

By Anurag Srivastava

# A lesson from Bollywood

**M**y Ph.D. adviser called me into his office, saying I needn't bring my notebook. Puzzled, I followed him and sat down. We'd met for 2 hours the day before to finalize our project plan for the coming months, and it wasn't clear what more we had to discuss. He started by saying, "Anurag, this conversation isn't going to be easy," instantly sending my mind into a flurry of thoughts about what was to follow. After 15 minutes of listing positive things about my academic capabilities, he looked me in the eye and said, "You are fired from the lab." I stared back, blinking in disbelief. "Is he joking?" I wondered. "How is this possible?"

I had moved to Israel from my native India the year before, excited to experience a new culture and pursue a Ph.D. I'd already completed a master's degree in the Netherlands, and at first things went well in my new lab: I got along with my Ph.D. adviser, and my experiments progressed as planned. Then, 3 months before I was fired, I ran into some problems. I made a few mistakes in the lab that slowed my research, but I wasn't aware that my adviser noticed them, and he never spoke to me about any concerns.

That's why I was caught off guard in his office that day. I'm still not sure why he fired me, but I suspect it was because of those mistakes. He wasn't confident that I could complete my research in the time frame we'd planned.

The first few days after my dismissal were especially difficult. I spent hours staring at my computer screen, unable to get anything done. One day all I could do was sit on a beach, crying as I looked out across the Mediterranean Sea and wondered what I should do.

My adviser gave me 2 months to wrap up my work. I tried to change his mind with promising results, but he remained resolute. I could not break the news to my family in India, as the fear of disappointing them overwhelmed me. I soon spiraled into a state of depression and anxiety. Meanwhile, the date for me to leave the country was drawing near, as my visa required me to be enrolled as a student. I was lonely and without hope.

I started to wonder whether my experience was unique. Poking around on the internet, I was relieved to discover that many Ph.D. students never finish their studies for various reasons, one of which is a broken relationship with their adviser. At least I wasn't alone.

Around that time, I watched *Dasvidaniya*, a Bollywood movie that's about a man who is told that he has 3 months



**"When life gives you lemons,  
make lemonade."**

to live. He responds by reframing his perspective on life and setting out to make the most of his remaining months. Even though it is a common saying, one line from the movie stuck out to me: "When life gives you lemons, make lemonade." What kind of "lemonade" could I make out of my current situation?

My desire to complete a Ph.D. was never in doubt; it was my confidence that had taken a hit after my dismissal. After much reflection, I told myself that one failed attempt was not the end of the world, and that I needed to give it another try. I reminded myself that even if I am not the most skilled researcher in the lab, I am a good teacher and I care passionately about mentoring students. My goal is to go back to India to work as a professor, a job I think I would excel at.

With renewed confidence, I emailed prospective advisers and applied to other programs. My previous adviser had not yet secured tenure; this time, I sent my applications to more senior, tenured professors. I thought they would have more experience working with international students and would be more patient as I developed my research abilities. Within 2 months of that fateful conversation in my adviser's office, I landed an offer from a Ph.D. program in Italy. I accepted it and relocated to Europe, happy that my goal of completing a Ph.D. was alive once again.

I've faced other challenges during my current Ph.D. program, but my adviser has been supportive, and I've felt comfortable going to him for help and guidance. I'm thankful that I didn't give up on my dream and that I found another professor willing to take me on. So, if you find yourself in a similar situation and life gives you lemons, ask yourself: "How can I make lemonade?" ■

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