



Perspective Walking with Purpose at 64

by Sandra Pfister, PhD

I turned 64 in January of the year of COVID-19. It's not surprising then that John Lennon and Paul McCartney's lyrics, "Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm sixty-four," have started to resonate with me more and more these days. It doesn't help that there have been a few misplaced words from some of our politicians that older people would (should) risk death in order to keep the economy open during the crisis.

I tell myself often I'm not "that old," but the daily video conferences where I get to see my face up-close-and-personal on my computer screen keep reminding me otherwise. In addition to trying to find a setting that allows me to touch-up my image (!), I have thought maybe I should wear makeup while working from home (#WFH), something I rarely do when at work.

Yet, it's not really about the number of years behind me or the wrinkles I see on the screen, but more about the words of Lennon and McCartney. It's more about wondering whether I am needed in this time of COVID-19. I will never be a frontline care giver and my training as a vascular pharmacologist are unlikely to make me an essential worker. Will you still need me when I'm sixty-four?

Like many, my days are not spent doing what I was trained to do. My lab is in hibernation. While I anticipated this would free me to finish a manuscript and design experiments for a new grant submission, these things have not yet happened.

I am also a course director for M1 Principles of Drug Action (PDA). With COVID-19, the changes to the course have been fairly straightforward, but the "extras" have taken time and energy. We transitioned our traditional paper-and-pencil,

short answer/fill in the blank exam to multiple choice questions on a computer. Not so easy.

I also worry about the isolation of our M1s, and I struggle with ways to keep myself and the other faculty connected with them. I feel a constant need to answer every email I receive from a student as soon as possible. Not so easy.

Since I no longer commute to work, I don't have that car time to play my motivational music for the day. For unknown reasons, I find myself starting my workday long before I did in the office. I wonder if the 'unknown reasons' are to convince me that my work is valuable. Will you still need me when I'm sixty-four?

Recognizing that I will not live forever, I have begun to think about this all in a different way. It has ended up being a good time for me to reflect and remind myself that I chose my path to be a basic science researcher *with purpose*. And that purpose continues to exist even as others might see aging people as less useful or as I have sensed that I might be less valuable during the pandemic.

A person that I hold in very high regard is Dr. Cheryl Maurana. One thing (of many) that I love about her is how she always seems to have the perfect quote for the occasion. Therefore, I went on my own hunt for a quote that would speak to me and my current state of mind. I found a quote from Charles Dickens that I think is perfect: *"The best way to lengthen out our days is to walk steadily and with a purpose."*

I haven't figured out this new reality of life in the time of COVID-19, but I am getting better at convincing myself that my sense of purpose never really changed. My life was purposeful before COVID-19, it remains purposeful during COVID-19, and will continue to be purposeful long after COVID-19 is over. I will continue to walk steadily and answer affirmatively that, yes, you will still need me when I'm sixty-four.

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