

Book Review

The Last Lecture, Wisdom Delivered during the Last Year of Randy Pausch's Life

Authors: Randy Pausch with Jeffrey Zaslow.
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Randy Pausch, a tenured professor of computer science at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was diagnosed in August of 2007 at age 46 with metastatic pancreatic cancer and was projected to live a few months. He had been married for seven years to his wife Jai, and they had three young children. *The Last Lecture* is the story of how Pausch lived the last year of his life after the diagnosis. He died on July 25, 2008.

Major universities in the United States traditionally ask professors at the end of their careers to address and deliver a "last lecture." When Carnegie Mellon invited Pausch to give his last lecture, he agreed to do so after some misgivings and doubts. He entitled it "Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams." Pausch prepared his talk primarily to leave a video memory for his three young children. Anticipating an audience of no more than 50, Pausch found that more than 400 showed up. Among them was Jeffrey Zaslow, a columnist for the *Wall Street Journal*, and he wrote a story that helped fuel worldwide interest in Pausch.

The lecture was disseminated on the world wide web. Millions saw Pausch on YouTube, the internet site for publicly submitted videos. The lecture was translated into many languages, and over the ensuing few months, Pausch, while on chemotherapy, authored the book *The Last Lecture* with Zaslow's assistance.

The lecture and the book inspired thousands to develop a positive attitude during adversity, stop feeling sorry for themselves, and pay more attention to matters that really matter: family and friends.

Time Magazine named Pausch one of the 100 most influential people in the world. ABC News declared him a "Person of the Year 2007."

This 200-page, easy-to-read book describes the

importance of overcoming obstacles, seizing every moment and making the best use of life. In a few words, the book is about living. A few snippets from the book will bring home the extraordinary courage and optimism Pausch demonstrated.

During his last lecture, the first slide he shows his audience is a CT scan of his liver showing 10 metastases. He comments "That is what it is. We can't change it. We just have to decide how we will respond. We cannot change the cards we are dealt with, just how we play the hand." (p. 17) It is as if Pausch were uttering Allah's words in the Qur'an:

مَا أَصَابَ مِنْ مُصِيبَةٍ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا فِي أَنْفُسِكُمْ إِلَّا فِي كِتَابٍ مِّن قَبْلِ أَنْ نَبْرَأَهَا إِنَّ ذَلِكَ عَلَى اللَّهِ يَسِيرٌ لَّكِنَّا تَأْسَوْنَ عَلَى مَا فَاتَكُمْ وَلَا تَفْرَحُونَ بِمَا آتَاكُمْ وَاللَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ كُلَّ مُخْتَالٍ فَخُورٍ

No evil befalls on earth nor in your own selves, but it is in a book before We bring it into existence; surely that is easy for Allah. So that you may not grieve for what has escaped you, nor be exultant at what He has given you; and Allah does not love any arrogant boaster.¹

Pausch devoted a fair amount of time to his upbringing and to his parents, particularly his father. He related that during his childhood, his family recognized two types of families: those that need a dictionary to get through dinner and those that don't. When he complained about a particularly difficult class in his doctorate program called "The Theory Qualifier", his mother patted him on his arm

and said: “We know just how you feel, honey. And remember when your father was your age, he was fighting the Germans” (chapter 4, p. 21).

The latter half of the book deals with challenges, why they exist, and how to handle them. For example, “Brick walls-obstacles-challenges are there for a reason. They give us a chance to show how badly we want something” (p. 52, 79).

I particularly enjoyed reading about Pausch’s time management strategy (p. 108). “Time is all you have. And you may find one day that you have less than you think” (p. 111). The final chapters deal with setting high goals, working hard, not complaining and not obsessing about what others think (p. 131). There is a fine and practical section on working together with seven tips for successful team work.

I felt there was a very practical take home message for everyone in this last lecture. As health care providers we know how a patient’s positive attitude has a beneficial impact on disease outcome. We and our patients are constantly challenged, as stated in the Qur’an:

وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ بِشَيْءٍ مِّنَ الْخَوْفِ وَالْجُوعِ
وَتَقْصٍ مِّنَ الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَنْفُسِ وَالثَّمَرَاتِ وَبَشِّرِ
الصَّابِرِينَ

Be sure we shall test you with something of

fear and hunger, some loss in goods, lives, and the fruits (of your labor), but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere.²

When faced with a challenge or brick wall, instead of becoming fearful, angry, sullen and withdrawn, one needs to develop patience, perseverance, self control, and constancy. The late Randy Pausch’s book *The Last Lecture* provides a very practical demonstration of those attributes. At age 46, faced with a terminal disseminated cancer, he set out to leave a video message for his three young children at his last lecture at Carnegie Mellon University. In addition to the video message for his wife and children, he left a lasting legacy for all and a better financial nest egg for his family. He succeeded in making sweet lemonade from the bitter lemon fate delivered to him.

References

1. Glorious Qur’an, Chapter 57, Verses 22-3.
2. Glorious Qur’an, Chapter 2, Verse 155.

Submitted by

Faroque Ahmad Khan, MB, MACP
Member, JIMA Editorial Board
Director, Research and Publications
King Fahd Medical City
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia