

The Last Lecture

What's in it for me? Life lessons from a man who did it all.

A loving family, a solid academic career, and a rich network of friends and colleagues – Randy Pausch seemed to have the perfect life. Then, at the age of 46, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and given six months to live. Before dying, Randy delivered a speech as part of Carnegie Mellon's Last Lecture series; it became an internet sensation and then a best seller. These blinks delve into the plentiful insights offered by a man confronting his own mortality with grace and dignity. You'll learn how facing death gives new value to seizing opportunities, overcoming obstacles, and appreciating life as it's lived moment to moment. In these blinks, you'll learn

why students need tough love; how to nearly go to space; and what makes childhood dreams come true.

Randy used his last lecture to reflect on living a good life.

There's a tradition in academia where professors deliver what's called a "last lecture." In these speeches, there's a gimmick. Distinguished thinkers pretend to make their final public appearance and offer the audience parting wisdom. However, for Carnegie Mellon professor Randy Pausch, there was no need to pretend. You see, after Randy scheduled his last lecture, he received grim news. He had pancreatic cancer – and the doctors estimated he had just months left to live. Now, of course, Randy could back out and spend his last few weeks quietly receiving palliative care. Everyone would understand. But that wasn't his style. Instead, Randy threw himself into the work. As a lifelong teacher, he wanted one last chance to step up to the podium and deliver a few thoughts. The key message here is: Randy used his last lecture to reflect on living a good life. At first, Randy didn't know how to approach his last lecture. What do you say when you're actually dying? He considered ruminating on the difficulties of cancer and the struggle of fighting through treatment. But that didn't feel right. After all, many people battle pancreatic cancer – more than 37,000 people a year. Instead, Randy wanted to focus on what made him unique. So, what made him stand out? After considering this question for a few minutes, the answer was obvious. Looking back at his life, Randy realized it was a massive success. Despite only being 46, he had basically managed to achieve all his childhood dreams. Sure, he didn't literally become Captain Kirk, but he did develop cutting-edge technology. Moreover, he did actually get to work for Disney Imagineering. Over the next few weeks, Randy poured himself into the presentation. Between playing with his children and managing end-of-life affairs, he spent hours at his laptop scanning old photographs and rearranging slides on PowerPoint. On the morning of the lecture, he was still cutting, editing, and making changes. All the while, he joked to himself that it's quite hard work compressing your whole life story down to just one hour. In the end, he pulled it off. Randy stood onstage and spoke to a packed house of more than 400 onlookers. He opened with a couple jokes. Then, a few minutes in, he showed the audience a CT scan of his numerous tumors. With a laugh, he offered his thoughts on the matter. He told them that yes, he's going to die. And, no, there's nothing he can do about it. However, before he goes, he'd

like to talk about an important topic: how to achieve your childhood dreams.

Randy never gave up on his dreams, so many of them came true.

Even as a youngster, Randy knew he'd never be an astronaut. Apparently, his poor eyesight and thick-lensed glasses disqualified him from the job. Still, he'd always had his heart set on attaining the next-best thing: floating in zero gravity. For years, the dream seemed out of reach. But finally, in 2001, he had a chance. Along with a team of students, he devised an experiment to be carried out on NASA's "Weightless Wonder," a special plane designed to simulate floating in space. At first, NASA was reluctant to let Randy ride along with the experiment. But he convinced the agency he could document the whole experience and generate loads of good publicity. They took the bait - and soon, Randy was floating in zero-G. The key message here is: Randy never gave up on his dreams, so many of them came true. Floating wasn't the only childhood dream Randy got to live out. In fact, through luck, determination, and a little charisma, he fulfilled many of his youthful aspirations - even the outlandish ones. Some he accomplished early, like winning a giant stuffed animal at a carnival. Others he realized later, like writing an entry in the World Book Encyclopedia. Sometimes, his dreams were satisfied in unexpected ways. For instance, as a young Star Trek fan, he always wanted to be Captain Kirk. Of course, this was impossible. However, after Randy became a leading expert in virtual reality, he received an exciting request. William Shatner - Captain Kirk himself - wanted to visit his lab. On the day Shatner arrived for the tour, it was like a dream come true. Other times, Randy actually attained exactly what he wanted. Ever since visiting Disneyland as a child, he'd dreamed of becoming a Disney Imagineer. He even applied for the job numerous times - but was always turned down. Then, in 1995, he convinced Disney to take him on as an academic expert in computer science. So, for six months, he worked as an Imagineer helping the company design cutting-edge virtual reality rides. Another dream came true. Of course, some dreams remained out of reach. As a youth, Randy had high hopes for his football career - he wanted to play in the NFL. While he never became a real pro player, he doesn't consider it a loss. Looking back, all the hours he spent training were more valuable than any NFL contract. He learned the value of patience and hard work. These skills made accomplishing his other dreams much easier.

