

# The Last Lecture



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RANDY PAUSCH

Randy Pausch was born in Baltimore and grew up in Columbia, Maryland, with his older sister Tammy, his mother, an English teacher, and his father, who ran a small auto insurance company. Pausch received a bachelor's degree in computer science from Brown University in 1982, and went on to earn a Ph.D. in computer science from Carnegie Mellon University in 1988. While in school, Pausch briefly worked for Xerox and Adobe Systems, but after graduating from grad school he spent most of his career as a professor. First, he worked at the University of Virginia in the Department of Computer Science from 1988 until 1997. During this time Pausch took sabbaticals to work at the video game company Electronic Arts (EA) and also at Walt Disney Imagineering, which was one of his childhood dreams. In 1997, Pausch went to work at Carnegie Mellon University as an associate professor, and in 1998 he co-founded Carnegie Mellon's Entertainment Technology Center. He also started the Building Virtual Worlds course, which he oversaw for 10 years. During this time, Pausch consulted with Google, and founded the software project Alice designed to teach kids computer programming skills while they make stop-motion movies or create video games. In 2000, Pausch got married to Jai Glasgow, and they had three children, Dylan, Logan and Chloe. In 2006, Pausch was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and underwent a Whipple procedure in an unsuccessful attempt to stymie the disease. In August of 2007 he found out the cancer was terminal. On September 18th, 2007, Pausch gave his last lecture at Carnegie Mellon entitled 'Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams,' which became a viral hit on YouTube and led to Randy appearing on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in October of 2007. The popularity of his lecture led Pausch to receive a book deal for \$6.7 million, and, with the help of his co-author Jeffrey Zaslow, the book *The Last Lecture* was published and became a *New York Times* best-seller in April of 2008, remaining on the best-seller list for 112 weeks. Pausch died of complications relating to pancreatic cancer on July 25th, 2008.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Randy gave his last lecture just three days after the beginning of the financial collapse in 2007, near the end of the George W. Bush administration. The book was released just a couple months into Barack Obama's democratic primary campaign.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Pausch's book could be compared to many modern memoirs, as

it details essentially all of Randy's life, from his childhood to his adulthood, just as Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* does. As a whole, the book most closely resembles *When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi, another book written by a dying man who will be survived by his wife. *Tuesdays with Mory* by Mitch Albom shares thematic similarities in that it is largely about learning and teaching in the face of death. In the general non-fiction category, *Being Mortal* by Atul Gawande deals directly with how patients and doctors deal with dying.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Last Lecture
- **When Written:** Late 2007 to early 2008.
- **Where Written:** Maryland
- **When Published:** April 8th, 2008
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir, Advice, Self-Help
- **Setting:** Columbia, Maryland; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Charlottesville, Virginia; Disneyworld in Orlando, Florida; and Disneyland in Anaheim, California.
- **Climax:** During Randy's last lecture, he tells the crowd that this lecture isn't just for them... it, and this book, are for his kids, too.
- **Antagonist:** Randy's cancer, mostly, and the lack of time Randy has left to live.
- **Point of View:** Aside from the foreword by Randy's wife Jai, the story is told from Randy Pausch's point of view.

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Star Trek:** Randy was invited by J.J. Abrams to do a cameo in the *Star Trek* film released in 2009. Randy accepted, and got to say the line, "Captain, we have a visual!" near the beginning of the movie.

**Ghostwriter:** Jeffrey Zaslow, Randy's co-author, is also the co-author of *Highest Duty: My Search for What Really Matters* by Captain Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger.



## PLOT SUMMARY

*The Last Lecture* recounts the life of Randy Pausch, from childhood until just before his death, which occurs a few months after the book's publication. It opens with Randy stating that he has only a few months left to live, and he is a father to three young kids. Before learning that his cancer is terminal, Randy is asked to give a "Last Lecture" at Carnegie

Mellon University. Once he learns that he is definitely dying, Randy considers cancelling the talk, largely thanks to prodding from his wife Jai. In the end, he decides it is important that he give one final lecture, in order to leave both a personal and professional legacy. He eventually lands on the topic of “Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams,” because being in touch with his dreams is largely what makes Randy unique and successful.

Randy goes back in time to discuss his upbringing, with his encouraging working class father and pragmatic mom. Randy played football (learning discipline from Coach Graham), was a science dork, and was allowed to paint his dreams onto the walls of his bedroom. One of Randy’s dreams was to float in zero gravity, which he was able to accomplish as an adult. Another was to make it to the NFL, and, though Randy never played football professionally, he learned the “**head fake**” through his attempt to do so. Randy’s family was obsessed with the World Book Encyclopedia, so it was a dream-come-true when the editors one day asked him to write up their new Virtual Reality entry. Randy also dreamed of becoming Captain Kirk, and, though Randy never gets to run the Enterprise, he does meet William Shatner in person and is wowed by his presence.

Randy was obsessed with winning giant stuffed animals as a kid, and he also loved Disneyland. He dreamed of growing up to become a Disney Imagineer (one of the people who design the rides). Though Randy’s application to work at Disney is initially rejected after grad school, he is eventually able to work on a virtual reality Aladdin ride with the Imagineers during a sabbatical as a professor.

In college, Randy goes to Brown University to study computer science, getting mentorship from Professor Andy Van Dam, who teaches him about **feedback loops** and gives Randy advice that makes him less of an arrogant jerk.

As an adult, Randy takes his sister Tammy’s kids, Chris and Laura, under his wing, escorting them on adventures and teaching them valuable life lessons. He eventually asks them to do the same thing for his kids that he did for them. In his late 30’s, Randy meets Jai, his future wife. Though she is initially reluctant to enter a relationship with Randy, he succeeds in “Romancing the **Brick Wall**” and gets Jai to move to Pittsburgh and then marry him. Randy recalls funny anecdotes of their relationship, like when he and Jai got swept away in a hot air balloon after their wedding, or when Jai backed her car into Randy’s car. Randy then delves into an intense episode in which Jai began bleeding during the seventh month of her first pregnancy. Randy keeps Jai calm while she has an emergency C-section, and both Dylan (the baby) and Jai end up being fine.

In 2006, Randy is diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and he treats his disease as analytically as possible, undergoing any medical procedure the doctors recommend. However, in 2008

when Randy’s cancer returns, he receives a terminal diagnosis of three-to-six months to live.

Randy delves into advice he has for enabling the dreams of others (including his readers)—managing time as if it’s money, delegating responsibilities, taking time to get in touch with your inner thoughts, and listening to feedback from others. In regards to that last point, Randy recounts an anecdote in which an Obnoxious Student was unable to accept statistical feedback that he was a bad group member, so Randy had to tell the kid point-blank that he had a serious issue. This causes the kid to change his behavior, much like Randy did after Andy Van Dam spoke with him.

Randy discusses his work as a professor, like training a student (Tommy Burnett) who ended up working on *Star Wars* films. He explains how he co-created The Entertainment Technology Center, a two-year cross-disciplinary master’s degree at Carnegie Mellon focusing on interactive storytelling, virtual reality, transformational games, and innovation by design. Randy’s most ambitious project was Alice, a computer programming software that aims to teach kids how to code through making movies or creating video games (an example of the “**head fake**”). His former students have taken this project over in order to continue it after Randy’s death. Randy gives more advice about how to live life, which includes: be earnest instead of hip, learn to compromise, don’t complain (just work harder), don’t obsess over what other people think, watch what people do (and not what they say), embrace clichés, learn to apologize, be honest, be humble, never give up, be positive, listen to feedback, take time to show gratitude, and don’t be afraid to be the first one to try something.

Finally, Randy concludes the book by discussing his dream for his children, which is that they have dreams of their own and feel passionate about chasing them. Randy takes the opportunity to tell his kids and Jai what he loves about each of them. Randy discusses his and Jai’s relationship, saying that he has faith in her to find her way in the future without him. Randy then tells of the end of his last lecture—he had a birthday cake rolled out for Jai, and the crowd sang happy birthday. Randy then asked the crowd whether they figured out the head-fake of his lecture, which is that it’s not about how to achieve your dreams, but rather about how to live your life. Then he asks if they noticed the second head-fake: this lecture (and the book) isn’t just for the audience—it’s for Randy’s kids, so he can pass this piece of himself onto them.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Randy Pausch** – Randy is the narrator of book and also its main subject. This book, as well as the lecture that the title references, serve as the final public statements of a dying man.

Randy, though he's dying, is concerned mainly with childhood dreams—he tells of how he achieved most of his, and gives strategies for how others might actualize theirs. Randy is a scientist, a pragmatist, and a “recovering jerk” who believes greatly in giving and receiving feedback and showing gratitude. By the end of his life, he is a family man who prioritizes his wife, Jai, and three kids, Dylan, Logan, and Chloe, over most other parts of his life. Randy is a computer scientist who specializes in virtual reality, so it somewhat makes sense that turning dreams into reality is his focus—that is, after all, what virtual reality is all about. Randy believes in hard work, not whining, never giving up, and using obstacles (as he calls them, **brick walls**) as opportunities to show how badly you want something.

**Jai** – Randy's wife, Jai writes the book's foreword after Randy's death, and recurs as a figure throughout the book. First she is a “**brick wall**” Randy has to climb over, then Jai becomes Randy's wife, the mother of his kids, and finally Randy's primary caregiver while he has cancer. Jai is a good yin to Randy's yang—whereas Randy is always a pragmatic scientist, Jai is a warm, strong woman who is a total straight-shooter, but is also in touch with her emotions.

**Randy's Mom** – Randy's mom is a tough, old-school English teacher who had high expectations, and Randy considers her high expectations to be part of his good fortune in life. She is a Christian who believes kids should work hard, look at themselves honestly, and that people should generally be kind, charitable and resourceful. She and Randy's Dad founded a dormitory in Thailand for girls who wanted to avoid prostitution and remain in school.

**Professor Andy Van Dam** – Randy's “Dutch Uncle” at Brown University who becomes one of Randy's mentors and has a deep impact on Randy's life—he makes Randy more self aware, leads him to believe in the idea of “**feedback loops**,” helps Randy get into graduate school, and continues to be a source of wisdom throughout Randy's life.

**Logan** – Logan is Randy's second son, who Randy describes as “the ultimate Tigger”—he's always making everything he does into an adventure, and he's constantly smiling and never stops moving. Logan is also enamored with his older brother Dylan; the best and worst parts of his day are usually “playing with Dylan.”

**The Pregnant Waitress** – She serves Randy and Steve Seabolt the day before Randy's lecture. Randy comments that she must be so excited to have kids, and she replies that no, it was an accident, which causes Randy to reflect on the chance elements at play in life. He wanted to spend time with his kids and can't, and this woman, who had no intention of having kids, was about to have a whole world opened up for her.

**Jack Sheriff** – Randy's childhood friend who helps him paint his bedroom with wild images (and, on top of the “hope” in the Pandora's box, he writes the word ‘Bob.’) Jack is Randy's good

friend throughout his life: he is the one driving the chase car during Randy's post-wedding balloon ride, and he was also present on Randy's last scuba diving trip before his death.

