

Professor's 'last' lecture teaches life lessons

The e-mail from my boss arrived that morning. "You knew Randy, right?" Indeed I did. Dr. Randy Pausch, professor of computer science at Carnegie Mellon and my college classmate, had just given the lecture of a lifetime. He was all over the Internet, all over the news, flooded with thousands of e-mails: "Your lecture changed my life."

I clicked on the link and watched the video. By the time it was over, I was a mess. The "lecture of a lifetime", for Randy Pausch, was far too literal. He will die in six months.

At the age of 46, Pausch has advanced pancreatic cancer. His oldest child, who is 5, may keep some memories of his father. His younger brother and sister, ages 2 and 1, will know him only through recorded images. That's why his "last lecture" is so important.

The "last lecture" series is a long-standing academic tradition. A university invites its best professors to give the talk of their lives. If they knew they were going to die tomorrow, what would they say today? What would their legacy be? It's a terrific idea. But when an academic exercise becomes more than academic, it takes on a whole new meaning.

I met Pausch 29 years ago, in our freshman computer science class. He was, of course, a genius, and immediately became a teaching assistant, helping those with lesser skills (i.e. everybody else). We took a few more classes together, we both got Ph.D.'s, and we both became computer science professors.

But Pausch achieved more in the next 20 years than I (or, to be fair, most academics) could ever achieve in a lifetime. Pausch became a full professor at Carnegie Mellon at a ridiculously young age, a pioneer in the field of virtual reality. When the secretary of defense needed to learn the state of the art in VR, the Pentagon called Pausch. They flew him to Washington to brief the secretary. Personally.

If you haven't seen Pausch's last lecture yet, stop right now and watch one of the news stories. It'll only take a few minutes. Fire up your browser and go to Pausch's home page (www.cs.cmu.edu/~pausch). Or



OPINION

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just Google "Pausch". He's famous enough to come up No. 1 of more than half a million hits.

Save Pausch's complete lecture for later. It's almost two hours long, and you'll want to see it with your kids. Just pick one of the short news clips. I'll wait.

Tell me how, after seeing that, you can live your life the same way.

Pausch's life lessons are profound and poignant. A summary here doesn't do them justice. Don't complain, just work harder. Experience is what you get when you don't get what you want. Brick walls give you a chance to show how badly you want something. Tell the truth, all the time. Let your kids paint their bedroom.

Pausch avoids any discussion of religion, so I won't speculate on his views of an after-life. I'm told, however, that rabbis and ministers have used Pausch's lecture in their sermons. They do not teach the myopic perspective that those who refuse to embrace a specific faith are destined to a life of eternal suffering. Watching Pausch, you'll agree that doesn't make any sense.

Instead, those clergymen are teaching that a life of any length is a gift, that we should number our days, to live every day as if it were our last, and to focus our lives on what is truly important. That is the true meaning of Pausch's last lecture. Along with letting your kids paint their bedroom, so they can follow their dreams.

After watching Pausch's talk, I went into my kids' rooms. My son is in college now, hoping for a career in space. When he was little, he stuck glow-in-the-dark stars all over the walls and the furniture. They're still there. My daughter is a senior with a passion for writing. As a child, she painted dinosaurs all over the walls. Now she's got an enormous rainbow dragon. I know Pausch would approve.

Good-bye, Randy. My children watched your speech. When they have grown up and found their dreams, I'll tell them more about you.

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