

Discussion questions for book groups on Breaking Through the Spiral Ceiling

1. What was Laura's strategy when things went wrong and she met rejection? Have you ever used this strategy yourself? Did it work well or do you think there are better ways to handle this type of problem?

2. Laura entered molecular biology before there were laws against some kinds of treatment of women. It wasn't illegal to ask if a woman planned to marry and have kids, to tell a woman that she was a risk not to produce as much work as a man because she'd take off to care for sick kids at home, or to offer a man and a woman with the same job different salaries and benefits because "a man has to take care of his family." Have you heard about women running into barriers recently that should have been removed by Title IX and the Civil Rights Act? How do women deal with borderline illegal treatment today?

3. Professional women used to remain single in the early days of women's breaking into male-dominated fields. Laura was among the earliest women to enter her field, but she didn't choose to do that. When she made that choice, do you think it affected the kind of career open to her? What other careers could have had the same risks for women (Magazine and Newspaper Publishing? Athletics? Academia in general? Airplane piloting? Business management?)

4. The highest echelon of women in science work in research centers or become professors at top research universities, while Laura pursued her career in liberal arts colleges. Do you think she could have made a discovery as important as those made in research universities in such a setting?

5. Laura says she often thought of her students almost as if they were her children. In the chapter about the two students who died, in what ways do you think she does or does not sound like a mother? Why was the subject of death so difficult for her?

6. In a panel organized by students, she talks about how such panels always pushed her guilt buttons and made her cry. Why do working mothers have so much guilt? Is it inevitable, or do you think she made it harder than she had to by the choices she made?

7. In helping to found the biology council of Council on Undergraduate Research, Laura stepped onto a national stage. Why didn't she see that coming? What effects did it have on her later life? Do you think she would have been as active in CUR if she had known what would happen later?

8. Laura and Chris Craney and colleagues started up the TOPS program, Teachers + Occidental Program in Science, to deliver equipment and supplies for state-of-the-art science experiments to teachers in the LA area high schools who had trained to use them the summer before. Why did she take time from her teaching, research, and family responsibilities to do this project? What did she gain from it?

9. Laura applied to become Vice President and Dean of the College at Pomona College and was surprised to be offered the position. Why do you think she was considered qualified and why was she surprised by the offer? Is it typical of women to believe they are about to be found out, that they don't really have what it takes to do big jobs? How do they deal with that problem of self-confidence?

10. After Laura became an administrator, how did her life change? What did she decide she missed when she was stopped by breast cancer? Do you feel she "let women down" when she stepped down from her position? Should she have continued and become a college president? In stepping down, did she waste the investment in training her in college administration?

11. Laura was in science, and liked doing laboratory work with her students. What aspect of science has she found least satisfying over the course of her career? Do you think running the Nature Women in Science blog probably helps her with this issue? Why or why not? Do you think recognition, networking, and collegiality for women are problems in other fields than science?

12. As Laura enters phased retirement, she is working on a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing. She is about to publish a dual biography of women in science, two women who balanced family and career from positions at research universities and still achieved high success in science. She claims biographies can fill the vacuum of role models like this for women considering careers. Do you think biographies have the power to affect people's decisions? Do they work as well as real contact with role models? Why or why not?

13. What biographies or memoirs did you read when you were young? Did you search for ones in careers you really were considering? Did any of them influence your choices later on? Why or why not?

14. Laura considers it sad that so many young American girls today say their inspiration is Marie Curie. Isn't Curie admirable? Why do you think Laura believes this is a sad choice?