Looking back, Randy picked up bits of wisdom from life's ups and downs.

It's a beautiful afternoon in Pittsburgh, and Randy is finally marrying the love of his life, Jai. The ceremony is beautiful, especially the final send-off - the bride and groom depart in a colorful hot air balloon. The couple gaze over the landscape and marvel at their picture-perfect wedding day. Then, the balloon's pilot breaks the reverie with an urgent update. The wind has blown them dangerously off course. They'll need to make a crash landing in a nearby field. Worse still, they'll land near a speeding train. One wrong gust and things could get very ugly, very fast. Luckily, they touch down safely. The memorable start to marriage teaches Randy a valuable lesson - in life, even the most wonderful things can have rough edges. The key message here is: Looking back, Randy picked up bits of wisdom from life's ups and downs. When Randy looks back on his short

but eventful personal history, he recalls many experiences that imparted prized lessons about how to live well. Some come from his early childhood. He remembers his sister getting so fed up with his arrogance that she dumped his lunch in a puddle. When his parents found out, they didn't punish her. They thought Randy could use a little humility, too. He took the advice to heart. Other lessons came from his days courting Jai. The two met at an academic conference and were instantly smitten. After a few dates, Randy even asked Jai to move to Pittsburgh to be with him. Initially, she turned him down. Randy was heartbroken, but on the advice of his father, he decided to respect her decision. After all, if she loved him, she would come around – and eventually, she did. For Randy, this shows love always wins in the end. Randy even gleaned wisdom on the day he received his terminal cancer diagnosis. When the doctor told him the bad news, he did it with such tact and sensitivity that Randy almost felt relieved. He was particularly taken with the doctor's phrasing. Rather than saying "you will die in three to six months" he said, "you have three to six months of good health." For Randy, the sentence had a certain inherent optimism. It reminded him that even though his life would be short, he should still enjoy it as much as possible. A few weeks later, a colleague saw him out driving his convertible. She later told him that he looked so happy and at ease. According to Randy, this observation meant he was doing things right – right up until the end.

Randy found real satisfaction in helping others achieve their dreams.

When Randy speaks of making dreams come true, sometimes it's just a metaphor. However, just as often, he's speaking literally. This is the case with his class "Building Virtual Worlds." In this university course, he teaches students how to make fantastical virtual reality experiences. Back when Randy started the course, he had a problem. His students were too excited. Their first projects were all spectacular. Their virtual worlds were so impressive, he didn't know what else to teach them. So, on the advice of a friend, he fibbed. He told them, "Great job, but I know you can do better." The bluff worked. The students' next projects were even more incredible. By pushing them a little harder, he helped bring even more dreams to life. The key message here is: Randy found real satisfaction in helping others achieve their dreams. Randy has always been dedicated to making his own dreams come true. In the course of his life, he's also discovered that helping others achieve their dreams is just as rewarding. Now, this isn't always easy. But he's found that if you provide the right mix of tough love, honest feedback, and unconditional support, you can help people achieve what they desire. Of course, as a scientist, Randy's approach to feedback always features data. In his virtual worlds course, he always asks students to evaluate one another on qualities like creativity, computer skills, and teamwork. This way, at the end of the semester, he can give each pupil a detailed look at what they're good at and what they need to improve. Sometimes, the critiques are harsh. But facing these facts prepares them to do better in the future. One student in particular really benefited from this process. He was very smart – but also rude and arrogant. In fact, his classmates consistently ranked him as the worst person to work with. Randy was honest with him; he shared the data but also explained that his condition wasn't permanent. With effort, he could improve his relationships. The student took the advice, and soon he was doing a lot better. Randy hopes he can continue making dreams come true even after he's gone. Along with a colleague, he designed Alice, a tool that teaches computer programming through games and storytelling. It's already helping people learn to code. He hopes that, in the future,

Alice will help millions of students learn to make their own virtual worlds come alive.

