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*An Injured Lion  
Still Wants to Roar*

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A LOT OF professors give talks titled "The Last Lecture." Maybe you've seen one.

It has become a common exercise on college campuses. Professors are asked to consider their demise and to ruminate on what matters most to them. And while they speak, audiences can't help but mull the same question: What wisdom would we impart to the world if we knew it was our last chance? If we had to vanish tomorrow, what would we want as our legacy?

For years, Carnegie Mellon had a "Last Lecture Series." But by the time organizers got around to asking me to do it, they'd renamed their series "Journeys," asking selected professors "to offer reflections on their personal and professional journeys." It wasn't the most exciting description, but I agreed to go with it. I was given the September slot.

At the time, I already had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, but I was optimistic. Maybe I'd be among the lucky ones who'd survive.

While I went through treatment, those running the lecture series kept sending me emails. "What will you be talking about?" they asked. "Please provide an abstract." There's a formality in academia that can't be ignored, even if a man is busy with other things, like trying not to die. By mid-August, I was told that a poster for the lecture had to be printed, so I'd have to decide on a topic.

That very week, however, I got the news: My most recent treatment hadn't worked. I had just months to live.

I knew I could cancel the lecture. Everyone would understand. Suddenly, there were so many other things to be done. I had to deal with my own grief and the sadness of those who loved me. I had to throw myself into getting my family's affairs in order. And yet, despite everything, I couldn't shake the idea of giving the talk. I was energized by the idea of delivering a last lecture that really was a last lecture. What could I say? How would it be received? Could I even get through it?

"They'll let me back out," I told my wife, Jai, "but I really want to do it."

Jai (pronounced "Jay") had always been my cheerleader. When I was enthusiastic, so was she. But she was leery of this whole last-lecture idea. We had just moved from Pittsburgh to Southeastern Virginia so that after my death, Jai and the kids could be near her family. Jai felt that I ought to be spending my precious time with our kids, or unpacking our new house, rather than devoting my hours to writing the lecture and then traveling back to Pittsburgh to deliver it.

"Call me selfish," Jai told me. "But I want all of you. Any



Logan, Chloe, Jai, myself, and Dylan.

time you'll spend working on this lecture is lost time, because it's time away from the kids and from me."

I understood where she was coming from. From the time I'd gotten sick, I had made a pledge to myself to defer to Jai and honor her wishes. I saw it as my mission to do all I could to lessen the burdens in her life brought on by my illness.

That's why I spent many of my waking hours making arrangements for my family's future without me. Still, I couldn't let go of my urge to give this last lecture.

Throughout my academic career, I'd given some pretty good talks. But being considered the best speaker in a computer science department is like being known as the tallest of the Seven Dwarfs. And right then, I had the feeling that I had more in me, that if I gave it my all, I might be able to offer people something special. "Wisdom" is a strong word, but maybe that was it.

Jai still wasn't happy about it. We eventually took the issue to Michele Reiss, the psychotherapist we'd begun seeing a few months earlier. She specializes in helping families when one member is confronting a terminal illness.

"I know Randy," Jai told Dr. Reiss. "He's a workaholic. I know just what he'll be like when he starts putting the lecture together. It'll be all-consuming." The lecture, she argued, would be an unnecessary diversion from the overwhelming issues we were grappling with in our lives.

Another matter upsetting Jai: To give the talk as scheduled, I would have to fly to Pittsburgh the day before, which was Jai's forty-first birthday. "This is my last birthday we'll celebrate together," she told me. "You're actually going to leave me on my birthday?"

Certainly, the thought of leaving Jai that day was painful to me. And yet, I couldn't let go of the idea of the lecture. I had come to see it as the last moment of my career, as a way to say goodbye to my "work family." I also found myself fan-

tasizing about giving a last lecture that would be the oratorical equivalent of a retiring baseball slugger driving one last ball into the upper deck. I *had* always liked the final scene in *The Natural*, when the aging, bleeding ballplayer Roy Hobbs miraculously hits that towering home run.

Dr. Reiss listened to Jai and to me. In Jai, she said, she saw a strong, loving woman who had intended to spend decades building a full life with a husband, raising children to adulthood. Now our lives together had to be squeezed into a few months. In me, Dr. Reiss saw a man not yet ready to fully retreat to his home life, and certainly not yet ready to climb into his deathbed. "This lecture will be the last time many people I care about will see me in the flesh," I told her flatly. "I have a chance here to really think about what matters most to me, to cement how people will remember me, and to do whatever good I can on the way out."

More than once, Dr. Reiss had watched Jai and me sit together on her office couch, holding tightly to each other, both of us in tears. She told us she could see the great respect between us, and she was often viscerally moved by our commitment to getting our final time together right. But she said it wasn't her role to weigh in on whether or not I gave the lecture. "You'll have to decide that on your own," she said, and encouraged us to really listen to each other, so we could make the right decision for both of us.

Given Jai's reticence, I knew I had to look honestly at my motivations. Why was this talk so important to me? Was it a way to remind me and everyone else that I was still very much

arguing that. More than 37,000 Americans a year are diagnosed with pancreatic cancer alone.

I thought hard about how I defined myself: as a teacher, a computer scientist, a husband, a father, a son, a friend, a brother, a mentor to my students. Those were all roles I valued. But did any of those roles really set me apart?

Though I've always had a healthy sense of self, I knew this lecture needed more than just bravado. I asked myself: "What do I, alone, truly have to offer?"

And then, there in that waiting room, I suddenly knew exactly what it was. It came to me in a flash: Whatever my accomplishments, all of the things I loved were rooted in the dreams and goals I had as a child . . . and in the ways I had managed to fulfill almost all of them. My uniqueness, I realized, came in the specifics of all the dreams—from incredibly meaningful to decidedly quirky—that defined my forty-six years of life. Sitting there, I knew that despite the cancer, I truly believed I was a lucky man because I had lived out these dreams. And I had lived out my dreams, in great measure, because of things I was taught by all sorts of extraordinary people along the way. If I was able to tell my story with the passion I felt, my lecture might help others find a path to fulfilling their own dreams.

I had my laptop with me in that waiting room, and fueled by this epiphany, I quickly tapped out an email to the lecture organizers. I told them I finally had a title for them. "My apologies for the delay," I wrote. "Let's call it: 'Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams.'"

## *My Life in a Laptop*

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HOW, EXACTLY, do you catalogue your childhood dreams? How do you get other people to reconnect with theirs? As a scientist, these weren't the questions I typically struggled with.

For four days, I sat at my computer in our new home in Virginia, scanning slides and photos as I built a PowerPoint presentation. I've always been a visual thinker, so I knew the talk would have no text—no word script. But I amassed 300 images of my family, students and colleagues, along with dozens of offbeat illustrations that could make a point about childhood dreams. I put a few words on certain slides—bits of advice, sayings. Once I was on stage, those were supposed to remind me what to say.

As I worked on the talk, I'd rise from my chair every ninety minutes or so to interact with the kids. Jai saw me trying to remain engaged in family life, but she still thought I was spending way too much time on the talk, especially since