Then, in April, my mother told me about some weird symptoms she was experiencing. My family likes to travel, so we thought perhaps she had contracted a tropical disease. “Have you submitted your thesis yet?” she asked me. “Almost, mum,” I said. She seemed to be holding back. But I was focused on finishing my experiments and the final edits on my thesis, so I brushed away my concerns.

A week later, the doctors had an update: They had found a shadow on the x-ray. It was lung cancer. I spent the next 2 months torn between my research and my family as I submitted my thesis and prepared for my defense, scheduled for mid-July, while my mother started radiation and immunotherapy treatment. My Ph.D. supervisor encouraged me to take all the time I needed to be with my mom, and I made three short visits home. But my expectations for myself pulled me back to lab. In the meantime, we learned that the cancer had spread throughout my mother’s body, including to her brain.

Yet my scientific commitments still had a grip on me. I was set to attend a big conference in New Zealand in early July, where I would present my Ph.D. results, meet with members of the Japanese research group I hoped to join, and broaden my job hunt in case that position didn’t work out. I had secured travel grants to cover the costs. Flights were bought, accommodations booked. My mother even told me she was jealous I was going to such an amazing location.

But on my way to the airport, I crumbled. Instead of New Zealand, I flew back to Madrid. Soon after, it was confirmed: The cancer was stage 4, it was everywhere, and it was unstoppable. My mother had 1 or 2 years left, the doctors said.

I postponed my Ph.D. defense. My mother asked whether I could get a job in Madrid, but nothing fit my research area and funding was scarce. The Japanese funding agency awarded my fellowship, but I didn’t know whether I should go. I had another opportunity in London—closer than Japan, but still too far. Meanwhile—in just 3 weeks—my mother’s prognosis changed to 1 year, then months, weeks, days. Cancer beat my mother at the end of July.

I will never forgive myself for losing precious time with my mother between that first call in April and that day in early July when I finally moved back home to help care for her. I thought I had more time and I didn’t. I had never slowed down before, knowing what it takes to secure an academic position. You need to publish. You need to present at international conferences. You need to secure grants and fellowships. You need to get cited. Passing up any opportunity felt like slipping back down the mountain, away from the big prizes at the top.

Losing my mother put things into perspective for me. I saw the humane side of science in the understanding and flexibility offered by my Ph.D. and postdoc supervisors and the funding agencies as I juggled my personal and professional needs and timelines. And the work I missed during my time away felt insignificant. I defended my thesis in mid-September and moved to Tokyo to start my new life.

For me, last year felt like a walk in the park compared with 2019. But I know that many people’s 2020 and 2021 may feel like my 2019, with struggles and losses competing with career goals. Please, take my advice: If your loved ones need you now, be there for them. Science will be waiting when you return. Prioritize yourself and your family. Prioritize well-being. Prioritize your mental health. Remember that life is what happens while you are making plans.

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“I will never forgive myself for losing precious time with my mother.”
When life happens
Julia Gaia de Pablo

Science 371 (6528), 534.
DOI: 10.1126/science.371.6528.534