

# COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

by

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Graduates, parents, members of our faculty, staff and administration, esteemed alumni and guests, ladies and gentlemen ...

Commencement speeches typically express a hopeful and positive view of the future. At thousands of ceremonies like this one, speakers are expressing their sincere hope that the graduates gathered before them will take the knowledge and experiences that they have accumulated over the last four or five years, and use them as the foundation for a long, productive, successful ... and most importantly ... a happy, life.

That is certainly the wish that I have for each of you. It's a well-worn analogy, but you stand on the threshold of the wonderful journey through life. We are fortunate to live in America, where the only limitations on your opportunities and success are the limitations you place on yourself. You have the freedom to go as far and as fast as your talent and determinate will carry you.

While here at the university, many of our traditional students have done a great deal of growing and maturing. No doubt, some of you experienced a lapse or two in the maturation process while attending campus social and sports events, but for the most part you have all left behind that immature and impetuous teenager you once were and made large strides toward adulthood.

But there's one trait of teenagers that remains a part of most of you, and that is a remarkably short perspective of the future. Teenagers have a hard time projecting more than a few minutes into the future. They live for the moment, and as a result often find themselves in a multitude of less-than-desirable situations. At this point in your life, your time horizon has extended a bit, but most of you are still primarily focused on the next few weeks or months.

You assume that you have a full life ahead of you, and plenty of time to do all things that you want to do. For most of you that is, in fact, the case. But I would suggest that your life may be better lived if you live it as if your time was much more limited.

Randy Pausch is a professor of computer science at Carnegie Mellon University. He was invited to deliver a speech modeled after an ongoing series of lectures where professors were asked to talk about a topic that really mattered to them, and to impart their wisdom as if were the last lecture they would ever give. The series was referred to as "Last Lectures."

Ironically, a few weeks after being invited to deliver this lecture, Randy learned that he had pancreatic cancer, and was given three to six months to live. This was last August. At the time, he was 47 years old with a wife and three young children.

He decided that the speech was now doubly important. He saw it as "a way to put himself in a bottle that would one day wash up on the beach for my children, Dylan, Logan and Chloe." (All quote from Pausch, Randy, "The Lessons I'm Leaving Behind," Akron Beacon Journal Parade, April 6, 2008)

## 2008 Commencement Address

His lecture, titled "Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams," was delivered on September 18, 2007. It struck a chord with many people, and earned him widespread recognition. I'd like to pass along to you some advice from a man who knew he had a very short time to live.

First is to **"always have fun."** Many of you will make career and life decisions based on what will create the greatest income. There's nothing wrong with being rich, but riches are no guarantee of happiness. You will be much more enthused about going to a job that you love than to a job that you hate but pays well. Randy Pausch posed it as a choice between being one of the two Winnie the Pooh characters, Eeyore or Tigger. Pausch's choice? "I won't let go of the Tigger in me."

His next piece of advice is to **"ask for what you want."** As an example, he described a trip to Disney World with his dad and his son, Dylan, who was four years old at the time. As they waited for the monorail, Randy's dad mentioned that it would be great fun to sit in the front of the train with the driver.

Randy told him "Actually I've learned that there's a trick to getting to sit up front. Would you like to see it?" He walked over to the ride attendant and said, "Excuse me. Could we please sit in the front car?" With that, the attendant led them to the front seat, to the surprise of his dad and the delight of his son.

There are so many opportunities that we miss, so many questions that go answered, so many doors left unopened, simply because we hesitate to ask for what we want.

**"Dare to take a risk."** Randy encouraged his students to take risks in his classes. In a virtual reality class that he taught, he presented a stuffed penguin to the student team that took the biggest gamble while not meeting its goals.

"The award came from the idea that, when penguins jump in water that might have predators ... one of them has to be the first penguin." His stuffed penguin rewarded the students who weren't afraid to take a risk and "dive in" to a challenging task. You will find that success and failure have a lot in common as long as, during both, you do your best. Take a risk and dive in.

Randy advised people to **"look for the best in everybody."** A friend of his at Disney Imagineering told him "If you wait long enough, people will surprise and impress you."

Think of anyone ... a friend, family member or fellow student. You can probably think of a number of things that you see as flaws in that person's character or habits. Too often, we focus only on those negatives. We would all do better, instead, to focus on the positive traits. No doubt there are far more good things about these people than there are bad. Randy's friend encouraged him to always look for the good. "People WILL show you their good side. Just keep waiting. It will come out."

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The final piece of advice isn't surprising from a man with only months to live. Randy encouraged people to "**make time for what matters.**" He was 39 when he got married, and when he went on his honeymoon ... well before his cancer diagnosis ... he wanted to devote his full attention to his new bride. But his boss demanded that people be able to reach Randy while he was on his honeymoon.

So on his answering machine, Randy recorded this message:

"Hi. This is Randy. I waited until I was 39 to get married, so my wife and I are going away for a month. I hope you don't have a problem with that, but my boss does. Apparently I have to be reachable."

He then gave the name of his wife's parents and the city where they lived.

"If you call directory assistance, you can get their phone number. And then, if you can convince my in-laws that your emergency merits interrupting their only daughter's honeymoon, they have our number."

Their honeymoon was not interrupted by any phone calls.

You will have to make decisions every day of your life, choosing how to spend that most precious resource ... time. You will constantly have to pick between job and home, between work and family. Never confuse what's urgent with what's truly important, and always remember that it's impossible to get back even one second of time wasted on unimportant things.

At the time my speech was prepared, Randy Pausch was still alive and continuing to battle cancer. His time, however, is most definitely short. For him, the end of life is very near on the horizon, so he feels a special urgency about living his life as fully as possible, guided by the rules for living that I just shared with you.

For most of us, the end of life is over the horizon and far beyond our range of sight. But we can all live our lives more fully if we never forget that a long life isn't guaranteed for any of us. Our situations can change in the blink of an eye, so it's vital that we make the most of every day we have here on Earth.

I am confident that the professors, professional staff, administrators and others here at the university have done their best to equip each of you with the knowledge, skills and guidance needed to prepare you for your entry into the world outside of college. The responsibility to go out into the world and make your way now rests firmly with you.

I believe that you will find the greatest personal happiness and success if you take to heart the simple advice of Randy Pausch; always have fun, ask for what you want, dare to take risks, look for the best in everybody, and make time for what matters.

Good luck to each of you.