**Chris** – Chris is Tammy's son and Randy's nephew. Randy relishes the opportunity to help shape Chris's, and his sister Laura's, lives. After Randy finds out that he is dying, he asks Chris and Laura to do the same thing for Randy's kids that Randy has done for them, taking them on excursions and adventures.

**Obnoxious Student** – One of Randy's students who has difficulty receiving feedback from other students that he's hard to work with. Randy imparts on this student the same lesson that Andy Van Dam imparted to him—that others perceive him as arrogant, and it's going to limit what he's able to accomplish. Subsequently, after Randy's feedback, the student changes his behavior.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Randy's Dad** – Randy's dad was a WWII medic who ran a small auto insurance agency in Baltimore, mostly insuring impoverished or high-risk clientele that other insurance companies wouldn't help out. Randy's dad was extremely charitable, founding a nonprofit group for immigrants' kids to learn English.

**Coach Jim Graham** – Coach Graham was Randy's no-nonsense hard-edged football coach and mentor from age seven through high school. He taught Randy the value of hard work and also the idea of the “**head fake**.”

**Assistant Coach** – He gives Randy encouragement after Coach Graham rides Randy particularly hard during one practice.

**Tammy** – Randy's sister. She's an artistic kid who helps Randy paint his bedroom, and she grows up to be a mom to Randy's niece and nephew, Laura and Chris.

**Dylan** – Randy's eldest son and first child, Dylan was born only seven months into Jai's pregnancy and had to be kept on a respirator for his first few months. Randy describes Dylan as a caring, curious kid.

**Chloe** – Randy's youngest child and only daughter, Randy falls in love with Chloe from the first moment he sees her. She is careful and dainty, unlike her brothers.

**Dr. Michele Reiss** – Randy and Jai's couples therapist, Dr. Reiss helps the two of them navigate marital issues after Randy is diagnosed with cancer.

**William Shatner** – One of Randy's childhood idols is Captain Kirk, and when Randy gets to meet William Shatner (who plays Captain Kirk) in person, Shatner impresses Randy with his inquisitive mind and his willingness to admit what he doesn't know. Kirk and Shatner both embody the idea of leadership to Randy.

**Jon Snoddy** – A Walt Disney Imagineer who runs the virtual reality Aladdin project that Randy ends up taking a sabbatical to work on.

**“Dean Wormer”** – Although Randy doesn’t give his real name, “Dean Wormer” is a dean at the University of Virginia who has a no-fun, all-business attitude. He made it difficult for Randy to take his sabbatical to work with the Disney Imagineers.

**Jessica Hodgins** – One of Randy’s colleagues who attends medical appointments with him after he is diagnosed with cancer.

**Dr. Herb Zeh** – Randy’s surgeon when he has to have a Whipple Procedure for his pancreatic cancer.

**Dr. Robert Wolff** – An oncologist at MD Anderson who is one of Randy’s primary doctors, and has to break the news (though Randy already knows it) that Randy’s cancer is terminal.

**Robbee Kosak** – Carnegie Mellon’s vice president for advancement who tells Randy a story of seeing him happy in an unguarded moment.

**The Janitor** – Takes care of Randy and gives him lunch money after Tammy has thrown his lunchbox in the mud.

**The Elementary School Principal** – Calls Randy’s mom to tell her about the lunchbox incident, but the principal lets Randy’s parents do the disciplining themselves.

**Scott Sherman** – One of Randy’s very good college friends who ends up going on the last scuba diving trip before Randy’s death.

**Laura** – Tammy’s daughter and Randy’s niece, Randy relishes the opportunity to help shape Laura’s, and her brother Chris’s, lives. After Randy discovers he’s dying, he asks Laura and Chris to treat his kids like Randy treated them.

**The Balloon** – The guy operating the balloon after Randy and Jai’s wedding.

**The C-Section Doctor** – The doctor who makes Randy and Jai sign insurance forms before Jai’s emergency surgery to have Dylan at just seven months of pregnancy.

**The Baby Nurse** – The woman who calms Randy and Jai’s fears after Dylan gets moved to a new room, where the healthy babies go.

**The Police Officer** – He pulls Randy over and then lets him go with a warning when Randy tells the officer that he has cancer. This illustrates the value of being entirely truthful.

**Tommy Burnett** – Tommy Burnett is one of Randy’s students who always dreamed of working as a special effects artist on *Star Wars* movies. After working with Randy and gaining programming skills, he eventually achieves his dream.

**Don Marinelli** – The drama Professor at Carnegie Mellon University who co-founded the Entertainment Technology Center with Randy.

**Jared Cohon** – Carnegie Mellon’s president who sets up Randy’s last lecture.

**Steve Seabolt** – An executive at the Electronic Arts video game company (EA) who becomes good friends with Randy during Randy’s sabbatical working at EA. Steve is one of the three friends who accompany Randy on his last scuba trip before he passes away.

**Dennis Cosgrove** – Randy sticks his neck out for Dennis after a mean dean (possibly “Dean Wormer”) wants to expel Dennis for a single bad grade in calculus. Dennis proves Randy right, and eventually Dennis takes over the Alice project, continuing Randy’s professional legacy.

**Caitlin Kelleher** – Randy’s student at Carnegie Mellon University who becomes a colleague and does research on how to make Alice more accessible to girls.

**Randy’s Ex Girlfriend** – Randy tells a story about how his ex-girlfriend was stressed about getting out of debt and started going to yoga and meditation class, until Randy pointed out that she could get a once-a-week job in lieu of yoga and pay off her debts, which she does.

**Sandy Blatt** – Randy’s quadriplegic college landlord who teaches Randy the value of not whining and dealing with things in stride.

**Gabe Robins** – A fellow professor at the University of Virginia who gifts Randy with a sledgehammer because Randy smashed so many VCR’s during his time there.

**Grocery Store Cashier** – A woman who inadvertently teaches seven-year-old Randy the value of preparedness when she jokingly asks if he has money to pay her when Randy’s mom runs off to grab another item at the supermarket.

**Norman Meyrowitz** – Randy’s over-prepared college classmate who brings an extra projector bulb to a presentation. Andy Van Dam says he’s going to be successful, which ends up coming true.

**Adult At Disney** – A stranger suggests that Tammy and Randy take the broken salt-and-pepper shaker back to the store and ask for a replacement, which proves fruitful.

**Mk Haley** – A Disney Imagineer tasked with overseeing Randy during his sabbatical there. He is initially skeptical of what Randy can bring to the table, but grows to respect him.

**Nico Habermann** – A friend of Andy Van Dam’s and the head of Carnegie Mellon’s computer science department. Though Randy’s grad school application is initially rejected, after some prodding from Andy Van Dam, Nico interviews Randy and accepts him into graduate school at Carnegie Mellon.

**Fred Brooks Jr.** – A famous IBM employee who Randy gets up the nerve to contact. He ends up being the one who sets up the lecture at UNC where Randy meets Jai.

**M. R. Kelsey** – A woman from Randy’s church who sits with him

for the eleven days after his surgery.

**Randy's Minister** – After Randy's terminal diagnosis, he sees his minister a few days later. The minister tells him he needs "emotional insurance" along with life insurance, and that he should take time to properly leave goodbyes for his wife and kids before his health worsens.

**Cleah Schlueter** – Jai's friend who wheels out the cake during the happy birthday song near the end of Randy's last lecture.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### DREAMS IN REALITY

When Randy Pausch, a professor and computer scientist at Carnegie Mellon University, learns that he's terminally ill, he delivers a final public lecture, which he titles "Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams." The lecture, and the book that quickly emerged from it, focus on the best strategies for turning childhood dreams into adult realities and, through that prism, the best ways in which to live a life.

More specifically, Randy urges his readers to do two things. First, he urges them to stay in touch with childhood dreams as adults, and to keep in mind the things about which they are most passionate. Second, Randy underscores the importance of understanding that dreams don't come true just by dreaming them—hard work and continued effort are needed to make dreams into realities.

Randy uses his own life to illustrate his points, explaining how as a kid he dreamt of floating in zero gravity, becoming a Disney Imagineer, and playing in the NFL. He then shows how he continued to pursue those dreams as an adult: despite myriad obstacles, Randy is able to float in NASA's zero gravity machine with his students by masquerading as a journalist, and his work in virtual reality allows him to take a sabbatical from teaching and work with the Imagineers. In these two examples, Randy's behavior embodies his motif in the book about **brick walls**—that obstacles exist to keep *other* people out, people who don't want something badly enough. Making dreams into realities isn't about things falling into your lap—it's about having a concrete goal, and scaling every brick wall that stands up between you and that goal.

Randy never achieves his dream of playing in the NFL, but he uses this failure to illustrate what he considers a more important fact: that chasing and failing to achieve a dream will also serve a purpose. In Randy's case, by chasing the dream of

playing pro football, he came to understand the value of mastering fundamental skills, as well as the necessity of simple hard work. Randy calls this concept the "**head fake**": in pursuing one thing, you can learn skills necessary for other things.

So, even as he fails to reach the NFL, the very act of chasing the dream taught Randy things that allowed him to accomplish many of his other dreams, to discover new dreams, and to help other people chase their dreams. Ultimately, Randy believes that keeping childhood dreams in mind and trying to accomplish as many as possible will make adults happier and more fulfilled. Further, he believes that children should be encouraged to dream as big as they want, and adults should support children in their dreaming. In Randy's view, working hard to achieve your own dreams, and enabling others to chase their dreams, is what life is all about—and he sees his last lecture, and this book, as leaving a piece of himself so others might follow the same path.



### TEACHING, LEARNING, AND FEEDBACK LOOPS

As a professor, Randy believes in the importance of teaching and learning. For him, one of the most effective ways of teaching is by putting in place feedback loops, which are mechanisms by which lessons can amplify and perpetuate themselves beyond the scope of Randy's literal teaching.

Randy gives a number of examples of feedback loops in his life and what he learned from them. Perhaps the most striking is from his time at Brown, when his mentor, Professor Andy Van Dam, told Randy that it's a shame that people perceive Randy as being so arrogant, because it's going to limit what he's able to accomplish. Randy was shocked and hurt by this information, but he didn't hide from it or dismiss it: he changed his behavior and people began to perceive him differently. In each instance of feedback loops in *The Last Lecture*, Randy describes a mentor providing honest feedback, which leads to behavioral change, and then to the recipient of the feedback re-gifting the lesson to others who need it.

This last point is essential to the concept of the feedback loop: feedback is not simply a "loop" between teacher and student—a successful feedback loop must create an infinite loop that travels beyond the original teacher/student relationship. For instance, Randy tells a story about a time when his sister lectured her kids about not messing up Randy's new convertible before he took them out for a ride. In order to teach his niece and nephew that people are more valuable than things, Randy poured a can of coke right onto the new seats. When Randy's nephew later threw up on the seat, he didn't feel guilty about it. The story is humorous, of course, but Randy extends it: when he finds out he's dying, Randy asks his niece

and nephew to make sure they impart this same lesson to his own children. Those who receive feedback become those who give feedback, and so that feedback can progress, improve, and become more refined through time. If done properly, the cycle of teaching and learning never ends, and each generation keeps improving upon the last.



