

I kept tinkering, rethinking, reorganizing. By 11 a.m., I felt I had a better narrative arc; maybe it would work. I showered, got dressed. At noon, Jai arrived from the airport and joined me and Steve for lunch. It was a solemn conversation, with Steve vowing to help look after Jai and the kids.

At 1:30 p.m., the computer lab on campus where I spent much of my life was dedicated in my honor; I watched the unveiling of my name over the door. At 2:15 p.m., I was in my office, feeling awful again—completely exhausted, sick from the chemo, and wondering if I'd have to go on stage wearing the adult diaper I'd brought as a precaution.

Steve told me I should lie down on my office couch for a while, and I did, but I kept my laptop on my belly so I could continue to fiddle. I cut another sixty slides.

At 3:30 p.m., a few people had already begun lining up for my talk. At 4 p.m., I roused myself off the couch and started gathering my props for the walk across campus to the lecture hall. In less than an hour, I'd have to be on the stage.

The Elephant in the Room

JAI WAS already in the hall—an unexpected full house of 400—and as I hopped on stage to check out the podium and get organized, she could see how nervous I was. While I busied myself arranging my props, Jai noticed that I was making eye contact with almost no one. She thought that I couldn't bring myself to look into the crowd, knowing I might see a friend or former student, and I'd be too overwhelmed by the emotion of that eye contact.

There was a rustling in the audience as I got myself ready. For those who came to see just what a man dying of pancreatic cancer looked like, surely there were questions: Was that my real hair? (Yes, I kept all my hair through chemotherapy.) Would they be able to sense how close to death I was as I spoke? (My answer: "Just watch!")

Even with the talk only minutes away, I continued puttering at the podium, deleting some slides, rearranging others. I was still working at it when I was given the signal. "We're ready to go," someone told me.

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I wasn't in a suit. I wore no tie. I wasn't going to get up there in some professorial tweed jacket with leather elbow patches. Instead, I had chosen to give my lecture wearing the most appropriate childhood-dream garb I could find in my closet.

Granted, at first glance I looked like the guy who'd take your order at a fast-food drive-through. But actually, the logo on my short-sleeved polo shirt was an emblem of honor because it's the one worn by Walt Disney Imagineers—the artists, writers and engineers who create theme-park fantasies. In 1995, I spent a six-month sabbatical as an Imagineer. It was a highlight of my life, the fulfillment of a childhood dream. That's why I was also wearing the oval "Randy" name badge given to me when I worked at Disney. I was paying tribute to that life experience, and to Walt Disney himself, who famously had said, "If you can dream it, you can do it."

I thanked the audience for coming, cracked a few jokes, and then I said: "In case there's anybody who wandered in and doesn't know the back story, my dad always taught me that when there's an elephant in the room, introduce it. If you look at my CT scans, there are approximately ten tumors in my liver, and the doctors told me I have three to six months of good health left. That was a month ago, so you can do the math."

I flashed a giant image of the CT scans of my liver onto the screen. The slide was headlined "The Elephant in the Room," and I had helpfully inserted red arrows pointing to each of the individual tumors.

I let the slide linger, so the audience could follow the arrows and count my tumors. "All right," I said. "That is what it is. We can't change it. We just have to decide how we'll respond. We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand."

In that moment, I was definitely feeling healthy and whole, the Randy of old, powered no doubt by adrenaline and the thrill of a full house. I knew I looked pretty healthy, too, and that some people might have trouble reconciling that with the fact that I was near death. So I addressed it. "If I don't seem as depressed or morose as I should be, sorry to disappoint you," I said, and after people laughed, I added: "I assure you I am not in denial. It's not like I'm not aware of what's going on."

"My family—my three kids, my wife—we just decamped. We bought a lovely house in Virginia, and we're doing that because that's a better place for the family to be down the road." I showed a slide of the new suburban home we'd just purchased. Above the photo of the house was the heading: "I am not in denial."

My point: Jai and I had decided to uproot our family, and I had asked her to leave a home she loved and friends who cared about her. We had taken the kids away from their Pittsburgh playmates. We had packed up our lives, throwing ourselves into a tornado of our own making, when we could have just cocooned in Pittsburgh, waiting for me to die. And we had made this move because we knew that once I was gone, Jai and the kids would need to live in a place where her extended family could help them and love them.

I also wanted the audience to know that I looked good, and felt OK, in part because my body had started to recover from the debilitating chemotherapy and radiation my doctors had been giving me. I was now on the easier-to-endure palliative chemo. "I am in phenomenally good health right now," I said. "I mean, the greatest thing of cognitive dissonance you will ever see is that I am in really good shape. In fact, I am in better shape than most of you."

I moved sideways toward center stage. Hours earlier, I wasn't sure I'd have the strength to do what I was about to do, but now I felt emboldened and potent. I dropped to the floor and began doing push-ups.

In the audience's laughter and surprised applause, it was almost as if I could hear everyone collectively exhaling their anxiety. It wasn't just some dying man. It was just me. I could begin.

II

REALLY ACHIEVING YOUR CHILDHOOD DREAMS

My Childhood Dreams

- Being in zero gravity
- Playing in the NFL
- Authoring an article in the World Book encyclopedia
- Being Captain Kirk
- Winning stuffed animals
- Being a Disney Imagineer

A slide from my talk . . .