

## **The Last Lecture:** *Life lessons from a professor with months to live*

*“Brick walls give us a chance to show how badly we want something.”*  
*-Randy Pausch*

On September 18, 2007, Dr. Randy Pausch, an esteemed professor of Computer Science, Human Computer Interaction, and Design at Carnegie Mellon University, gave a “last lecture” in front of an audience of 400. Unlike other contributors to the university last-lecture series, Randy knew this would really be his last lecture, since he had been diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer. His lecture, entitled “Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams,” was both instructive and inspirational.

You can experience Randy’s entire lecture by logging on to [www.thelastlecture.com](http://www.thelastlecture.com) and/or by reading Randy’s “National Bestseller” book, *The Last Lecture* published in 2008 by Hyperion Books, NY. I read Randy’s book and viewed his lecture, and was moved by both. Here I review the human-dynamic principles of his lecture I found most innovative, compelling and related to the promotion of safety.

### **The Elephant in the Room**

Randy began his lecture by introducing the elephant in the room—an unspoken topic or fact that influences people’s thoughts and perceptions. In this case, the elephant was the fact Randy was dying of pancreatic cancer and this was a primary reason many attended his last lecture. Thus, Randy flashed a giant image of the CT scans of his liver onto the screen, and pointed out the tumors. He affirmed he was not in denial of his impending death and declared, “We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand.”

Then Randy showed he was in better shape than most in the audience by performing several one-arm push-ups. He declared he was not going to talk about cancer or dying, but about living and achieving his childhood dreams.

### **The Elephant at My Safety Talks**

A participant at my ASSE talk last June (2008) wrote on the evaluation sheet: “This narcissistic presentation was designed for book/Coastal promotion. You pretended to be passionate but it’s just about Scott Geller.”

While this kind of disheartening evaluation is rare, it does reflect an elephant in the room which could be on the minds of others and interfere with my sincere intention to teach. More specifically, some perceive my reference to the availability of my books, CDs and DVDs on People-Based Safety as a sales pitch rather than a sincere desire to help people make a difference.

Perhaps I would get more participants on board with my message by revealing this elephant and clarifying, “I am here today to teach and share principles I’m passionate about. What matters most to me is not whether you buy my book, but whether you ‘buy into’ my knowledge, and whether your workplace becomes safer, more caring, and more productive. If that happens, I’ve achieved my goal, regardless of whether you purchase my book.”

### **Suspiciousness of Intent**

Barriers to understanding and relationship-building develop when people are suspicious of one’s intentions. Is your concern about my safety authentic, or are you just following required protocol? Do you really want us to improve our safety with your product, or are you only interested in making another sale? Have you implemented this safety incentive program to prevent injuries or only to decrease the reporting of incidents?

You can see how the answer to these intention-relevant questions can influence the impact of interpersonal conversation. In other words, suspiciousness of a communicator's intention is an elephant that can hinder progress. My recommendation: Put the cards on the table. State your sincere intention to help, but if relevant, acknowledge that personal achievement and/or financial gain could be a beneficial side effect.

### **The Caring of Corrective Feedback**

Randy told the story of his frustrating experiences when learning the fundamentals of football at age 11. During practice, his coach rode him hard with reprimands like, "You're doing it all wrong, Pausch. Go back! Do it again!" Once, when Randy failed to meet the coach's standard, he was required to do push-ups for punishment. The assistant coach consoled Randy with "When you're screwing up and nobody says anything to you anymore that means they've given up on you."

This experience reflects two valuable safety-related lessons: 1) Repeated corrective feedback is essential for improvement, and 2) Asking a person to stop a certain at-risk behavior and/or perform a particular safe behavior is an act of caring. When people do not speak up on behalf of another person's safety, they send an "I give up" or "I don't care" message.

### **The Head Fake**

Dr. Pausch testified to the important life lessons he learned while being trained on the fundamentals of football, including "teamwork, perseverance, sportsmanship, the value of hard work, an ability to deal with adversity." He called this indirect learning a "head fake," whereby people learn things "they don't realize they're learning until well into the process."

Ever since hearing Randy's last lecture, I've been pointing out specific examples of head-fake learning to my graduate students. This is certainly not a new idea or concept. The head fake

is key to the success of nondirective counseling, whereby the counselor shows authentic empathy and caring, enabling the client to arrive at a self-directed solution to a problem.

As detailed in my August 2005 *ISHN* column, the effective behavior-based coach employs the head-fake principle throughout the observation-and-feedback process. Specifically, the coach is not there to make judgments or give directions, but rather to merely collect relevant and objective injury-prevention information, and share the results in a mutual learning experience. With the head-fake approach, both parties develop self-accountability to perform the safety-related actions defined by the Critical Behavior Checklist.

### **More Last-Lecture Lessons**

Randy shared several other life lessons in his last lecture, including: 1) Dream big, 2) Learn from your students, 3) Work well with others, 4) Look for the best in everybody, 5) Watch what people do, not what they say, 6) Help others, 7) Show gratitude, 8) Give, receive, and cherish feedback, 9) Tell the truth, 10) Strive to be good at something, 11) Be prepared—“Luck is where preparation meets opportunity,” 12) Ask for help when you need it, 13) Don’t complain, just try harder, 14) Never give up on things important to you, and 15) Apologize when you screw up. Those familiar with the actively caring principles of People-Based Safety have heard all of these lessons before.

### **In Conclusion**

Professor Randy Pausch lost his battle to pancreatic cancer on July 25<sup>th</sup>, 2008, at the age of 47. But his positive legacy lives on. Randy’s book and last lecture will be instructive and inspirational for many generations to come. This review is a biased sampling of the insight available in his book and from his lecture. There is much more to learn from Randy’s scholarship.

Finally, Randy's last lecture emphasizes a most important life principle—Have fun!

Indeed, Randy showed youthful energy and creative humor throughout his profound and spirited lecture. In Randy's words, "I'm dying and I'm having fun."

E. Scott Geller, Ph.D.  
Alumni Distinguished Professor, Virginia Tech  
Senior Partner, Safety Performance Solutions

Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help companies worldwide apply human dynamics to industrial safety and beyond. Coastal Training and Technologies Corporation has published Dr. Geller's books on People-Based Safety, including his latest: *The Courage Factor*, coauthored by Bob Veazie. For more information, please log on to [www.people-based-safety.com](http://www.people-based-safety.com); call SPS at 540-951-7233, or Coastal at 1-800-767-7703, ext 3313