## OBSTACLES AS OPPORTUNITIES

In much literature, walls serve as symbols of disconnection, separation, and alienation. In

Randy's view, however, **brick walls** (shorthand for obstacles) should be viewed as assets and opportunities. They are assets because they keep the other people out, and opportunities because they give people a chance to show just how badly they want something.

When Randy gets close to achieving his dream of floating in zero gravity by taking a team of students on a trip to NASA, he crashes into a brick wall when he learns that only the students, not the chaperones, are allowed to go into the zero gravity machine. However, always the pragmatist, Randy combs through every line of the contract and figures out that a journalist accompanying the trip *is* allowed to ride in the machine. So Randy applies for journalistic credentials, submits the paperwork, and (though the people at NASA find his efforts "transparent") he convinces them he will use his connections to media members to promote NASA, so they allow him to ride the machine.

Throughout the book, Randy gives many examples of obstacles that he turned into opportunities, including his initial placement on the Brown University waitlist (he called Brown so much that they ultimately admitted him), and his wife's initial skepticism of him when he tried to woo her. To use Randy's words, "Brick walls are there for a reason. They give us a chance to show how badly we want something."



## ATTITUDE AND POSITIVE BEHAVIOR

In *The Last Lecture*, Randy admits that his attitude can't change the facts of the world around him, but he argues that it can change how he reacts to and

interacts with the rest of the world, which positively affects how the world reacts to him.

Randy uses a story about Disney World, one of his favorite places, to illustrate his point. When he was 12, Randy and his sister bought a \$10 salt-and-pepper shaker at Disney for their parents. When Randy accidentally broke it, they returned to the store and the shop workers quickly replaced it at no charge. This positive experience led Randy and his family to return to Disney so many times that they ended up spending more than \$100,000 at Disney throughout their lives: his parents even made trips to Disney an integral part of their volunteer work. If the attitude of the Disney World employees had been more

negative, it could have cost the company life-long customers.

Randy relates the Disney staff's behavior to Disney's policy on answering the question "When does the park close?"—staff are required to respond that the park is "open" until eight P.M., which re-directs the focus from the negative (closing) to the positive (how long the park is open). Thus, Randy lives his life, even while dying, as if he is open until the end, rather than closing down prematurely. This allows him to fully enjoy the time he has left.

But Randy goes even further, making the case that by acting positively—by controlling your attitude and behavior—you actually can sometimes change the facts. Put another way, Randy believes that by behaving positively and generously, you are more likely get good things in return. For instance, Randy tells a story about reviewing a young woman's application to Carnegie Mellon. He is about to reject her until he discovers a single handwritten thank-you note addressed to an employee with no power over her admission. This note leads Randy to accept her, because the fact that she took the time to write it teaches him more about her personality than anything else in her file.

And so, while Randy knows his attitude can't make his cancer go away, he also knows that panicking and succumbing to fear and anger will only diminish what remains of his life. Randy decides to die as he lives—an optimistic, practical, mostly happy, hard-working person, who deals with every obstacle as it comes.



## ENTITLEMENT VS. EARNING

When Randy receives tenure a year earlier than most professors, one of his colleagues asks what his secret is. Randy replies, tongue-in-cheek, "...Call me any Friday night in my office at ten o'clock and I'll tell you." This epitomizes Randy's idea about success—that earning success through hard work and continued effort is far more rewarding and realistic than being handed success through luck.

Randy holds up a former student of his, Tommy Burnett, as a phenomenal example of earning success rather than feeling entitled to it. Tommy, an artist-turned-programmer, started working on Randy's research team in 1993, and his greatest dream was to work as a special effects artist on a *Star Wars* movie. Though they weren't planning on making any more *Star Wars* films at that point, Tommy remained resolute that one day they would, and he set out to learn the requisite skills to work on the films in the future. Randy worked Tommy hard, like a demanding football coach, telling Tommy that he was smart, but smart wasn't enough. Randy's ideal team member is smart and also "help[s] everyone else feel happy" to be there. After this coaching from Randy, Tommy became a fantastic programmer and team player. When *The Phantom Menace* was announced, Tommy got hired by George Lucas's effects company. But,

Randy notes, “they didn’t hire him for his dream; they hired him for his skills.” Rather than believing that his dream entitled him to the job, Tommy worked hard, acquired the skills, and *earned* his dream job.

In the end, Randy believes that earning your accolades is the right thing to do, not only because it is a more successful long-term strategy than relying on luck or resting on pure intellect, but also because earning something through hard work is more rewarding than earning it through shortcuts. If your dream is just gifted to you, you won’t be as qualified to do it well, you won’t work as hard once you get it, and, as a result, the experience will be less fulfilling.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### BRICK WALLS

Almost every time Randy runs up against an obstacle, he refers to it as a **‘brick wall.’** However, rather than letting these brick walls keep him from what he wants, Randy uses the walls as opportunities to show how badly he wants whatever it is that they’re blocking. Brick walls try to stop Randy from getting accepted to Brown University, floating in NASA’s zero gravity machine, becoming a Disney Imagineer, and getting his future wife, Jai, to fall for him. In each case, Randy is undeterred by the obstacles keeping him from his dreams, and, in fact, when reflecting on his life, he believes that each of these brick walls was “there for a reason” because they “give us a chance to show how badly we want something.”



### THE HEAD FAKE

Randy learns the **head fake**—a situation in which someone believes that they are learning about one thing, but are really learning about something different—from his old-school youth football coach, Coach Graham. Randy believes that youth sports, in general, are an example of the head fake, as most parents don’t care so much whether their kid learns about the intricacies of the sport. Instead, they want their kids to learn about “teamwork, perseverance, sportsmanship, the value of hard work, [and] an ability to deal with adversity.” Similarly, Randy’s software project Alice is designed to teach kids how to create video games and make stop-motion animated movies. But, really, it teaches them the fundamentals of how to program computers without the kids even realizing it. Finally, Randy’s last lecture is, in itself, an example of a head fake—the title says it’s about how to achieve your dreams, but it’s really “about how to lead your life.” In Randy’s view, one of the best ways to learn something

important is to believe you’re really learning about something else.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Hyperion edition of *The Last Lecture* published in 2008.

### Introduction Quotes

☞ Under the ruse of giving an academic lecture, I was trying to put myself in a bottle that would one day wash up on the beach for my children.

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker), Chloe, Dylan, Logan

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** xiv

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs in the first passage that Randy writes in the book, right after Jai’s foreword. It tips readers off to the fundamental head fake that underscores the entire narrative of *The Last Lecture*—that, though Randy’s lecture is supposedly about achieving your dreams (and thus how to lead your life), the deeper purpose of his book is to leave a piece of himself—of his beliefs, ideas, and personality—behind for his young children to remember him by. The notion of teaching one thing (like how to achieve your dreams) in order to actually teach another thing (like telling his children who he was and what he cared about) will recur throughout the book. This is also an example of another trick that Randy consistently teaches: using obstacles as opportunities. Randy uses the horrid obstacle of his impending death as an opportunity to do as much as he possibly can to leave behind remnants of himself for his children (and anyone else) to find.

☞ ...engineering isn’t about perfect solutions; it’s about doing the best you can with limited resources. Both the lecture and this book are my attempts to do exactly that.

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** xiv

### Explanation and Analysis

Doing the best you can, being practical, and having a positive attitude (no matter the cards life deals you) are fundamental, Randy believes, to a well-lived life. Randy always views life as a scientist and engineer, and so, when he finds out that his cancer diagnosis is terminal, he vows to do as much as possible to leave behind an imprint of himself for his children (and for the rest of the world, too). This book and the video recording of Randy's last lecture serve as those imprints, which his children should be able to access through their whole lives. Though this won't replace him in their lives, Randy's statement that "engineering isn't about perfect solutions" reminds readers that the book and lecture are the best he can do. They will serve as a corrective to Randy's kids' fuzzy memories when he's gone, and the act of writing a book and creating a lecture are a reason for him to stay sharp and engaged while he is alive.

## Chapter 1 Quotes

☝ ...all of the things I loved were rooted in the dreams and goals I had as a child... 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 passion, I felt, my lecture might help others find a path to fulfilling their own dreams.

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 10

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs soon after Randy has been told that his cancer is terminal and he is prompted by organizers at Carnegie Mellon to give a title and topic for his last lecture. Forced to confront what matters most to him, Randy lands on the topic of childhood dreams, since many of his accomplishments are rooted in his childhood hopes.

Also, rather than focus on the negative aspects of his cancer, Randy spins it in a positive light and sees himself as lucky because his last lecture has the potential to "help others find a path to fulfilling their own dreams." Randy also feels lucky to be able to show gratitude towards many mentors in his life through his last lecture, using their stories and feedback to, in turn, teach others the many lessons Randy learned

throughout his life. This makes his lecture into a kind of feedback loop for the reader/viewer in which the reader/viewer uses Randy's advice and beliefs to take a hard look at the way in which they're living their own lives.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

☝ ...kids—more than anything else—need to know their parents love them. Their parents don't have to be alive for that to happen.

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker), Chloe, Dylan, Logan, Randy's Dad

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 26

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Randy discusses his circumstances and mindset when he began his last lecture. While it seems that this quote refers to Randy's relationship with his own children (he wants them to know that he loves them, even though he won't be alive to tell them), Randy then takes a step back to discuss his own lower middle-class childhood, indicating that he is also talking about how he knows his father loves him, even though his father is no longer alive to tell him so. Randy feels his parents' love, in part, because he recognizes how lucky he is to have had parents who allowed him to dream, but were also honest with him and didn't coddle him. In the end, Randy loops back around to his own children, and he says that he believes his dad would have approved of the ways that Randy is being proactive and positive in the wake of his impending death. Randy is doing everything he possibly can to leave behind messages to his wife and kids that he loves them and wants desperately to shape their lives.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

☝ Jack and I painted a large silver elevator door... we painted a panel with floor numbers one through six. The number "three" was illuminated. We lived in a ranch house—it was just one level—so I was doing a bit of fantasizing to imagine six floors. But looking back, why didn't I paint eighty or ninety floors? If I was such a big-shot dreamer, why did my elevator stop at three? I don't know. Maybe it was a symbol of the balance in my life between aspiration and pragmatism.

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker), Tammy, Jack

Sheriff

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 29

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Randy, halfway through high school, asks his parents if he can paint some images that he has imagined in his head (things “that matter” to him) on the walls of his room. His mom is skeptical but his dad gives permission, and after painting many images, Randy decides he wants to paint an elevator on the wall of his ranch house. But, Randy notes, he decided it would only be a six-floor elevator. While Randy does not understand why that was his desire at the time, he thinks (in retrospect) that choosing an elevator with only six floors epitomizes his balance between dreams and reality. Randy allows himself to dream big dreams, but he always makes them specific enough that he can imagine the concrete steps he can take to achieve them.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

☝ Have something to bring to the table, because that will make you more welcome.

