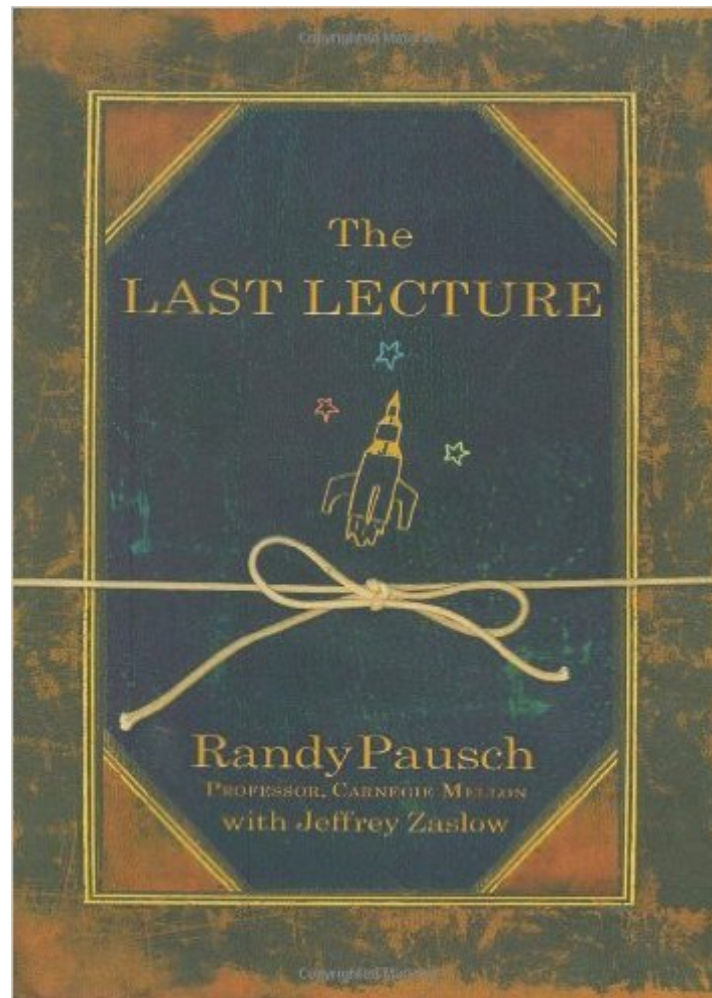


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The Last Lecture



Synopsis

A lot of professors give talks titled "The Last Lecture." Professors are asked to consider their demise and to ruminate on what matters most to them. And while they speak, audiences can't help but mull the same question: What wisdom would we impart to the world if we knew it was our last chance? If we had to vanish tomorrow, what would we want as our legacy? When Randy Pausch, a computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon, was asked to give such a lecture, he didn't have to imagine it as his last, since he had recently been diagnosed with terminal cancer. But the lecture he gave--"Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams"--wasn't about dying. It was about the importance of overcoming obstacles, of enabling the dreams of others, of seizing every moment (because "time is all you have...and you may find one day that you have less than you think"). It was a summation of everything Randy had come to believe. It was about living. In this book, Randy Pausch has combined the humor, inspiration and intelligence that made his lecture such a phenomenon and given it an indelible form. It is a book that will be shared for generations to come. "We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand." --Randy Pausch

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Customer Reviews

One of the staples of "the college experience" at many schools is the "last lecture" --- a beloved professor sums up a lifetime of scholarship and teaching as if he/she were heading out the door for the last time. It's the kind of tweed-jacket-with-elbow-patches talk that may or may not impart useful knowledge and lasting inspiration, but almost surely gives all present some warm and fuzzy feelings. But a "last lecture" by Randy Pausch was different in every possible way. The professor of

Computer Science, Human Computer Interaction, and Design at Carnegie Mellon University was just 46, and this really was his last lecture --- he was dying. And dying fast. In the summer of 2006, Pausch had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, a ferociously efficient killer. Only 4% of its victims are alive five years after diagnosis. Most die much faster. Think months, not years. Pausch fought back. Surgery. Chemo. Progress. But in August of 2007, the cancer returned --- and now it had metastasized to his liver and spleen. The new prognosis: 3-6 months of relative health, then a quick dispatch to the grave, leaving behind a wife and three little kids. On September 18, 2007 --- less than a month later --- Randy Pausch gave his last lecture. No one would have faulted him for launching a blast about desperately seizing opportunities in an irrational universe. Instead, Pausch delivered a laugh-filled session of teaching stories about going after your childhood dreams and helping others achieve theirs and enjoying every moment in your life --- even the ones that break your heart. Pausch's philosophy, in brief: "We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand." The lecture was taped, and slapped up on YouTube.

UPDATE: Randy Pausch passed away on Friday, 25 July 2008. R.I.P. At one point in my life, I spent a couple of years as a hospital chaplain, ministering pretty regularly to folks who were dying. I discovered one thing: generally people died as they had lived. How a person approaches his or her dying reveals a great deal about the values, character traits, dispositions, and attitudes with which they navigated the business of living. What comes through clearly in Randy Pausch's little book is that he's a guy who's incredibly decent and loving. He writes warmly of his childhood and his parents; he assures us that he's achieved just about every goal he dreamed of as a youth; he appears to be a good and dedicated teacher; he loves his wife and kids; and even when he assures us that he, like everyone else, has personality issues that need working on--he is, he tells us, a "recovering jerk"--his admitted foibles seem pretty tame. Pausch is Joe Everyperson. I think that's the value of his Last Lecture. Pausch clearly isn't of a philosophical bent of mind. If you pick up his book looking for profound existential discussions about human frailty and mortality (as, I confess, I did), you're not going to find them. I've no doubt that, since the onslaught of his illness, he and his wife Jai have endured despairing dark nights of the soul, paralyzing bouts of panic, and heart-pounding rage against the dying of the light. But except for very rare intimations, Pausch draws a veil over such episodes, and instead offers a mixture of autobiographical reflections and homespun tips on making the most of life (such as managing time, re-thinking priorities, and learning to listen to others). As he tells us, his final lecture to us is about life more than death.

As I opened the shipping box from .com, I found two preordered copies of Randy Pausch's book, one for my family and one for whoever needs it most within the next few weeks. This could be a friend or business acquaintance who has reached some personal crisis or turning point. I'll know. Randy's message will find the right recipient. This book is a very large gift in its compact, neatly bound actuality. It is a gift of hope and affirmation, a gift of encouragement and courage. Recently I said good-bye to a friend and business colleague who at 58 died of pancreatic cancer. His was a more private passing, but nevertheless he fought the disease until the disease won, and he died with dignity. Two days before his death, he called a mutual friend to wish this friend good luck with minor corrective surgery. Even two days before death my stricken friend was thinking of others' welfare. As I sat in his memorial service with 300 other mourners, watching a slide presentation of his photographs and original art, I also thought about Randy Pausch. The two personalities mixed together because they shared so many of the same qualities: creativity, professionalism, gusto for living, a sense of humor, lifelong dedication to giving back to their communities, and a profound faith in personal power. This is the story of The Last Lecture: that we can face any challenge in this life as long as we welcome our fate with optimism and determination to confront all odds. We can live for the welfare of others. We can live today with our legacies in mind for the future -- after we are also gone. The good professor is his own metaphor. In this final gift, he both teaches and does.

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