Why get a Ph.D.?

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As a doctoral student some days I wake up and think: “this was a really, really, bad idea.” Other days the feeling is more like: “this is awesome, I am so glad to be doing this.” The point being that the experience of pursuing a Ph.D. can in some ways be described as a rollercoaster of emotions where you easily and rapidly can go from feeling like a complete impostor, who is going to be discovered any minute, to feeling like you are on the verge of achieving something great. Furthermore, one may also wonder what is the purpose of doing all this; why subject one’s self to a lot of work and sacrifice for very little fortune and almost certainly no fame. Why not just go and get an industry job and get paid a tremendous amount of money and live a comfortable life, away from exams, homework, experiments, and papers?

The answer is not easy to present, and I would suggest that it could be very personal in nature. Perhaps we love school too much to ever leave. Perhaps we cannot fathom a world where science is not at the center of everything. Maybe we want to teach at a university or work at a research lab. Whatever the reason one thing is certain, the level of commitment is enormous. One must be willing to dedicate heart and soul to the pursuit of that one very small sliver of the knowledge pie that will be significant enough to become one’s dissertation. One must be determined to do whatever it takes to learn as much as possible about something, to the point where very few people in the world know more about it than we do… yes, that includes knowing more about it than our advisor does.

So is it all about the all-niters, midterms, or eating ramen noodles to make ends meet? Of course not, pursuing a Ph.D. can be a great and fulfilling experience. Very few jobs require you to create something original, make sure it works, and then tell the world about it. You get to create knowledge, do science, and learn new things! I would argue that very few intellectual experiences compare to the challenges of a Ph.D. student as he or she works through the quest that is going to lead to that much-coveted diploma. There are also the additional benefits that come from being a college student, such as football games, sleeping in, and world-class libraries.

Of course, not all can be fun and games. There are those sleepless nights when we are too busy, too worried, or too wired to let Morpheus take us into his realm. There are those moments when we realize that there is something we really want but that we just can’t afford it and that it will be quite a while before we can. And let’s not forget those very sad moments when we don’t get an A on some assignment or when one of our papers gets rejected. We feel horrible and lost. Nevertheless, we pick ourselves up and keep going because failure is not an option. Or maybe it is, but if we expect to succeed we just cannot think that way.
Finally, there are the special cases, like those of us who left lucrative careers in the industry to come back to school. Sounds crazy—especially in this economy—but it happens more often than you think. There are those who have families and must deal with the pressures of graduate school and the responsibilities of a home. And there are also those who are just starting a family or may be trying to start one. The fact is that life does not just stop so people can get a Ph.D. It keeps going and it is up to us to adapt and do whatever it takes to succeed at both.

Considering all this, why then? Why would anyone want to embark in this “awesome” quest? In my case the answer is that we do it because very few things in life are worth more. Also, if I may speculate a little one wants to get a Ph.D. because as professors and scientists we will have an opportunity to advance science, change lives, and in the process change the world. We do it because science would cease to exist without new research and because someone needs to be prepared to educate the younger generations.