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 33

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Randy has told the audience, “It’s important to have specific dreams.” What he means is that, as a kid obsessed with science, Randy didn’t want to be a NASA astronaut because he knew his glasses prohibited him from interstellar travel; instead, Randy simply dreamed of being able to float in zero gravity, which is a more achievable dream that he fulfills when a research team of his wins a competition to do experiments in one of NASA’s zero gravity acclimation planes.

However, Randy finds out that only the students, and not their chaperone, are allowed to ride in the zero gravity plane. Never one to let a brick wall stop him, Randy combs through the contract for loopholes, and finds one: an adult journalist can accompany the students into the machine. So, Randy calls NASA, faxes them the paperwork to apply as a

journalist, and though they find his efforts “transparent,” Randy convinces them that he will use his actual connections to journalists to get the story of his team’s visit to NASA published in the press. NASA agrees, and Randy is able to earn his way to achieving his dream by being hard-working, optimistic, and not giving up until he gets what he wants. Randy’s point in this quote, though, is that simply asking for the thing you want without being able offer something in return can be ineffective and, at worst, entitled. By pointing to his genuine media connections, Randy is able to offer something in return for NASA helping him achieve his dream, which makes him a more welcome guest at NASA.

## Chapter 7 Quotes

☝ ...even though I did not reach the National Football League, I sometimes think I got more from pursuing that dream, and *not* accomplishing it, than I did from many of the ones I did accomplish.

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker), Coach Jim Graham

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 35

### Explanation and Analysis

How you perceive failure is all about attitude: you can view it as a negative or as a positive learning experience, and the latter is how Randy chooses to view the fact that he did not make the NFL. This quote occurs after Randy discusses his deep love of tackle football, which began during his formative experiences playing peewee football under the tutelage of Coach Jim Graham, an old-school strict disciplinarian who believed in hard work and learning the fundamentals.

Randy isn’t a good enough football player to play professionally, but his experiences on the football team taught him valuable life lessons that he passes down to his students, children and readers. Those lessons include that you can’t teach self-esteem (you can only build it through hard work), and, most importantly, the idea of the “head fake,” which is that you can think you’re learning one thing (like how to play football) while you’re really learning something far more important (like how to work with others, sportsmanship, perseverance, etc.). Randy applies

the idea of the head fake to many aspects of his life, including the construction of this book and his last lecture.

“When you’re screwing up and nobody says anything to you anymore, that means they’ve given up on you.”

**Related Characters:** Assistant Coach (speaker), Randy Pausch, Coach Jim Graham

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 37

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Coach Graham rides Randy particularly hard after one football practice, making him stay to do drills after the official practice has ended. Getting chewed out by a mentor (especially one that you deeply respect) is never a fun experience, but this Assistant Coach does Randy a huge favor, in that he advises Randy to change his perspective on the situation. Rather than being upset at how hard Coach Graham was being on Randy, the Assistant Coach shifts things into a more positive light by explaining that Coach Graham was only being tough with Randy because he believed Randy could do better. In other words, nobody wastes their time trying to help a lost cause, and Coach Graham’s criticism actually meant that Randy had potential. We could all be better off if we shifted our attitudes towards constructive criticism from defensive to receptive. Carefully considering criticism and trying to address it in our future attitudes and behavior is one of the main ways we are able to improve as people.

The second kind of head fake is the *really* important one—the one that teaches people things they don’t realize they’re learning until well into the process. If you’re a head-fake specialist, your hidden objective is to get them to learn something you want them to learn.

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker), Coach Jim Graham

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 39

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs at the end of Randy’s chapter about football being a formative experience for him, as Coach Graham gave Randy a “feedback loop for life.” Up until the day Randy wrote *The Last Lecture* (and presumably until his death), Coach Graham would continually pop into Randy’s head to ask the question: Are you working hard enough? And then Randy would re-evaluate his strategies and time management, and often work harder.

However, the most important thing Coach Graham taught Randy is “the second kind of head fake” (as opposed to the first kind, which is literal misdirection, like when a football player moves one way but goes the other). The second kind of head fake is teaching people one thing (like football, or making video games) so that they actually, without realizing it, learn another thing (like teamwork, or computer programming skills). This is a lesson Randy uses throughout his whole life as a teacher and parent, which is why he thinks he may have learned more from not accomplishing his dream of playing in the NFL than from many of the dreams he did accomplish.

## Chapter 9 Quotes

“...I was hugely impressed. Kirk, I mean, Shatner, was the ultimate example of a man who knew what he didn’t know, was perfectly willing to admit it, and didn’t want to leave until he understood. That’s heroic to me. I wish every grad student had that attitude.”

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker), William Shatner

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 45

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Randy explains that, since he was a huge *Star Trek* fan as a kid, one of his childhood dreams was to be Captain Kirk (not Randy Pausch as captain of the Enterprise—literally to be Captain Kirk himself). Though Randy obviously could never become Captain Kirk, he does get the opportunity to meet the man who portrayed Kirk on TV., actor William Shatner, who visits Randy’s lab to ask questions in relation to a book about scientific breakthroughs that were foreshadowed by *Star Trek*.

While one of Randy’s colleagues is frustrated by Shatner’s inquisitiveness and lack of prior virtual reality knowledge, Randy is extremely impressed with Shatner’s humble, open, and honest attitude, and his desire to learn as much as

possible from the experience. Rather than feeling entitled to the knowledge or trying to come off as more prepared than he is, Shatner is honest about his ignorance, which invites hours of explanations from experts. Shatner is able to absorb the knowledge by asking follow-up questions so that, by the end, he truly understands. Rather than trying to impress with posturing, Randy believes it's noble and even heroic to be honest about our weaknesses and take on the attitude of continually trying to address them.

## Chapter 11 Quotes

☞ The brick walls are there for a reason. They're not there to keep us out. The brick walls are there to give us a chance to show how badly we want something.

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 51-52

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Randy tells of a cross-country trip his family took to Disneyland when he was eight years old, a trip that resulted in inspiring Randy's childhood dream to one day become a Disney Imagineer (one of the people who designs the theme park rides).

Randy's motto about brick walls is something he repeats as a symbol/metaphor all throughout the narrative, and the way he views brick walls, or any other obstacle, is that they are not a negative blocking force, but instead a positive opportunity to show the people who want to keep you out just how badly you want to get in.

In this example, though Randy is rejected from Disney Imagineering after receiving his PhD, he keeps his goal of working there in mind through the rest of his life. He works hard, rises up through the computer science ranks, and when he hears that Disney is working on a virtual reality ride (which was Randy's specialty), he finds out who the head of the project is (Jon Snoddy) and proceeds to contact him and set up a meeting to impress him. Randy didn't let the brick wall keep him out—he was patient, worked hard, bided his time, wracked up credentials and experience, and when he learned of a good opportunity to accomplish his dream, he worked relentlessly toward that goal until the gatekeepers believed he had earned his way in.

☞ Now, here's a lesson for managers and administrators. Both deans said the same thing: They didn't know if this sabbatical was a good idea. But think about how differently they said it!

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker), "Dean Wormer"

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 54

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs soon after Jon Snoddy, the Disney Imagineer in charge of Disney's virtual reality Aladdin project, agrees to bring Randy on as an Imagineering consultant for six months during Randy's sabbatical. But "Dean Wormer," a dean at the University of Virginia where Randy works, is negative and skeptical about Randy working for Disney because he believes that Disney might steal Randy's intellectual property.

When Randy brings his request to work at Disney to the Dean of Sponsored Research, however, the dean is delighted by how excited Randy is and he is far more open to making an atypical sabbatical work. While the Dean of Sponsored Research is also unsure about the project and makes his objections clear, his reaction to Randy is much more compassionate. This anecdote illustrates the ways in which attitude impacts how those around you interact with you. Both "Dean Wormer" and the Dean of Sponsored Research said basically the same thing (they were unsure about the sabbatical to Disney) but their approach to dealing with it was opposite. The Dean of Sponsored Research had a much better relationship with Randy, solely because of his optimistic, open attitude.

## Chapter 14 Quotes

☞ ...I had strengths that also were flaws. In Andy's view, I was self-possessed to a fault, I was way too brash and I was an inflexible contrarian, always spouting opinions. One day, Andy took me for a walk. He put his arm around my shoulders and said, "Randy, it's such a shame that people perceive you as being so arrogant, because it's going to limit what you're going to be able to accomplish in life."

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker), Professor Andy Van Dam

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 67-68

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Randy tells a funny story about mouthing off at the bus stop as a kid, which caused his sister Tammy to throw his lunch box in the mud. As a college student, Randy wasn't any less mouthy or arrogant, and though these traits served him well in many of his classes, they would often alienate other students.

Andy van Dam, in imparting the advice in this quote, does two things that Randy grows to appreciate through the rest of his life. First, the manner in which he gives Randy criticism opens Randy up to taking in the feedback and changing his behavior. Rather than telling Randy that he's an arrogant jerk and he needs to change his attitude, Andy tells Randy that "it's such a shame" that he is the way he is "because it's going to limit" what he's able to accomplish. So, instead of being told what to do, Randy hears the criticism and decides he must make a change on his own. Second, because of how powerful this experience is for Randy, it makes him a deep believer in the idea of receiving feedback. Randy becomes dedicated to creating feedback loops in his life so that he is always able to both examine his own behaviors and receive feedback from others to help him improve.

## Chapter 15 Quotes

☝☝ While my sister was outlining the rules, I slowly and deliberately opened a can of soda, turned it over, and poured it on the cloth seats in the back of the convertible. My message: People are more important than things. A car, even a pristine gem like my new convertible, was just a thing.

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker), Laura, Chris, Tammy

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 69-70

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Randy explains that, as a bachelor in his twenties and thirties, he would often take his sister's kids, Chris and Laura, on trips and adventures. One day, Randy showed up to pick his niece and nephew up in a brand-new convertible and Tammy (Randy's sister) lectured her kids about not spilling or making a mess in Randy's new car. During this lecture, Randy poured an entire can of coke all over the back seats to teach his niece and nephew a

lesson they would never forget (that people are more important than things). Randy's visual example was effective in shifting Chris and Laura's attitude towards material things: when Chris got sick in the convertible later in the weekend, he didn't feel bad about it since he knew from Randy's lesson that he was more important to Randy than the car. Randy notes later that he hopes Chris and Laura will pass this lesson on to Randy's own kids after Randy has passed away.

## Chapter 18 Quotes

☝☝ The dents would be OK. My parents had raised me to recognize that automobiles are there to get you from point A to point B. They are utilitarian devices, not expressions of social status. And so I told Jai we didn't need to do cosmetic repairs. We'd just live with the dents and gashes.