Sometimes the simplest advice is also the most valuable.

Let's say you're taking one of Randy's famous virtual reality classes. The course always starts the same way. First, he divides the class into groups. Then, he hands out a sheet of paper containing crucial information. So, what's on the handout? The history of computing? Theories on optics and perspective? The fundamentals of coding and information architecture? Nope, none of the above. The paper is titled "Tips for Working Successfully in a Group." It gives helpful advice: learn each other's names, let everyone talk, and always eat before working. Of course, most students roll their eyes at these obvious, straightforward truisms. Yet, by the end of the course, the groups that take the guidance seriously are inevitably the ones that truly excel. The key message here is: Sometimes the simplest advice is also the most valuable. As you make your way through life, you're bound to hear all types of advice about how to navigate the world. A lot of these tips will be so familiar and obvious that they'll more or less sound like tired platitudes. However, oftentimes, these adages are repeated for a reason. Even though they're clichéd, they're still full of wisdom. Take, for example, the old chestnut, "Always work hard." Yes, sometimes it's tiresome to hear, but working hard really does get results. Randy was awarded tenure earlier than most faculty members. When people asked how he pulled it off, he'd tell them to call his office at 10:00 p.m. on Friday night. Why? Because he always spent his Fridays working late – that's how he got tenure. Here's another classic: "Fix the disease, not the symptom." Randy recalls how often people obsess over difficult problems but never fix the root of the issue. He had a friend struggling with debt. To deal with the stress, she spent every Tuesday night at a meditation class. Randy suggested that, rather than meditating, she should get a job on Tuesdays. Sure enough, working as a waitress once a week ended her debt – and her stress – in a matter of months. Finally, there's "Don't be afraid to fail." While teaching, Randy encourages his students to take big chances on projects. In fact, he gives out an award each year to the students who have the biggest, most ambitious failure. Even though they missed the mark this time, they're usually the students with the best ideas – and eventually one of those big ideas will come true.

Randy's final thoughts are about his children and their future.

When Randy delivered his last lecture, he was still fairly healthy, all things considered. Despite his terminal diagnosis, he was about to stand on stage and speak for an hour straight. At one point, he even did one-handed push-ups to prove his vitality. Still, as the talk wore on, he struggled with a lingering worry that he wouldn't be able to finish. The concern wasn't about physical health, but emotional control. He knew that the end of the lecture revealed a twist – one that pulled on his heartstrings so much he would surely cry. You see, with his final slides, Randy told the truth: This lecture wasn't for the audience. No, it was for the three children he would soon be leaving behind. The key message here is: Randy's final thoughts are about his children and their future. For Randy, the most troubling part about pancreatic cancer isn't facing his own mortality. While he does occasionally fear death or feel sorry for himself, it's not the major source

of his sorrow. What really breaks him up is thinking about his children: Dylan, Logan, and Chloe. He feels awful that they'll grow up without a father. Rather than succumb to this sorrow, Randy tried to make his last months with his family count. However, all his children were still very young, so he worried that their memories of him would easily fade. To prevent this, he attempted to make moments so special that even his young children would remember forever. He took Dylan and Logan to Disney World; then, still feeling that wasn't enough, he took them to swim with dolphins. Randy's daughter Chloe posed a special challenge - at the time of his last lecture, she was just 18 months old. A child that young doesn't form clear memories, so Randy admits she probably won't recall him on her own. Undaunted, he takes extra care to leave her mementos for the future. He writes her letters to read later and devotes a whole passage of his last lecture to extol how much he loves her. In the end, Randy hopes the advice he passes on is useful to the audience. But really, deep down, the entire last lecture was for his children. He doesn't want to give them a strict life path to follow - just the opposite. He wants them to discover their own personalities and passions. But he hopes that the words of wisdom he leaves behind will help them make all their childhood dreams come true.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Life doesn't always go the way you expect it to. However, you can still make your short time on Earth meaningful and memorable if you approach life with a sense of optimism and love. Make your childhood dreams come true by working hard, facing your fears, and always aiming to encourage others.