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Inside your search for understanding

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From an outsider's perspective, the invitation to write for this journal is an unexpected opportunity, and then a privilege, intensified by the quality of the papers, the commitment and professionalism of the authors, and the breadth of the research. But I still find myself wondering - what's the point? Who reads these reports? Do you ever wonder what practical difference your research makes to the quality of anybody's life? Let's revisit those questions. Perhaps they missed a point.

If you can bear the commercial squalor, we could look at your work from an employer's perspective. Most employers are notoriously disinterested in undergraduate research material, fairly interested in your research skills but extremely interested in your research attitude. Employers can train skills into their workforce, but they have to resort to recruiting attitude. Peering into what we might expect to be an unappealing landscape, we can start to identify this unknown employer. Do we mean a business paying a salary in compensation for robbing your working day of personal meaning? Or is the employer you, employing your attitudes and skills in the service of your values, your motivations, your friends, your choice of profession and workplace, your research colleagues, your Sunday league team and your family? This journal is shocking evidence (I was more than surprised) of a vibrant research community growing open-minded enquiry - into attitudes, into habits and into identities. Nice! How far are you going to roll out these attitudes, habits and identities beyond the familiar world of your higher education?

How could a scientist not love the unfamiliar? I became a science outsider from the inside, an ideal journey for looking back and loving science. I didn't realise at the end of my Plymouth science degree how deeply I expected the unknown to become knowable, until I started a research degree with engineers who expected the undone to become do-able and then done; on schedule, to specification and within budget. For them, time with the unknown was time with the undone, so they lived with a surplus of unknowns reaching out from behind ingeniously crafted mathematics and approximations, begging to be known. Innovative businesses also love scientists and their dogged search for understanding - because, in the words of pioneering statistician John Tukey "An approximate answer to the right problem is worth a good deal more than an exact answer to an approximate problem".

But this afternoon I found myself some way down the track from appreciating your scientific writing. Those engineers knocked that language right out of me in the first research supervision meeting. Really. It took just one meeting. Clarity was the aim of their communication and the goal of their enquiry was advantage not perfection. So what was I achieving in my scientific writing and what are you achieving in yours? Are you learning

the habits of a patient and precisely documented search for truth, gently teasing back the boundaries of knowledge, becoming the timeless virtue of detached enquiry, Thích Nhất Hạnh's non-attachment to views? Glancing in again from the outside, I catch myself feeling that scientific language is a mean-spirited code excluding me from your cosy self-indulgent club - until my jealousy melts into admiration as I catch sight again of your method, your discipline, your diligence and your precision, and receive your carefully crafted invitation to join with your open-minded, open-hearted search for truth.

So, who are you? What will you become?

Glen works for the University's Career Gateway. If you would like to hear yourself think through your as-yet-unknown graduate life, you can book an impartial, confidential meeting with one of the advisers by calling in to the Careers Gateway, Ground Floor Roland Levinsky Building or ringing 01752 587456 just after 8.45am on the day when you want to meet.