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker), Jai

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 88

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs when Randy comes home one day to find that Jai had accidentally run her own car into Randy's convertible. After inspecting the cars, Randy tells Jai, much to her surprise, that the damage doesn't warrant repairs. Randy's parents had taught him that what cars look like is irrelevant—they aren't meant as status symbols, but as vehicles that get you from point A to point B, which their vehicles could still manage. In Randy's view, not everything needs to be fixed, and these gashed-up cars become a symbol of Jai and Randy's marriage, in that it might have some dents, but, when looking at it with a positive attitude, it still works more than well enough. This passage is also evocative of the part of the book where Randy pours a can of coke onto the seat of his new convertible to teach Chris and Laura the lesson that people are more important than things. In both cases, Randy treats damage to his car as being much less important than his relationships to people he loves.

## Chapter 19 Quotes

☝☝ Through the whole ordeal, I don't think we ever said to each other: "This isn't fair." We just kept going. We recognized that there were things we could do that might help the outcome in positive ways ... and we did them. Without saying it in words, our attitude was, "Let's saddle up and ride."

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker), Dylan, Jai

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 93

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Jai, pregnant with their first child, began to bleed and Randy rushed her to the hospital, where she needed to have an emergency C-section surgery. All through the procedure, Randy held Jai's hand and kept her from going into shock by calmly explaining whatever the doctor was doing to her. In the end both Dylan and Jai survived, though Dylan, born at seven months, needed to be kept in a special closed basinet.

Through this example, Randy lives out his advice about attitude and positive behavior—rather than getting upset at or flustered by their scary situation, Randy and Jai do whatever they can in the moment to deal with it. They never complain or whine about the unfairness of their situation (which could take their attention away from doing everything possible to make the outcome positive), and instead the two of them focus on the positive steps they can take to make things better, just as Randy does with his battle against cancer.

## Chapter 21 Quotes

☛☛ At Christmas, I had made an adventure out of putting the lights on the tree. Rather than showing Dylan and Logan the proper way to do it—carefully and meticulously—I just let them have at it haphazardly. However they wanted to throw those lights on the tree was fine by me. We got video of the whole chaotic scene, and Jai says it was a “magical moment” that will be one of her favorite memories of our family together.

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker), Chloe, Logan, Dylan, Jai

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 100

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Randy, on his last New Years eve, has taken his son Dylan to go see the movie *Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium*, which turns out to be a melancholy experience; Randy's son cries on his lap during the movie when the toymaker in the film tells his apprentice that he is going to die. Afterwards, Randy is depressed, so Jai tries to cheer him up by recounting all the happy memories their

family experienced over the past year.

Jai highlights this one memory in particular from a week or so earlier, and Jai telling Randy she is so glad they recorded it is, in a way, Jai's attempt to turn an obstacle into an opportunity. Normally she might have been mad at the messiness, or she might not have recorded it at all, but because of Randy's impending death, Jai is cognizant of the need to record as many memories with Randy and the kids as possible. Also, Randy allowing his kids to have creative freedom with the lights, rather than having the attitude that it needs to look as professional as possible, turns an often-mundane activity into a fun adventure, which is very similar to how Randy would make normal activities into adventures with his niece and nephew.

## Chapter 23 Quotes

☛☛ I've long held on to a clipping from a newspaper in Roanoke, Virginia. It featured a photo of a pregnant woman who had lodged a protest against a local construction site. She worried that the sound of jackhammers was injuring her unborn child. But get this: In the photo, the woman is holding a cigarette.

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 108-109

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs in the midst of Randy spouting off tons of time management advice. Time management was always an obsession of Randy's, but his lack of time left on earth has made him even more cognizant of managing his time. One of his pieces of advice is to make sure you're spending time on the right things.

In this example, the pregnant woman may be protesting for a good cause and her behavior seems to be proactive and positive, but the fact that she is smoking a cigarette means that she's overlooking a major (and easy) thing that she can do to impact the outcome of her pregnancy and the quality of her future child's life. Managing your attitude and taking positive actions is important, but making sure you're focusing on the *right* things and taking the *best* positive actions should also be part of the equation.

## Chapter 24 Quotes

☞ ...educators best serve students by helping them be more self-reflective. The only way any of us can improve—as Coach Graham taught me—is if we develop a real ability to assess ourselves.

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker), Coach Jim Graham

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 112

### Explanation and Analysis

Randy discusses the current educational landscape and expresses his frustration that students and parents often view colleges and universities as operating in a customer-service model; parents and students think they're buying a five-class course load in the same way that they would buy five pairs of jeans. Randy is okay with the customer-service model, but he prefers a different analogy: the university is like a gym, and the professors are like trainers. Randy sees his job as not to coddle the kids, but to give them access to tools and then present them with an honest assessment of how they're faring so that, one day, they can be able to assess themselves.

Creating a feedback loop for yourself so that you can assess your own strengths, weaknesses, and progress in any aspect of life is the primary character trait that Randy believes colleges should teach students, just as Coach Graham gave Randy a feedback loop to assess how hard he's working on any task. Without teachers offering students honest feedback, the students will have great difficulty assessing their strengths and weaknesses honestly, and will then not know what to focus their time on improving. Honesty and openness, on both the part of teacher and learner, is what helps create effective feedback loops.

## Chapter 25 Quotes

☞ “It does take a lot of luck,” he said. “But all of you are already lucky. Getting to work with Randy and learn from him, that’s some kind of luck right there. I wouldn’t be here if not for Randy.”

**Related Characters:** Tommy Burnett (speaker), Randy Pausch

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 120

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Randy discusses the backstory of one of his former students, Tommy Burnett, who always dreamed of working on special effects for a *Star Wars* film. After learning programming skills from working on Randy's research team, Tommy is hired by George Lucas's company to do special effects for *The Phantom Menace*.

Here, Tommy's response to one of Randy's student's questions helps to shift the attitude of all of Randy's class. Rather than searching for luck in the form of an outside opportunity that simply falls into their laps, Tommy explains that all of the students in Randy's class should have the attitude that they are already lucky, as they have the opportunity to learn from Randy. Tommy's advice and attitude (which Randy largely helped shape) helps Randy break through to this class of students so he can help teach them and give them important feedback, much in the same way Randy taught Tommy. In this instance, Randy's feedback cycles down to Tommy, which cycles down to the rest of his class, in turn making them more open to hearing Randy's advice in the present. Hopefully, one day, these students will pass Randy's advice down to students of their own, and so on, so the feedback loop never ends.

## Chapter 27 Quotes

☞ ...if it is presented as a storytelling activity, girls become perfectly willing to learn how to write software. In fact, they love it... Everybody loves telling stories. It's one of the truly universal things about our species. So in my mind, Caitlin wins the All-Time Best Head-Fake Award.

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker), Caitlin Kelleher

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 128

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Randy tells of his creation of the Alice software project, which is software designed to get people of all ages (but especially kids) to make animated videos as well as video games, while at the same time teaching them real computer programming skills.

One of Randy's students, Caitlin Kelleher, sees that the program doesn't seem to be as effective or enjoyable for

girls as it is for boys, so she sets out to remedy that problem. Her solution isn't to change the software much, but instead to frame it in a different way. Rather than 'programming software,' Caitlin presents Alice as a 'storytelling activity,' leading girls to enjoy it just as much as boys. This makes Randy decide to give Caitlin the metaphorical All-Time Best Head-Fake Award, as many more girls are now making their dreams into realities through the Alice program *and* learning valuable programming skills they can use throughout their lives. In the guise of simply telling stories, these girls will now learn skills they're not even necessarily aware of, which is the whole idea behind the head fake.

## Chapter 28 Quotes

☝️ ...my dad had taken a photo of our TV set the second Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon. He had preserved the moment for me, knowing it could help trigger big dreams.

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker), Randy's Dad

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 132

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote is situated after Randy says the moon landing is what made him first realize that pretty much anything is possible. At summer camp, the counselors intended to show the kids the moon landing, but because the landing was delayed, they made the kids go to bed. This is something that still disappoints Randy.

However, Randy's dad took a photo of the TV during the moment of Neil Armstrong's famous leap for mankind, and when Randy gets home from camp he is elated by the photo, as it helps to trigger huge dreams for his future. In Randy's view, the camp counselors should have had a more positive attitude and realized that seeing your species get off of the planet for the first time was far more important than missing their scheduled bed time. Inspiration, to Randy, is the ultimate tool for spreading optimism, hope and dreams, and if the counselors had prioritized that more and had been a little more positive, dozens more kids might have become inspired to have big dreams of their own.

## Chapter 32 Quotes

☝️ ...Complaining does not work as a strategy. We all have finite time and energy. Any time we spend whining is unlikely to help us achieve our goals. And it won't make us happier.

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker), Sandy Blatt

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 139

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs right after Randy explains his adoration for two very different people: Sandy Blatt, Randy's quadriplegic college landlord, and Jackie Robinson, the first non-white baseball player in Major League Baseball.

Both Sandy Blatt and Jackie Robinson never complained about their harsh situations. Sandy's hopes of becoming a professional athlete were dashed when a truck backed into him, and as a result of his injuries his fiancé left him. Sandy never complained, he became a marriage counselor, found a wife, and eventually adopted kids. Jackie Robinson never complained or whined about the racism hurled at him on a daily basis, he simply worked harder than everyone else and earned his place on the field. In both cases, Randy focuses on how they easily could have whined, complained, and taken on a 'woe-is-me' attitude, but instead they simply faced their situations head-on, had a positive attitude, and earned their way to whatever they wanted.

## Chapter 51 Quotes

☝️ I made a comment to my dad about the job being beneath those teachers. (I guess I was implying that the job was beneath me, too.) My dad gave me the tongue-lashing of a lifetime. He believed manual labor was beneath no one. He said he'd prefer that I worked hard and became the best ditch-digger in the world rather than coasting along as a self-impressed elitist behind a desk.

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker), Randy's Dad

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 169

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote is situated toward the end of the book, after Randy has lamented the growing entitlement among young people entering the work force today. This leads Randy to recall an anecdote about entitlement from his own life, when Randy was working with a group of teachers hoeing strawberries during a summer job and he complained that the job was beneath them.

Essentially, Randy's dad told Randy that he really needed to adjust his attitude to be more positive, open-minded, and

less condescending. Randy and the teachers are no different from those who do physical labor every day, and treating them or their job as unimportant makes Randy a jerk, not an impressive person. Randy's father's outburst had a real impact on Randy, as Randy took the feedback, worked harder the next day, and looked at laborers with far more respect through the rest of his life.

## Chapter 55 Quotes

☛ Ask those questions. Just ask them. More often than you'd suspect, the answer you'll get is, "Sure."

