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The Last Lecture: Lessons Learned Over a Lifetime

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Understandably, it seems most of us are focused on one subject these days – the current tough economic times. But as our leaders and financial experts debate solutions, this may be a good time for the rest of us to step back and examine the guiding principals by which we lead our lives. Unlike the economic crisis, over which we individually may have little control, each of us has **absolute** control over how we order our lives. Or as Randy Pausch, puts it, “We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand.” ***The Last Lecture. New York: Hyperion Books (2008)***

When Dr. Pausch, a popular computer science professor, husband and father of three small children was diagnosed with inoperable cancer, he decided to take charge of the situation by preparing a last lecture that would draw from his life experiences. His goal was to leave a legacy not only for his students but also for his children who would soon be fatherless. Some notable excerpts:

- **People are more important than things:** While still a bachelor, Pausch enjoyed the company of his sister’s young children. When he showed up in a new convertible to take the kids for a ride, his sister sternly warned them to “Be careful in Uncle Randy’s new car. Wipe your feet before you get in. Don’t get it dirty.” As his sister was outlining her rules, he slowly and methodically opened a can of soda and poured it on the cloth seats in the back of the convertible. His message was delivered with a dramatic flair that amazed his niece and nephew and no doubt shocked his sister! (Chapter 15)
- **Emphasize the positive whenever possible:** When he asked his oncologist, “How long before I die?” the physician framed the answer positively: “You probably have three to six months of good health.” This reminded Pausch of the time that he and his sister visited Disney World as young children and asked a worker, “What time does the park close?” The response: “The park is *open* until 8:00PM.” (Chapter 12)
- **Negative feedback is still very good feedback:** When his football coach rode 12-year-old Randy particularly hard one day, an assistant coach later commented, “When you’re screwing up and nobody says anything to you anymore, that means they’ve given up on you.” (Chapter 7)
- **Obstacles need not be barriers to success:** “Brick walls are there to stop people who don’t want it badly enough. They’re there to stop *other* people!” (Chapter 16)
- **Don’t obsess over what other people think:** “I’ve found that a substantial fraction of many people’s days is spent worrying about what others think of them. If nobody ever worried about what was in other people’s heads, we’d all be 33% more effective in our lives and on our jobs.” How did he arrive at that 33% figure? “I’m a scientist. I like exact numbers, even if I can’t prove them. So let’s just run with 33%.” (Chapter 34)
- **Effective leadership requires empathy not just intelligence:** “Just because you’re in the driver’s seat doesn’t mean you have to run people over.” (Chapter 4)

Some books provide “a good read” while others can help reorder one’s life. *The Last Lecture* does both in a highly entertaining way! And if you need some help with this reordering process, your EAP is here to help!