as time goes on, a quality that will help you be very successful in all the collaborative projects that you do.

Oh, there’s just one more thing. I wish you wouldn’t eat quite so many sweets...It makes a lot of work for me!

With confidence in you,

Nirmala

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