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker), Dylan, Randy's Dad

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 179

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs near the end of the book, when Randy recounts a trip to Disney World that Randy, Dylan, and Randy's dad took shortly before Randy's Dad's death. While waiting for the monorail, Dylan mentioned that he wanted to sit all the way up front near the conductor, and Randy's dad thought that sounded really cool, too. So, when they all boarded the monorail, Randy simply asked if they could sit in the front-most compartment, and a Disney employee said yes and took them to sit there. Both Dylan and Randy's dad were shocked, and Randy uses this anecdote as an opportunity to impart advice to the readers of *The Last Lecture*—often in life, if you have a positive attitude and proactive behavior and simply just ask for what you want (like when Randy and Tammy broke the salt-and-pepper shaker many years earlier and asked to have it replaced), people might be happy to give it to you. Simply feeling entitled to something and not trying to get it won't amount to anything, but if you're optimistic in your attitude and proactive in your behavior, oftentimes it is easier to receive the things you want than it might at first seem.

## Chapter 57 Quotes

☛ My personal take on optimism is that as a mental state, it can enable you to do tangible things to improve your physical state.

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker), Dr. Herb Zeh

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 183

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote is situated near the end of *The Last Lecture*, when Randy recalls speaking with his doctors about how optimism and positivity can impact terminal illnesses like pancreatic cancer. Randy knows that being optimistic can't save his life all on its own, but he also believes that being optimistic and positive can lead him to do "tangible things" to improve his condition and physical state, like continuing to work out or spend time with his family. Having a positive attitude, even in a dire situation, can make your quality of life better, even if it won't change the end date.

## Chapter 59 Quotes

☛ ...my dreams for my kids are very exact: I want them to follow their own path to fulfillment. And given that I won't be there, I want to make this clear: Kids, don't try to figure out what I wanted you to become. I want you to become what you want to become.

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker), Chloe, Logan, Dylan

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 198

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs in the final section of the book, where Randy writes directly to his kids about his hopes and dreams for their lives. Randy's dreams for his kids amount to exactly this: he wants them to have dreams of their own, and to chase them passionately and enthusiastically, just like their old man did. Randy doesn't believe in parents prescribing dreams for their kids: he thinks that everyone should discover what it is they're passionate about, and then chase that with everything they have. Childhood dreams are so powerful because of the unadulterated enthusiasm surrounding them. Chasing someone else's dreams will not be nearly as exciting or fulfilling as chasing your own, and the kind of enthusiasm that propels a person to do great things cannot be forced on them.

## Chapter 61 Quotes

“It’s not about how to achieve your dreams. It’s about how to lead your life. If you lead your life the right way, the karma will take care of itself. The dreams will come to you.”

**Related Characters:** Randy Pausch (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 205-206

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs on the very last page of the book, where Randy explains that he ended his last lecture by revealing

the fundamental head fake that underscores the lecture. This quote explains how Randy’s last lecture, and the book *The Last Lecture* itself, are examples of the “head fake” because, although the lecture purported to be about achieving childhood dreams, it is really about how Randy believes people should live their lives. So, Randy believes, if people lead their lives in the proper way, always keeping their childhood dreams in mind, then the dreams will come to them.

In no way is Randy advocating for simply being entitled to achieving dreams and waiting for them to show up—instead, he is arguing that if you live your life in such a way that you consciously work hard to improve yourself and seek dream-fulfilling opportunities, then when those opportunities do arise you will be ready and able to seize them.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

### FOREWORD

The foreword, written by Randy Pausch's wife Jai after his death, is the only section of the book not written from Randy's perspective. Jai recalls taking Randy to a celebratory lunch after his book, *The Last Lecture*, was released in April of 2008. After lunch they went to a bookstore, where she snapped a picture of Randy holding his book. She notes that working on the book was one of the things that kept him vital until his last days. She states how touched she is that people, still to this day, reach out to her to tell her how much of a difference *The Last Lecture* has made to their lives. She ends by saying that the past few years without Randy have been tough, but Jai and her children "choose to find the joy in life and good in people," and that's the best lesson she could hope to teach her kids in honor of their father.

*Jai, in her attitude throughout this section, reflects Randy's ideas about being simultaneously realistic and optimistic in your outlook on life. Rather than focusing on how difficult life has been since Randy's death (although she also doesn't shirk away from discussing it), Jai highlights how touched she's been by all of the positive feedback she's received about how impactful Randy's book has been on its readers' lives.*



### INTRODUCTION

Randy starts by letting the reader know he has "an engineering problem." Though he looks healthy, his liver is riddled with tumors and he has only a few months to live. He has three young kids, and though he knows he has to spend as much time as possible soaking up experiences with his family, his real problem is how to communicate with them after he's gone. To solve this problem, Randy decides to give a "last lecture," both to cap off his career, and to leave a few of the lessons of his life behind for his kids to discover after he's gone. He also notes that much of this book was distilled from conversations he had with Jeffrey Zaslow, his co-author, on the phone while biking. Still, Randy says, this book and his lecture are no replacement for living—"but engineering isn't about perfect solutions; it's about doing the best you can with limited resources."

*Doing the best you can with whatever limited resources you have is exactly at the heart of Randy's ideas about attitude and positivity. Rather than having a "woe is me" type outlook, Randy faces his cancer head on and does whatever he can to positively impact the remaining time he has left, both for himself and for his family.*



## CHAPTER 1: AN INJURED LION STILL WANTS TO ROAR

When Randy is asked to give a “last lecture” at Carnegie Mellon University, he knows that he has cancer, but he hasn’t yet found out that it is terminal. During his cancer treatments, Randy receives incessant emails about what his lecture will be about, but he can’t figure it out. The week before he has to decide, he finds out the illness is terminal, and he knows the University will let him cancel the lecture. He discusses it with his wife Jai, and she’s wary of Randy giving the lecture. Since the family just moved, and Randy is dying, Jai wants Randy to spend as much time as possible with her and the kids. Randy listens, but can’t let go of his urge to give the lecture—he notes that throughout his academic career, he’s been known for giving great lectures, but he feels he has one truly great one still left to give people.

Randy and Jai can’t come to an agreement, so they go discuss it with their psychotherapist, Dr. Michelle Reiss. Jai argues that Randy’s a workaholic and doing the lecture will take up all of his time, and, on top of that, he would have to fly to Pittsburgh on the day of Jai’s birthday, which is probably the last one they’ll get to spend together. Still, Randy can’t let go of the idea of giving the talk, because it gives him a chance to “really think about what matters most to me, to cement how people will remember me.” Dr. Reiss finally weighs in that they have to make this decision on their own.

Randy reflects on why he wants to give this talk so badly—he confesses to Jai that he sees his last lecture “as a vehicle for [him] to ride into” a future that he’d never see. He reminds Jai that the kids are young—five, two and one—and will probably barely remember him when they grow up. He wants to give them answers to the questions they’re bound to have—Who was Dad? What was he like? This lecture, Randy argues, will help them know who Randy was and what he cared about. Jai agrees, but then asks why he can’t just record videos for the kids in their living room. Randy says that a college campus is his natural habitat, and also that kids listen to advice much more readily if it’s validated by people other than their parents. Finally, Jai relents, allowing him to go give the lecture.

Randy knows people think his talk will concern dying—but instead, Randy thinks, “it had to be about *living*.” In trying to create the lecture, Randy delves into what makes himself unique. And he decides, whatever his accomplishments, that everything he’s done in his life ties back to the dreams and goals he had as a child. Despite his cancer, he truly believes himself to be a lucky man for having been able to live out his dreams. So, he finally emails the people organizing the lecture, telling them the title will be “Really Achieving Your Childhood Dreams.”

*In a way, Randy uses perhaps the biggest obstacle life can throw at you (imminent death) as an opportunity—the opportunity to give one final lecture to cap off his career. Also, the lecture will serve as Randy’s final tribute to teaching and learning: he will be lecturing a room full of students, and he will leave the video of the lecture behind for his kids to teach them a little something about their father.*



*Like other obstacles, Randy frames his terminal diagnosis as an opportunity—it gives him a chance to reflect on what he considers to be important in his life. Rather than feeling sorry for himself, Randy uses the harsh truth of his imminent death to dig deeper into himself, in the hopes of maximizing the time he has left and leaving some of his wisdom behind for students to absorb.*



*Randy’s last lecture isn’t entirely about himself or his students—it is also about his kids. Randy sees the lecture as having the ability to bring his words and ideas to the future in order to teach his kids lessons that he won’t be around to impart.*



*Randy knows the audience will expect his lecture to concern death, so he uses this expectation (which might, in some contexts, be considered an obstacle) as an opportunity to teach his audience about a topic on the opposite end of the spectrum: childhood dreams, and how to live your life with those in mind.*



## CHAPTER 2: MY LIFE IN A LAPTOP

Randy wonders what the best way to catalogue his childhood dreams is, and also ponders how to get other people to reconnect with theirs. For four days, Randy sifts through photos as he builds a PowerPoint presentation. He decides the talk will have no text, but it will have pictures to give the audience visuals and give him prompts for what to say. Although Randy spends time with his kids, Jai still thinks he's spending too much time working on the lecture. At first, Jai plans on not attending the lecture, but Randy asks her to come, so she agrees to fly out the morning of the talk. After celebrating Jai's birthday a day early, Randy kisses Jai and the kids goodbye and flies to Pittsburgh.

Randy is picked up at the airport by Steve Seabolt. They go to lunch at a diner. Steve tells Randy his presentation is too long. They chat with The Pregnant Waitress about Randy's kids, and Randy remarks that she must be overjoyed about being pregnant. She replies, "Not exactly... It was an accident." An hour later, back in his hotel room, Randy's kids remain in his head as he combs the web, still looking for images for the presentation. Though he feels the effects of a recent chemo treatment, he works on the presentation until midnight. He wakes up, keeps tinkering, and by 11 A.M. he shapes it into a narrative arc he's happy about. Jai arrives, joins Randy and Steve for lunch. Randy feels awful again, lies down in his office, and edits the slideshow, cutting sixty slides in the hour before the presentation. Finally, he gets ready to go on stage.

*Jai could easily be justified in staying home to take care of the kids during Randy's lecture (especially considering it's her birthday), but, given the circumstances, Jai puts on a positive attitude and decides to be there for Randy when he wants (and perhaps needs) her to be.*



*Much like the famous story about Martin Luther King Jr. editing his 'I Have a Dream' speech until moments before giving it, Randy uses every spare moment before his lecture to edit his presentation, using the obstacle of an approaching deadline as fuel to make difficult cuts. Additionally, Randy sees The Pregnant Waitress's obstacle (having kids when you didn't plan on it) as an opportunity to infuse her life with love and new experiences.*



## CHAPTER 3: THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

The auditorium is full, with 400 people in attendance when Randy gets on stage to set up for the lecture. Randy is nervous. Even with the lecture minutes away, he tinkers with the slideshow, deletes a few more slides, and he's still working when he's told it's time to start. Randy notes that he's dressed in a Walt Disney Imagineer polo shirt, and an oval name-badge, paying tribute to his life experience working there. This is also a tribute to Walt Disney himself, "who famously said, "If you can dream it, you can do it."

