

Last Lectures

Jamaica Plain, September 7, 2008, Rev. Terry Burke

Early in August I was driving with my daughters in central Michigan on a state route that is known, incongruously, as the Dixie Highway. At that point it was a four lane divided highway, though it wasn't limited access. I was in the slower lane and glanced over for a second to my right to see a large Catholic cemetery - What a huge cemetery in a largely rural area! I looked back at the road to see a red SUV that had simply stopped in my lane ahead of me - it wasn't braking, or signaling, it was simply stopped. I put my brakes to the floor and was thankful that I had bought new tires just before the trip. At the last moment, I was able to swerve to the right off of the road. Thankfully, it was level ground, and we scooted around the stopped car. Soon, the red SUV passed me in the other lane, the driver talking on his cell phone. Shocked by the experience, I just kept driving. Half an hour later, at my brother's home, I told him how it felt like we'd almost bought the ranch.

That was about ten days after Randy Pausch died. One of my children had announced the fact after seeing his death on the computer main screen. About all I knew about him at the time was that he was a dying young professor who had given a "last lecture" that was very popular online.

At times of beginning like today, it's good to think about endings. Last year in this service I quoted Morrie Of Tuesdays With Morrie. He had this Buddhist idea that everyday you pretend a little bird on your shoulder asks, "Is it today? Are you ready? Because we don't know the day or time of our deaths. Unitarian Universalists went to church in Knoxville this July and were shot by the liberal-hating disgruntled ex-husband of a parishioner. People went to work in New York City on September 11th, 7 years ago. We don't know. I try always to say "I love you" to my family members when they leave; they think I'm nuts.

I learned Pausch was a Unitarian Universalist. His academic specialty was virtual reality. Before his lecture, he had moved with his family to Virginia so that his wife's relatives could provide support during his illness. He jokes how the university had recently changed the name to something innocuous, "Journeys." How many of you have seen Pausch's Last Lecture?" When I saw it, the site had had 6,700,000 hits. I'm not an academic, so this is a tradition I wasn't familiar with. I gather that people often do them when they are retiring. How many of you have ever seen a Last Lecture? My Unitarian Universalist colleague in Weston has potlucks where retiring academics give the congregation a "Last Lecture."

At the age of 47, Carnegie Mellon professor Pausch was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He received treatment, but the cancer spread to his liver, where he developed 10 tumors. A month before his "Last Lecture" he was told that he had three months to live. Pausch was married with children ages six, four, and one-and-a-half. Church Administrator Jean O'Leary and I work on the covers for these orders of service. I suggested a photo of Pausch with the children. Jean preferred this one. Seeing how young his children are is very painful.

From his lecture he comes across as an unusually caring teacher, addressing students by name in the audience, and someone with a strong sense of humor. He had a reputation as a good lecturer, which in computer science, he joked, was like being the "tallest of the seven dwarves." Pausch was clearly a very work-driven, Type A kind of guy. He said he was "most at home on a football field." In the interest of full disclosure, I ran cross country in high school; the football players sneered at us.

In his lecture, Pausch chose not to talk about his illness, spirituality, or his family. Instead, he focused on his childhood dreams. Things like winning big stuffed animals at amusement parks. Having won quite a few of the humongous beasts, he had them brought on stage for the lecture, to be taken away by members of the audience "first come, first serve." Having labeled his terminal cancer the "elephant in the room at the start of the

talk, he was pleased to learn afterwards that a young woman student with cancer had taken his big stuffed elephant.

Another of his childhood dreams was to be Capt. Kirk of Star Trek. Instead, he met actor William Shattner, who came to Pausch's computer lab to learn about his research. He also had hoped to be a National Football League player, and talked about the value of our experiences when we try our best and don't achieve our dreams.

For Pausch, even more satisfying than achieving childhood dreams was helping others with their dreams, through his teaching and computer programs. He believed that you would find the good in people if you only waited long enough - a deeper faith mine. And he believed in having fun helping people -he said that you could choose to be Tygger or Eeyore, enthusiastic or down. He especially wanted to teach young people computer skills and creativity with his Alice Program. Knowing he wouldn't see the finished software product, he compared himself to Moses on Mt. Nebo, able to see the promised land that he couldn't enter.

