

Rev. Gary Kowalski – UCOT, May 7, 2023
Last Lectures

Ministers often ponder the question, “What would I say to my congregation, if this were my very last sermon?” College professors do the same. And some universities have made a tradition of inviting their faculty members to deliver a discourse at the end of their teaching careers.

It’s a chance to summarize everything you’ve learned over the course of a lifetime, and pontificate a little, which is one of the privileges of going bald or grey around the edges.

Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh was one of those schools with a well-established record of asking its profs to deliver what they called “the Last Lecture” when they invited Randy Pausch to do the honors. Randy was a professor of computer science there, at age forty-seven one of the younger members of the faculty, and wasn’t planning to retire. In fact, he was just getting started. An expert in virtual reality, he’d managed to fulfill a lifelong fantasy by joining the Disney Imagineers to create a Magic Carpet Ride at Disney World in Orlando. He’d also designed the Alice Project, an innovative curriculum for teaching students online with interactive characters, a family called “the Sims.” With a beautiful wife and three rambunctious pre-schoolers at home, he was really just beginning to hit his stride. But Randy had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer shortly before he got the invitation to speak and given just three to six months to live.

It was fifteen years ago that he stood in a lecture hall and prepared to speak to a standing room only crowd of well-wishers, many no doubt curious to learn what a dying man looked like and what he might choose to say in such a final, public statement. Randy startled everyone by dropping to floor and doing one-handed push-ups as a warm-up. He looked trim, with a full head of dark, tousled hair, the very picture of a man in his prime. But one of the first slides he flashed on the screen as part of his power point was a CAT scan of his liver, where the cancer had metastasized, and where ten tumors were plainly visible.

He began the talk by saying what he wasn’t going to talk about. He wasn’t going to talk about his love for his wife or kids, who were the most important thing in his life. That would be just too difficult emotionally. And he assured the audience that he wasn’t going to talk about religion or spirituality, although he did joke that he had experienced a late-in-life conversion and switched from a PC to a Mac.

Instead, he wanted to talk about childhood dreams and the power of imagination. He talked about growing up in a family where his mom and dad encouraged him to think big but also to work hard. He talked unashamedly about his father as his hero—a man who sold car insurance for

a living, but founded a special school for girls in Thailand to keep kids off the streets and out of the traffic. And he spoke with admiration for his mother, who always helped him keep a sense of proportion about his personal problems. When he complained to her about the difficulty of grad school, for instance, she patted his arm with the soothing reminder that “We know just how you feel, honey. And remember, when your father was your age, he was fighting the Germans.”

It was a home where learning was valued and family dinners weren’t complete without a dictionary nearby, where unconditional love came coupled with high expectations. And there Randy dreamed.

As a kid, he dreamed of someday floating weightless in space. He dreamed of being Captain Kirk of Star Trek. He dreamed of playing for the NFL. He dreamed of writing an article for the World Book encyclopedia. And he fantasized prodigiously about winning the biggest stuffed animals ever on the midway at the State Fair. Wishful thinking for some, perhaps, but not for Randy. He never forgot his dreams. He never gave up. As he said, when brick walls appeared in your path, they were only meant to test how badly you wanted a thing.

The secret to winning stuffed animals, he confided, was to have long arms and a large amount of loose change to spend. Lean in as far as you can at the ring toss, without actually cheating. Eventually you’ll win the elephant. And to prove the technique worked, he brought an assortment of bears and lions and other giant-sized critters on stage for his finale.

The secret to floating weightless, on the other hand, is to hitch a ride on “the Vomit Comet.” That’s what everyone else calls it, though NASA calls the airplane where it trains astronauts the “Weightless Wonder,” for public relations reasons. When the plane hits the top of its arc, it slips into a sharp dive, and for about twenty-five seconds all the passengers aboard know what it’s like to experience zero gravity. Randy won a ride when his computer science team proposed an experiment. Could training in a simulated, virtual reality helmet reduce the nausea space travelers suffered? Randy got to find out the answer to that question for himself, and learned important lessons. Like, keep your feet pointed down, he advised. That way it wouldn’t hurt so much when the plane came out of its dive and you tumbled out of the air.