*Again, Randy uses an approaching deadline as an opportunity to edit. Also, Randy's wardrobe reflects how he realized his dreams. His clothes also illustrate his later advice about fashion (it's better to be earnest than hip.)*



Randy cracks a few jokes, and then says his dad always taught him that “when there’s an elephant in the room, introduce it.” So he tells the audience about his terminal cancer, showing an image of the tumors on his liver, entitled “The Elephant in the Room.” He tells the audience this is what it is—nothing will change it. “We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand.” In this moment, Randy says he no longer feels the effects of chemo—he feels like his old, healthy self. Still, he says, he’s not in denial. He shows a picture of the new house Jai and Randy bought so that they could be closer to Jai’s family after Randy passes away. Then, to show them that he’s still okay, Randy drops down to the ground and does push-ups, to the audience’s laughter and applause. Finally, Randy feels that the lecture can begin.

*If there was ever a quote that sums up Randy’s attitude about having a positive outlook and positive behavior, it is, “We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand.” So, Randy acts that idea out when he drops down and does push-ups—he’s showing the audience that though he’s sick, that doesn’t mean he has to act like it.*



## CHAPTER 4: THE PARENT LOTTERY

Randy says a major reason he was able to live out his childhood dream is because of his amazing parents. Randy’s mom is a strict, tough English teacher, and Randy says her high expectations were part of his good fortune. Randy’s dad, now deceased, was a medic in World War II, founded a nonprofit to teach immigrants’ kids English, and ran an auto insurance lender in Baltimore that mostly insured people with minimal resources. Randy says he grew up comfortably middle-class, but his parents spent little to nothing. “We didn’t buy much. But we thought about everything.” That’s because Randy’s dad was an infectiously curious person, leading Randy to believe, growing up, that there are two types of families: Those who need a dictionary to get through dinner, and those who don’t. His family is the former.

*Rather than seeing his frugal, middle-class upbringing as a hindrance (compared to his mostly-privileged Ivy League colleagues), Randy views his parents’ give-first spend-second attitude as an asset, as it led him to think more deeply about the world, become resourceful, be less entitled, and focus less on surface-level issues. Randy also sees his mother’s high expectations not as an obstacle, but as an opportunity to learn to work hard and set his sights higher than he could have imagined on his own.*



Randy notes that his dad was an amazing storyteller, and he believes that stories should be told for reasons—for their morals or lessons. Tammy, Randy’s sister, says that when she watched Randy’s Last Lecture, she heard their dad’s voice. Randy says he quotes his father almost every day—Randy’s dad gave him advice throughout his whole life, saying things like, “Just because you’re in the driver’s seat... doesn’t mean you have to run people over.” Randy’s mom, on the other hand, sees it as her mission to keep Randy’s cockiness in check. When she describes what Randy was like as a child to other people, she tells them he was “alert, but not terribly precocious.” And now as an adult, after earning his PhD, Randy’s mom introduces him to people by saying that “He’s a doctor, but not the kind who helps people.”

*From his father, Randy learns that storytelling has the power to impart lessons. Randy uses this power all throughout his book and last lecture, which shows that Randy’s father’s lesson is part of a feedback loop. The wisdom passes from Randy’s dad, to Randy, to the readers, and hopefully from the readers onto other people in their lives. Randy’s mom, in her descriptions of Randy, epitomizes the idea of being brutally honest when giving feedback to anyone, especially those you love—her honesty helps Randy become less cocky.*



Randy's parents believed strongly in community service. For example, they underwrote a student dorm in Thailand to help girls stay in school and avoid prostitution. Randy considers his father to be the most giving, "Christian" man he's ever known, because he was "focused on the grandest ideals and saw equality as the greatest of goals." Though his high hopes for society are often dashed, Randy's dad always remained a "raging optimist." When Randy's dad was diagnosed with leukemia at 83, he arranged to donate his body to science, and gave money to the dorm program in Thailand to sustain it for at least six more years.

Randy says that many people who watched his last lecture were captivated by a photo of him, in his pajamas, staring up toward the sky, his head separated from his body by a wooden slat. This wood slat is a part of Randy's bunk bed, which was hand-built by his father, and this photo reminds Randy that he won the parent lottery. Randy notes that, although his children will have a wonderful mother in Jai to guide them, he knows they won't have a father—he's accepted it, but it still hurts. Randy says he'd like to believe that his father would've approved of how Randy is going about his final few months, and that "kids—more than anything else—need to know their parents love them. Their parents don't have to be alive for that to happen."

## CHAPTER 5: THE ELEVATOR IN THE RANCH HOUSE

Randy says that, as a kid, his imagination was hard to contain. Halfway through high school he had this urge to externalize some of his thoughts onto the walls of his bedroom. When he asked his parents for permission and they wondered what he wanted to paint, he told them, "things that matter" to him. That was explanation enough for his father (who "loved to watch the spark of enthusiasm turn into fireworks"), but his mother wasn't so sure, though she relented in the face of Randy's excitement. For two days, Randy, Tammy, and his friend Jack Sheriff painted the walls of Randy's bedroom. His father sat in the living room, reading a newspaper and waiting, whereas his mother hovered outside his door the whole time, totally anxious, trying to sneak a peak constantly.

*Randy takes every step possible to ease his family's path into the future and remain optimistic when he is diagnosed with pancreatic cancer; perhaps this attitude is modeled on Randy's dad who, in the face of a cancer diagnosis, doesn't take on a 'woe is me' attitude. Randy's dad faces reality as positively and realistically as he can, and he takes the necessary steps to leave the world and his family in as good a position as he possibly can.*



*Rather than simply giving in to the sadness of being inevitably separated from his kids, Randy focuses on what he can do for them, which is to show them, in as many ways as possible, that he loved them deeply. This positive attitude and proactive behavior was always how Randy lived his life, and that didn't change while he was dying.*



*Randy, as a high school kid, quite literally strives to turn his dreams into realities; this is literally shown in the way he externalizes his imagination onto his bedroom walls. Randy's father, in this instance, embodies the idea of an optimistic attitude having a positive impact on life. Randy's dad understands that Randy's excitement is reason enough to give his son permission to realize his ideas, whereas his mother, had she stopped him from painting his walls, could have seriously limited Randy's ability to visualize (and perhaps actualize) his dreams.*



What did they paint? A quadratic equation (celebrating Randy's inner nerd), chess pieces, Jack Sheriff wrote the words "I'm trapped in the attic!" backwards on the ceiling so it looked like they'd imprisoned someone, and Jack and Randy together painted an elevator door with "Up" and "Down" buttons above the elevator, with a painted panel with floor numbers labeled one through six. The number three was illuminated. Also, near Randy's bed, he drew a periscope rising above the bedspread, and Tammy and Randy painted their version of Pandora's box, a story Randy was drawn to because he liked its optimistic ending. So, inside his Pandora's box, Randy wrote the word "Hope," over which Jack Sheriff couldn't resist writing "Bob."

Since it was the late 70's, Randy also wrote, "Disco sucks!" over his door, and the only alteration his mom made was painting over the word "sucks." When Randy showed them his room, his mother wasn't initially thrilled, but over time she began to appreciate it, as whenever she toured people around her house everyone thought Randy's room was really cool. Randy ends the chapter with advice to parents—if your kids want to paint their bedrooms, let them, because although it might ding the house's resale value a bit, it's a treasure for Randy every time he returns there. When Randy visits home, he still sleeps in the bunk bed his father built, looks at his walls, and falls "asleep feeling lucky and pleased."

## CHAPTER 6: GETTING TO ZERO G

"It's important to have specific dreams," Randy starts. For example, Randy knew at an early age that his glasses prohibited him from becoming an astronaut, so he never dreamed of that—he didn't want the job, just the sensation of floating in space. However, Randy learned that NASA has an airplane capable of doing parabolic arcs, which are used to acclimate astronauts to zero gravity. When he learned, in 2001, that NASA has a program in which students can propose experiments to be done on the plane, Randy and his team proposed a virtual reality project to help limit astronauts' nausea. NASA selected his team's experiment to be tested. When Randy learned that only the students, not the faculty advisor, would be allowed to ride the plane, Randy says he "was heartbroken, but not deterred." He was resolved to find his way around this "**brick wall**."

*The title of this chapter, 'Elevator in the Ranch House,' refers to the painted elevator in Randy's room, and in a way it comes to symbolize Randy's focus on enabling imagination and turning dreams into realities. Of course there's no elevator, nor a person trapped in the attic, but this whole scenario teaches Randy to think outside the box (the literal box of his room, in this case). It also shows him that if he has a dream, makes it a goal, and works hard at it, it can become a reality, like the walls of his room.*



*The fact that Randy's childhood bedroom is still painted with his childhood imaginings means that every time he returns home, he is reintroduced to his own creativity, imagination, and ability to dream. This could be part of the reason Randy is so focused on—and so successful at—turning his dreams into realities.*



*Dreaming specifically rather than broadly is an important component in bringing dreams into the realm of reality—when they're specific, it's much easier to take conscious steps to move closer to those goals. So, when you're chasing a specific goal and run into a roadblock (a brick wall), you will be that much more determined to try to climb over it, treating that obstacle as an opportunity to show how badly you want to get in. Also, you will not feel that you are entitled to be on the other side of that wall—hopefully, with specific dreams, the dreamer, like Randy, will feel they have to earn their way over the wall and will then be capable of doing so and grateful once it happens.*



Randy read all of the literature about the program in search of loopholes, and he found one—NASA would allow a journalist from the students' hometown to come along to document it. Randy got a NASA fax number and told them that the advisor would be accompanying his students as a "member of the media." Though NASA found Randy's actions "transparent," Randy promised to get information about the experiments onto news websites, and send the story out to mainstream journalists, making this a "win-win" for both parties. Randy notes that if you "Have something to bring to the table" it "will make you more welcome." Randy's experience in OG was fantastic, and, though he got a little banged up when gravity threw him back to the floor, he's happy he achieved his dream of floating, because it "proves that if you can find an opening, you can probably find a way to float through it."

*Randy doesn't just call NASA and beg them to let him go on the zero gravity plane—he finds a way to make himself qualified so he can "bring something to the table," thus earning his way on board. Randy certainly uses this obstacle as an opportunity to show how badly he wants to float in zero gravity, and he is rewarded with the floating he's desired since man first walked on the moon. Randy's positive, realistic but proactive attitude also certainly played a big part in his ability to actualize his dream.*



## CHAPTER 7: I NEVER MADE IT TO THE NFL

Randy loves tackle football. He started playing when he was nine, and football helped shape him into who he is. Although he didn't reach the NFL, Randy believes he got more from pursuing his dream and not getting there than he got out of many of the dreams he actually accomplished. At first, his dad dragged him, kicking and screaming, to join a league. Randy was a tiny, wimpy kid, but his fear turned to awe when he met his coach and mentor, Coach Graham. Jim Graham was an enormous man who was a linebacker at Penn State. He was extremely old school. On the first day of practice, Coach Graham didn't bring along any footballs. When one of the kids pointed it out, Coach Graham told them they didn't need footballs. He asked how many guys there are on the field (22), then how many of them have the football. "So we're going to work on what those *other* twenty-one guys are doing."

