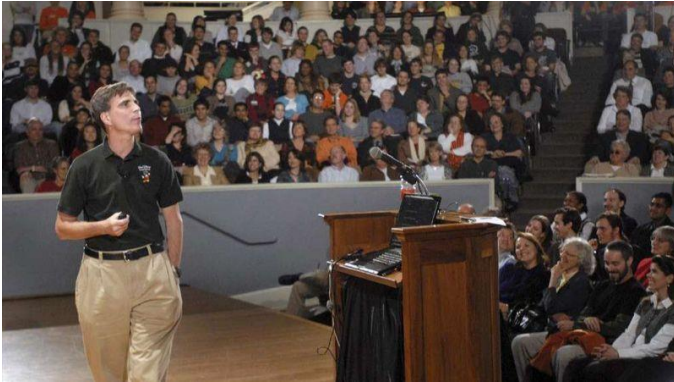


Dying professor's last lecture offers timeless lesson: 'Time is all you have'

By JERRY DAVICH

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Randy Pausch, a former University of Virginia professor, gives his final lecture on time management on the Charlottesville campus Nov. 27, 2007. (AP Photo/Daily Progress, Kaylin Bowers)

Time seems infinite when you're a kid, elusive when you're an adult, and precious when you're near death.

"Time is all you have. And you may find one day that you have less than you think," wrote Randy Pausch, a former Carnegie Mellon University computer scientist.

More than a decade ago, Pausch wrote these words while facing terminal cancer. His thoughts about the concept of time, the meaning of life, and the inevitability of death led to one final collegiate lecture which became an international internet sensation. And also to a best-selling book, "The Last Lecture," which I finally got around to reading.

"All my life, I've been very aware of that time is finite," wrote Pausch, whose book was co-written by Jeffrey Zaslow, the late journalist whose compelling stories in the Wall Street Journal always entranced me.

I, too, have always been acutely aware that time is finite. Sometimes to a fault. I treat my time like businessmen treat their bank accounts, or like models treat their appearance. It means everything to me. I rarely feel I waste my time these days after too many years of spending it like I owned an endless amount. I don't. None of us do.

Knowing for several months that he would die from pancreatic cancer, Pausch put a special premium on his time, as all of us should do, I believe. In 2006, he was diagnosed. In 2007, his diagnosis was terminal. Less than a year later he was dead.

No more time.

No more time to play with his kids. Or to drive around his convertible. Or to ponder the future together with his wife. Or to lecture college students. He ran out of time.

Regardless if you believe in an afterlife or eternal life or only one life, Pausch's time ran out on this plane of existence. Period. And, as a computer scientist who dealt all his life with scientific facts, Pausch understood this undeniable fact.

"What wisdom would we impart to the world if we knew it was our last chance?" Pausch wrote in his book. "If we had to vanish tomorrow, what would we want as our legacy?"

Again, I also have similar thoughts though, thankfully, I'm not dying of a terminal illness, as far as I know. However, if you think about it, life itself is a terminal condition. This doesn't have to be interpreted in a doom and gloom way, but in a way that celebrates every day, every year, every breath.

Pausch truly lived life this way, especially after receiving his fatal diagnosis. While reading his book, I found myself jotting down key words and sentences and concepts. On page 108, about halfway into the book, I felt compelled to start highlighting those concepts, beginning with a brief chapter on the usage of time.

"Time must be explicitly managed, like money," Pausch wrote, prompting me to nod my head in agreement. I'm a much better banker with my time than with my money. And I waste more money than I do time. Despite his admitted frugality, Pausch began caring more about his time than his money, no matter how small the amount.

For instance, he mistakenly overpaid a grocery bill by \$16.55, and he could have easily recouped it by waiting for a manager to fill out a form and go through the refunding policy. Pausch didn't have that kind of time to wait.

"So I left the store, happier to have 15 minutes than \$16," he wrote.

I highlighted that sentence twice in the book. I've lived similar scenarios many times.

Although time is the most precious commodity we possess, most of us have wasted so much of it in our lives, myself included. I think back to all the time I've given away to people who didn't deserve it, to tasks that didn't matter, to emotions that didn't do me any good.

Pausch delivered his "Last Lecture" Sept. 18, 2007, at Carnegie Mellon University, in Pennsylvania, where he taught before moving his family to Virginia, closer to relatives who could help raise his kids after his looming death.

Before addressing hundreds of guests for his final lecture, Pausch received a long standing ovation that he may have expected. He motioned them to sit back down, saying, "Make me earn it."

He understood the true value of time. Not only his time, but their time.

"Ask yourself: Are you spending your time on the right things," he wrote.

I ask myself this question almost on a daily basis. It's become my mantra.

"You may have causes, goals, interests," he wrote. "Are they even worth pursuing?"

That depends on how much free time you have, I guess.

The notion of "free time" – an oxymoron in my mind – has always fascinated me. I once possessed infinite amounts of it. Then again, how much is the right amount? A team of researchers from UCLA and the University

of Pennsylvania surveyed more than 35,000 Americans and found that 2.5 hours each day is the optimal amount of free time.

Not enough free time each day equates to a certain dissatisfaction in life. Yet too much of it doesn't necessarily lead to greater satisfaction. There's a sweet spot that obviously is different for all of us, but it hovers around 2.5 hours a day, their study showed.

Pausch ran out of free time before he ran out of time.

"I'm living like I'm dying. But at the same time I'm very much living like I'm still living," he wrote near the end of his book.

At his last lecture, his wife Jai joined him on stage for an emotional embrace. She whispered in his ear, "Please don't die."

Pausch, a father of three young children, died July 25, 2008. He was 47.

Unlike Zaslow, who died instantly in a vehicle crash in 2012 (a tragic irony regarding the book he co-wrote), Pausch lived fully until he died. He took advantage of every second, literally. How many of us can say this?