



Book The Last Lecture

Randy Pausch and Jeffrey Zaslow
Hyperion, 2008
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Recommendation

On July 4, 1939, Hall of Fame first baseman Lou Gehrig, fatally ill with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), the disease that would be named after him, told a capacity crowd at Yankee Stadium that he was “the luckiest man on the face of the earth.” Sixty-eight years later, computer science professor Randy Pausch, who had terminal pancreatic cancer, delivered his “last lecture.” Like Gehrig, Pausch used the opportunity to express his gratitude rather than focusing on his terrible misfortune. In an hour-long taped presentation that earned worldwide acclaim as it spread throughout the Internet, Pausch summarized his philosophy, and spoke of the importance of ambition, hard work and perseverance. Pausch’s main objective was to leave a meaningful legacy for his three children – and he succeeded brilliantly. His book, written with Jeffrey Zaslow, expands on the themes in his lecture, entitled “Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams.” Pausch served up heaping portions of wonderful life-affirming advice. You’ll discover the qualities that made him so special. You’ll count your blessings. You’ll cry. You may even feel embarrassed or ashamed for those times when you lapse into self-pity. *BooksInShort* believes that every reader can draw inspiration from this remarkable man who embraced and celebrated life even as he faced his death, which came on July 25, 2008.

Take-Aways

- Randy Pausch, a terminally ill professor, husband and father, offered valuable life lessons in his final college lecture.
- He was glad that his lecture drew a global audience, but its purpose was to leave a legacy for his wife and three small children.
- Pausch made most of his childhood dreams come true; they formed the basis of his professional and personal achievements.
- He taught that you, too, can realize your dreams.
- His other lessons include valuing people more than things.
- Earn self-esteem by learning something new and trying your best to perfect it.
- Gratitude for life’s blessings keeps you from getting stuck.
- Complaining is a complete waste of time and doesn’t make things better.
- Time is your most valuable commodity. Don’t waste any of it.
- Don’t be afraid to fail – that’s how you grow.

Summary

The Ultimate Irony

Many colleges conduct a series of “last lectures” in which they ask professors to imagine that they are about to die and to think about what wisdom, philosophies or beliefs they would like to pass on before they go. Randy Pausch’s participation in Carnegie Mellon’s series, renamed “Journeys,” represents the ultimate irony. Pausch, a noted computer science professor at the university, prepared his final lecture knowing that he was dying of pancreatic cancer.

“We cannot change the cards we are dealt; just how we play the hand.”

Conflicting emotions tormented Pausch as he prepared the lecture. Considering the prognosis that he had only months to live, he certainly could have cancelled it. Married to Jai, and the father of three children ages five, two and one, Pausch had precious little time left with his loved ones.

They had recently moved from Pittsburgh, home of the university, to Virginia where Jai's family lives. She was upset that his flight back to Pittsburgh for the lecture coincided with her 41st birthday – the last one they would celebrate together.

“All of the things I loved were rooted in the dreams and goals I had as a child.”

However, Pausch came to the realization that his lecture could serve as a legacy for his children. He wanted them to understand what he stood for and who he was. With Jai's blessing, Pausch prepared a talk that focused on living a full, meaningful life and the importance of realizing your dreams. On Sept. 18, 2007, Pausch, 46, addressed a capacity crowd of 400, including his wife. Pausch opened by quoting his father as saying, “If there is an elephant in the room, introduce it!” So, that's what he did: he began by explaining his condition and his impending death.

Paying Tribute to Great Parents

Pausch grew up near Baltimore in a solid middle-class family that valued morality and education, and shunned materialism. Pausch's mother was a hard-driving English teacher who expected a lot from her students and her children. His father, a decorated World War II medic, fought on behalf of the underprivileged. His small auto insurance business sold policies to poor inner-city people who normally would be uninsurable.

“I find myself quoting my dad even if it was something he didn't say. Whatever my point, it might as well have come from him. He seemed to know everything.”

The family used money for life's necessities and important goals, not for movies and restaurant meals. Pausch's parents funded a dormitory in Thailand to help keep girls in school and away from prostitution. The family's dinner table discussions were stimulating forums for thoughts and ideas. If he had questions, Pausch looked for the answers in the dictionary or encyclopedia. He greatly admired his father's ethics and tried to practice the same principles as an adult.