The recording of Pausch's lecture became an internet phenomenon. A Wall Street Journal writer approached him about doing a book together. In order not to take precious time away from his family, he wrote it while exercising. Riding on his bicycle on neighborhood streets, he wore a head set to communicate with the co-author. Pausch describes the book, called *The Last Lecture*, as a "message in a bottle" for his very young children.

The book also stands in a respectable tradition of books, going back to the *Memoirs of General Ulysses S. Grant*, written by the dying to provide financially for their families. It's kind of a thin book. At one point Pausch recommends hand writing thank you notes to people because it shows that you value them. In his lecture, he quipped, "There'll be no death bed conversions, well, there is one, I've just bought a Mac." The book does contain a deathbed conversion. Towards the end, he talks about the couple's therapy he's doing

with his wife Jai. He says, " I had spent much of my life doubting the effectiveness of counseling. Now, with my back against the wall, I can see how hugely helpful it can be."

Pausch the teacher comes through much more in the book. Remembering that the first penguin jumping into the water checks for deadly predators and might get eaten, he gave a First Penguin Award to the team of students who tried the most ambitious project and failed the most gloriously. He also lectured his students about considering the people who would use the technology they created. Reading in class from complicated VCR instruction manuals, he would then take a sledgehammer and smash a VCR. When he left Carnegie Mellon he was given a sledgehammer with the plaque, "So many VCRs, so little time."

Given three months to live, Pausch lived 11 months. He died on July 25th this summer. As my Russian friends would say, "Memory Eternal!"

Fall is a time of beginnings, but it's also a good time to think about our endings, our last lectures, what has been important to us in our lives. Perhaps you might want to write a last lecture for your loved ones, or even speak at one of our potlucks. And think about how you want to live your life according to your values. In a few weeks, our Jewish brothers and sisters will sit in silently in synagogues and think about the meaning of their lives for Yom Kippur. It's good to take time to reflect.

Recently, we received manna from Heaven at the church. I arrived in a rush to find boxes of books on the side steps. I left them there to spent several hours working busily inside, then rediscovered the books as I was hurrying off. I enlisted my wife Ellen McGuire to help me move them temporarily into the sanctuary, so that they wouldn't get rained on.

A few days later I glanced at one of the books, *Writing Down the Bones*, and an old photo fell out. I knew from the photograph of a mother or grandmother whose books they had to be. It turned out that many were signed with her name. Suzy Saul died last spring in her early seventies. She was a poet who spent many years teaching prisoners. She was

a fiery, fiercely independent woman. She could also be a royal pain. She drove her children crazy - they wouldn't know where she was or what she was doing. She outlived her cancer diagnosis by over a year. Two days before she died, I visited her and she had me do my comedy set. She was a great audience. Someone, family or friend dropped off some of her books. There are especially books on writing and poetry, but politics too, and junk books. I have them stacked up behind me. If you knew Suzy, take some, or if you didn't, please take some too. I've already taken *Writing Down the Bones*, the *Nearings'* *Living the Good Life*, and Suzy's 1940's paperback copy of *Walden*. Please take them all. They are Suzy's "Last Lecture" for us.

This beginning church year, we should also consider our church ending. What, if say, a natural disaster destroyed our city. What would be our church's "Last Lecture?" What would have been the meaning of this church as a sacred center in the city? How did we practice spiritual freedom in a community of faith? How did we "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God?" Well, the church is still here, and we all have this day. Share your words and deeds, what's important to you.

In June, we close the regular church year with a spiral dance. We have a tradition of beginning the year with a Buddhist walking meditation. We walk silently together through the building, outside, and back in the front door. If you're not comfortable with that, please feel free to remain here in the sanctuary. Though it's hard for some people, please try to walk silently. You're supposed to look down on a Buddhist walking meditation, but you can look up. You can take a break - you don't have to keep driving like I did after the near miss on the Dixie Highway. Think about your "Last Lecture" and the people you walk with. Then we'll come back here to the sanctuary and sing. Singing makes you feel really alive. So I invite you to come join me for our walking meditation....

Benediction: T. S. Eliot wrote, "In my end is my beginning." We give thanks for this new beginning of growth and change. Amen

