Finding Our Way
Dear Labby,
We receive mentoring of all kinds, but many of my fellow students and I find it granular: helpful but lacking in broader sweep. Senior members of our department recount tales of their mentors conveying much deeper lessons. You deal each month with a specific query or issue, but many of us are wondering whether you have broader advice, particularly because we in my generation are so worried about our futures in science.

—Hopeful

Dear Hopeful,
You are kind, but Labby is neither the Oracle of Delphi nor a definitive authority. Labby tries in these columns to apply three fundamental principles when offering advice:

The first principle is that we all need help. (Labby learned this very late, having been an only child. Such children get used to fending for themselves.) The solitary geniuses like Newton and Einstein (who neither got nor needed help) are rare exceptions. Other students and prospective scientists cannot reach their full potential without assistance.

The second principle is that the majority of aspiring scientists are in doubt of themselves. Do not believe the myth that most successful scientists were Westinghouse Science Talent Search winners or had vast collections of insects or a chemistry lab in the cellar where they experimented with pyrotechnics. A childhood fascination with science is indeed a predictor of a future career, but if you didn’t have that experience you are not a mutant—you are the wild type.

The third principle is that there is nothing more powerful in science than an open mind. In a scientist’s formative years this open-mindedness means being receptive to new ways of thinking handed down by mentors or proffered by peers. Later, it is a powerful mindset for acute observation and an unwillingness to assume that everything has been “settled.”

Labby tries to bring these three fundamental principles forward in responding to any particular query, while also addressing the specific circumstances at hand. But bear in mind that “authorities” should always be viewed with skepticism. Consider the Oracle of Delphi, a paragon of astute advice in antiquity. It is likely that she was no Solomon-like source of wisdom but rather a rotating series of young women each of whom experienced a hallucigenic state induced by inhalation of ethylene vapor from a geothermal vent at the site.

Labby does strive to be your truthful friend, but seeking advice from multiple sources is always best.

—Labby

Got Questions?
Labby has answers. ASCB’s popular columnist will select career-related questions for publication and thoughtful response in the ASCB Newsletter. Confidentiality guaranteed if requested. Write us at labby@ascb.org.