“There's a lot of talk...about giving children self-esteem. It's not something you can give; it's something they have to build.”

His parents encouraged Pausch to dream and to use his imagination. He slept in a bunk bed his father built. In high school, he painted unique decorations on his bedroom walls, including a mathematical formula, a large elevator door, a submarine, chess pieces and a version of Pandora's box. His father strongly endorsed the project; his mother came around more slowly, but eventually took great pride in her son's creativity. They never painted over the walls.

Childhood Wishes Do Come True

One of the slides Pausch showed during his lecture listed his six childhood dreams:

- “Being in zero gravity.”
- “Playing in the NFL.”
- “Authoring an article in the *World Book* encyclopedia.”
- “Being Captain Kirk.”
- “Winning stuffed animals.”
- “Being a Disney Imagineer.”

“Give yourself permission to dream. Fuel your kids' dreams, too. Once in a while, that might even mean letting them stay up past their bedtimes.”

Pausch experienced weightlessness in 2001 when a group of his students submitted a proposal to NASA for a virtual reality project aboard the agency's zero-gravity plane. Faculty members weren't permitted to accompany their students onboard, so the quick-thinking Pausch “resigned” as faculty advisor and flew as a journalist covering the event.

“Earnestness is highly underestimated. It comes from the core, while hip is trying to impress you with the surface.”

Though he loved tackle football, Pausch never played in a pro game, but he learned valuable lessons from his coach. Former Penn State linebacker Jim Graham taught Pausch the importance of fundamentals, hard work and perseverance. Graham's players developed self-esteem by learning new skills and practicing them repeatedly. Pausch adopted Graham's philosophy and tried to teach his students to deal with hardship, play as a team and be good sports.

“When Jai and I talk about the lessons she has learned from our journey, she talks about how we've found strength in standing together, shoulder to shoulder.”

Because his family emphasized learning and self-awareness, Pausch loved reading the encyclopedia and eagerly anticipated publication of the annual updated yearbooks. He always fantasized about being a contributor. He got his chance several years ago when *World Book*'s editors asked him to write the entry on virtual reality.

“We all have finite time and energy. Any time we spend whining is unlikely to help us achieve our goals. And it won't make us happier.”

One of Pausch's childhood idols was Captain Kirk, the dashing commander of the Starship Enterprise in the *Star Trek* TV and film series. Pausch admired Kirk's leadership and managerial skills, including how he delegated responsibility while creating a singular purpose and vision among the crew. William Shatner, the actor who portrayed Kirk, visited Pausch's virtual-reality lab when he was co-authoring a book on how science had realized many of the advanced technologies introduced on

Star Trek. Shatner spent three hours at the lab and asked many questions. When he learned of Pausch's illness, Shatner sent him a photo of Kirk inscribed with a line he spoke in an episode of *Star Trek*: "I don't believe in the no-win scenario."

"I would just urge my kids to find their way with enthusiasm and passion. I want them to feel as if I am there with them, whatever path they choose."

Pausch inherited his father's love of the kind of giant stuffed animals you can win at carnival games. Pausch collected quite a few over the years and he brought them on stage during his final lecture. He invited audience members to come up and take home an animal. A student who also had cancer took the big, stuffed elephant, so she, too, could talk about the elephant in the room.

"I'm aware that Chloe may have no memory of me at all. She's too young. But I want her to grow up knowing that I was the first man ever to fall in love with her."

Pausch became fascinated with Disneyland during a trip when he was eight years old. After earning his doctorate in computer science, he applied unsuccessfully for a position with Walt Disney Imagineering. In 1995, Pausch, then a University of Virginia professor, heard that Disney had undertaken a project in virtual reality, one of his areas of interest. He spent six months of his sabbatical working with the Imagineering team.

Heading into Rough Waters

Pausch was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer – the deadliest form of the disease – in the summer of 2006. He underwent extensive surgery followed by chemotherapy and radiation, dropping from 182 to 138 pounds. A January 2007 CAT scan was clear but in August another scan revealed that the cancer had spread to his liver. His doctor indicated he had only "three to six months of good health." Right after getting this jolting news, Pausch told his wife that he intended to make the best of every day. In fact, a Carnegie Mellon vice president spotted Pausch driving in his convertible, top down, tapping his fingers to the music on the radio. Knowing his medical condition, she told Pausch in an e-mail how impressed she was with his mood and attitude.

A Lesson in Humility

Pausch learned an important lesson when he was a very bright but brash student at Brown University. He was a teaching assistant for a renowned computer science professor who told him that his arrogance and inflexibility would prevent him from maximizing his accomplishments. Pausch appreciated the candid advice and acknowledged the importance of knowing people who tell you what you need to hear – not what you want to hear.

A Matter of Perspective

Like his parents, Pausch put little stock in material possessions. When he was a bachelor, he frequently entertained his sister's two children. Once he picked them up in his new Volkswagen convertible. His sister warned her kids not to get the car dirty, advice Pausch believed was impossible for them to obey. He promptly poured a can of soda on the backseat to convey the message that "people are more important than things." That weekend, his nephew got sick all over the backseat; Pausch was glad he had showed the boy beforehand that he wouldn't be angry.

"All my life, I've been very aware that time is infinite."

On a day when Pausch had walked to work, Jai backed her minivan out of the garage and hit his parked convertible. Nervous all day about his reaction, she prepared his favorite meal and tried to act especially sweet. Pausch hardly reacted to the "bad" news, even choosing not to repair the damage since both cars were still fully operational. The Pausches just drove dented cars.

Dream the Possible Dream

Pausch was an eight-year-old at summer camp, poised in front of the TV as astronaut Neil Armstrong prepared to step on the moon. The feat inspired Pausch's belief that nothing is impossible, but he did not get to witness the historic moment – the camp directors sent the kids to bed. However, in those days before video recording, Pausch's father had realized the significance of the event, and had photographed the TV screen as Armstrong touched the moon's surface. Sometimes, Pausch surmised, inspirational moments require you to be flexible and bend the rules. History is more important than bedtime.

Stop Complaining and Do Something

Pausch learned about the importance of attitude from his graduate school landlord, a former standout athlete. A work-related accident had left the man a quadriplegic and his fiancée had broken up with him. But instead of wallowing in self-pity, he became a licensed marriage counselor. He married and adopted children. And he never complained. Pausch also drew inspiration from Jackie Robinson, who endured taunts, jeers and threats to break the color barrier in Major League Baseball. Whining about life's unfairness requires time and effort. It won't get you anywhere and you'll still be miserable.

Happy or Sad? It's Up to You

Many people with terminal illnesses don't believe they can have fun. Not Pausch. His entire family dressed up as the *Incredibles* cartoon characters at Halloween. Pausch also went on a scuba-diving trip with three close friends who were painfully aware of his condition. They all behaved like teenagers and avoided serious cancer talk. After his diagnosis, Pausch had a vasectomy and purchased a new convertible. Such forward-looking actions reinforce his optimistic attitude and even allow him to fantasize about recovering.

For the Family's Sake

The reality of his dire situation really hit home when Pausch pondered his children's future without a father. Pausch and Jai decided not to tell the children about his

disease at first, and waited until he became “symptomatic.” He packed every meaningful minute into his interactions with them. People whose parents died when they were young told Pausch how important it was to express his love abundantly. He created keepsakes for his children, including individual letters and personalized videos. He also left them “The Last Lecture.” He said he hoped his children would feel his presence as they journey through life.

“Time is all you have. And you may find one day that you have less than you think.”

After he presented his last lecture, Pausch had a large cake rolled onto the stage and invited the audience to join him in singing “Happy Birthday” to Jai. He considered himself fortunate that cancer, instead of death from a sudden heart attack or auto accident, gave him and his wife the opportunity to grow closer. Pausch admired Jai’s strength, resiliency and sensitivity. He urged her to be happy – and if that means remarrying, so be it. After the audience serenaded Jai, she walked on stage. She and her husband kissed and hugged.

“I’m dying and I’m having fun. And I’m going to keep having fun every day I have left. Because there’s no other way to play it.”

“Please don’t die,” she whispered in his ear.

About the Authors

Randy Pausch was a tenured professor of computer science at Carnegie Mellon University. He died on July 25, 2008. **Jeffrey Zaslow**, a *Wall Street Journal* columnist, attended Pausch’s last lecture and wrote the story that brought him international acclaim.