Of course, he had to work incredibly hard to get to the edge of space. People used to ask him how he became one of the youngest Ph.D. 's ever to win tenure at a top flight university. Randy told them to call his office at 10 p.m. on some Friday night, and he’d tell them how.

At the start of his lecture, Randy said he wasn’t going to talk about religion or spirituality. And he certainly didn’t talk about God or the Bible. He

wasn't churchy in any conventional way. And when his last lecture was posted on YouTube, where it got over six million hits, his friends started calling him "St. Randy," just to tease him a bit. But he talked about family and friendship and being true to your roots. He radiated enthusiasm, despite his illness and the short time he knew he had to live. He said he'd learned it was more important to be earnest than to be hip—that fashion changed frequently, but that integrity never went out of style. In fact, he talked about spirituality quite a bit, though in a funny, indirect, and offbeat way. So it didn't surprise me too much to learn that Randy and his wife were fellow travelers in faith—members of our First Unitarian Church in Pittsburgh.

What struck me most about Randy was what a neat but goofy guy he really was. I'm sure that growing up he was really rather a dweeb, and in fact he calls himself a nerd. Who paints the quadratic equation on their bedroom wall? Who fantasizes of writing encyclopedia articles when most teens are fantasizing about ... well, other things? I imagine that Randy was never the most popular boy in school. If he was president of the student council, or part of the "in" crowd, he never mentions it. And yet somehow, Randy excels. As he says, he wins the parent lottery, with the best mom and dad a boy ever had. He marries the woman of his dreams. Like Peter Pan, he stays playful and has fun his whole life long. Randy Pausch is the perfect illustration of the first principle of our faith, that even geeks and dorks are filled with limitless goodness and possibility.

Just by being himself, following his own quirky bent, Randy managed not only to invent a wonderful, fairy tale life for himself. But by telling his story, honestly and without embellishment, he also managed to reach millions of other people, with the Last Lecture climbing to the top of the New York Times bestsellers.

At the end of his lecture, Randy tried to sum up a few of things he'd shared. "So today's talk was about achieving childhood dreams," he said, "But did you figure out the head fake?" A head fake was a maneuver he'd learned playing high school football—looking in one direction while darting in the other. Randy paused as the listeners tried to figure out where he was going with this ball.

"It's not about how to achieve your dreams," he said. "It's about how to lead your life. If you lead your life the right way, the karma will take care of itself. The dreams will come to you."

He then clicked to the next slide on his PowerPoint, and a question filled the screen: "Have you figured out the second head fake?"

Randy hung back a beat. "This talk wasn't for you here in this room," he told the audience. "It was for my kids." Then he clicked to his very last

slide, standing with his children by the swing set, Logan and Chloe hugged close in his arms, Dylan riding on his shoulders.

So now ask yourself ...
What are your dreams?
What feeds your spirit?

Ask yourself ...
Which people have touched and blessed your life?
Who are your teachers and heroes?

Ask yourself ...
What kind of person do you want to be?
What kind of legacy would you like to leave for your descendants?

And ask yourself ...
What message would you like to transmit when you come to deliver your own
Last Lecture?

So where Are They Now and how are they doing? Just two years old when her father died, Chloe Pausch is currently a student at the Pittsburgh School for the Creative and Performing Arts. She is a talented singer, dancer and actress and takes part in musicals and other performances. Older brothers Dylan and Logan went on to attend the Norfolk Academy, athletes like their dad excelling in cross country and wrestling and, like their father, honing a gift for oratory; delivering a persuasive public speech is a graduation requirement at Virginia's oldest private high school. Four years after Randy's death, his wife Jai married retired naval officer Rich Essenberger and wrote her own book, *Dream New Dreams*, to help others coping with the death of a loved one. "Life is a precious gift, and I don't intend to waste a day of it," says Jai. "Have I experienced tragedy? Yes, I have. But it would be another real tragedy if I didn't recover from the sadness I have felt and thus missed many happy moments along the way. Was my dream crushed? Yes, it was. And that will happen again. But when it does, I will pick up those pieces and create something new. I will always dream new dreams."