*Coach Graham fully embodies the idea of working on the fundamentals—and fundamentals are all about earning success rather than being entitled to it. Instead of focusing on what the one quarterback does with the ball, Coach Graham believes in focusing on what everyone else is doing, which shifts the students' attitudes from valuing only the results to relishing the hard work that goes into achieving those results.*



Fundamentals. That's the gift Coach Graham imparts to Randy—if you don't learn the fundamentals, "the fancy stuff is not going to work." Coach Graham rides Randy hard—one day, he makes Randy stay to do push-ups after practice, and when he's finally dismissed, an Assistant Coach comes over to talk him. He says that Coach Graham riding Randy so hard is a good thing, because "When you're screwing up and nobody says anything to you anymore, that means they've given up on you." Self-esteem, Randy believes, cannot be *given* to someone—it must be built. Coach Graham worked in a no-coddling zone, because he knew that there's only one way to teach kids how to develop self-esteem: give them something they can't do, make them work hard until they can do it, and then keep repeating the process.

*Rather than learning how to do a flea-flicker or Hail Mary on the first day of practice, Coach Graham teaches Randy that mastering the fundamentals before working up to more complex skills is the best approach to becoming a competent and versatile player. Coach Graham also changes Randy's attitude; Randy goes from being wimpy and unsure of himself to being self-assured and confident in the power of hard work to build skills.*



When Coach Graham first got hold of Randy, Randy was tiny, with no discipline, physical skills or conditioning. Through hard work, Coach Graham made Randy realize he could do things tomorrow that he “can’t do today.” Randy knows that these days Coach Graham would likely get thrown out of a youth sports league, because parents would complain. Randy remembers one game where his team played horribly, and Coach Graham got livid when the boys all ran to the water bucket at half time. “That’s the most I’ve seen you boys move since this game started!” Coach Graham yelled, then he dumped the water bucket all over the ground. Coach Graham then told an Assistant Coach to give water to the first string defense, because “They played OK.”

Coach Graham, Randy notes, would never endanger any kid, and the dash to the water was more about the kids being brats than really needing hydration. Randy laments that if this incident happened today, parents on the sidelines would pull out cell phones and call the league commissioner or a lawyer. It saddens Randy that kids today are so coddled, because he remembers how he felt during Coach Graham’s halftime rant—disappointed, and, further, humiliated for letting his coach down. Deep down, Randy and the other kids knew that Coach Graham was right, and he let them know in a way they’d never forget—getting chewed out by him really meant something to them. During the second half, they played much harder.

Randy says he hasn’t seen Coach Graham since he was a teenager, but his coach continually shows up in Randy’s head, forcing Randy to work harder. Randy attributes this to Coach Graham having given Randy a “**feedback loop** for life.” Randy says that we send kids to play organized sports not to learn the sport itself, but for the fundamental character traits sports teach—“teamwork, perseverance, sportsmanship, the value of hard work, an ability to deal with adversity.” This kind of indirect learning is what Randy calls a “**head fake**”. Randy says that there are two kinds of head fakes—literal ones, like when a football player fakes one way, then goes another. That’s like misdirection. The second kind of head fake is “the *really* important one,” which is the ability to teach people things “they don’t realize they’re learning until well into the process.” Coach Graham, Randy says, was a master of the second kind of head fake.

*Coach Graham doesn’t believe anybody is entitled to anything—even a water break at half time of a football game should be earned by hard work during the first half. Randy describes this as a way for Coach Graham to respect the boys’ abilities and demand that they do their best, rather than as a cruelty that Coach Graham inflicted on his players.*



*Being coddled, to Coach Graham and to Randy, isn’t the same as having a positive, realistic attitude. Being positive when there’s no reason to be is simply delusion, and Randy believes that everyone should be able to look at themselves honestly in order to improve, just as Coach Graham tried to impart to his team that they needed to improve their effort level during this game. And his lesson worked—through Jim Graham’s feedback, the team learns a lesson and works harder in the second half.*



*The “feedback loop” that Coach Graham gives Randy is the ability to assess how hard he’s working and to determine if he’s doing everything in his capacity to make whatever situation he’s in better or more efficient. Also, Coach Graham teaches Randy the ability to teach people things they don’t even know they’re learning; just as Coach Graham taught kids self-esteem and hard work by teaching them football, Randy will work throughout his life to lecture students about one thing but really teach them another. His last lecture, for instance, is allegedly about dreams, but it is really about how to live your life.*



## CHAPTER 8: YOU'LL FIND ME UNDER "V"

Randy loves living in the computer age, but the world he grew up in was very different: in 1960, paper was where great knowledge was located. Through the 60's and 70's, though his parents were frugal and rarely purchased anything, Randy's house never failed to have an up-to-date copy of the World Book Encyclopedia, and Randy loved to read it. So, one of his dreams was to one day become a World Book contributor—but you can't ask to be one, they have to come find you.

One day, after Randy is a professor of some renown, World Book calls Randy and asks if he'd like to write their entry on virtual reality. Randy accepts, writes his entry (which includes a photo of his student Caitlin Kelleher wearing a V.R. headset) and the World Book accepts it, never editing or questioning a word he wrote. Sometimes, Randy says, when he's in a library with his kids, he can't help but look up the "V" volume and show his kids what he wrote.

*Having a dream of writing an entry in the World Book Encyclopedia is a perfect example of having to earn your dreams rather than be entitled to them—you can't sweet-talk your way into the World Book, you have to be an expert of some renown and the Encyclopedia's editors have to come to you for your expertise. There's no way into the World Book other than hard work.*



*Randy earned his way into the World Book by putting his dream of writing an entry on the backburner while he became a renowned virtual reality expert. Because he put in the hard work to become a virtual reality expert, the editors of the World Book came to him to ask him to write an entry (much in the same way, near the end of the book, Randy will argue that dreams come to you if you live your life the right way.)*



## CHAPTER 9: A SKILL SET CALLED LEADERSHIP

Randy was a huge fan of *Star Trek* as a kid and dreamed of being Captain Kirk—not Captain Pausch, but literally being Kirk himself. That's because Captain Kirk was, to Randy, the perfect role model for young boys who like science, and watching Kirk's leadership tactics made Randy a better teacher, colleague, and husband. Randy attributes this to Kirk having never been "the smartest guy on the ship"—Dr. McCoy was a medical expert, Scotty was chief engineer, Spock was the most logical intellect. Kirk was a good captain, then, not because of his intellect, but because he was "the distilled essence of the dynamic manager"—he knew how to delegate, inspire passion, look professional, and he always trusted his subordinates in their knowledge. In other words, Kirk possessed the perfect skills to be a leader.

Randy also loved Captain Kirk because of the cool futurist toys he would play with—including, Randy notes, a communicator device like the ones we all now carry around in our pockets (cell phones). Randy then says that a few years ago, he got a call that William Shatner (who played Captain Kirk) wanted to visit Randy's lab for research about a book he was co-writing about how *Star Trek* foreshadowed many real scientific discoveries. Randy and his students worked tirelessly to create a virtual reality world that looked just like the Enterprise ship from *Star Trek*. Shatner came, loved the display, stayed for three hours, and asked a ton of questions.

*Captain Kirk's attitude is what Randy believes we should all aspire to—positive, realistic, trusting in others, acknowledging of our limitations, but ultimately decisive once we've weighed all the factors of a decision appropriately. Rather than seeing himself inaccurately and thinking he always knows best, Captain Kirk relies on others with skills and knowledge greater than his own, and he uses them to improve his own thought process and decision making. This creates a kind of feedback loop on the Enterprise that Kirk oversees.*



*When Randy gets the chance to get close to one of his childhood dreams (meeting William Shatner), he doesn't feel entitled to the opportunity. Rather than simply wait for Shatner to arrive, Randy and his students seize the opportunity to wow William Shatner, working their butts off to create a virtual reality world that looks just like the Starship Enterprise in order to earn Shatner's respect.*



While one of Randy's colleagues is frustrated at all of William Shatner's questions, Randy is impressed—Shatner, Randy says, is the ultimate example of a man who knows what he doesn't know, and is willing to admit his ignorance until he does understand. That, to Randy, is heroic, and he wishes every grad student had that attitude. Later, when Randy is getting cancer treatment, a moment from the Star Trek film *The Wrath of Khan* jumps into his head. It's typical for young cadets to be faced with a simulated scenario where, no matter what, the whole crew is killed, but when Kirk was a cadet, "he reprogrammed the simulation because he 'didn't believe in the no-win scenario.'" When William Shatner learns of Randy's diagnosis, he sends him a Captain Kirk headshot, signed with the words, "I don't believe in the no-win scenario."

*Being realistic, self-reflective, and honest about your limitations while striving to improve them is, to Randy, heroic. William Shatner, in his attitude that day in Randy's lab, entirely embodied that idea. Also, the idea of not believing in a no-win scenario is, in itself, an example of using an obstacle as an opportunity—when the game is rigged for you to lose, it is an opportunity for you to change the game.*



## CHAPTER 10: WINNING BIG

One of Randy's earliest dreams was to be the coolest guy at any carnival or amusement park—to Randy this was always the guy carrying around the enormous stuffed animal. Randy's dad felt the same way, and, given his family's competitiveness, capturing the largest stuffed animal became a heated competition. Randy then asks his lecture audience if they've ever walked around a carnival with a huge stuffed animal and felt how people looked at them, and then he asks if they've ever used a giant stuffed animal to woo a woman? Randy has, and he married her. As an adult, when Randy showed up at home with bigger and bigger stuffed animals, his family suspected him of cheating. But he never did—Randy might have leaned (it's the only way to beat the ring toss), but he never cheated.

*Randy easily could have cheated in order to acquire gigantic stuffed animals—he could have simply purchased them, or paid off the minimum-wage carnival tent employees; however, even in regard to something as trivial as winning huge stuffed animals, Randy believes in earning the prize rather than being entitled to it. It is only through earning the prize that he will be able to fully enjoy and appreciate it.*



Randy reveals the secret to winning giant stuffed animals: long arms, and a small amount of disposable income. Randy has been blessed to have both in his life. At his last lecture, Randy shows photos of his giant stuffed animal collection. But, since it's the digital age, he thinks the audience might believe he digitally manipulated the pictures, so he has his students walk from the wings of the stage, each carrying a giant stuffed animal he's won over the years. Randy, knowing Jai wouldn't need this many stuffed animals after he's gone, decides that the best thing to do is to give them away—so that's what he does. After the lecture, people from the audience are free to take one. And they do, including one student who, Randy later learns, also has cancer. After the lecture, she walks up, selects the giant elephant, and takes it away. In Randy's words, "She got the elephant in the room."

*By taking his stuffed animals out of the digital world of his PowerPoint presentation and physically bringing them into the auditorium, Randy makes clear his message about achieving dreams in reality. Just as the stuffed animals might have seemed like a joke or a myth to those in the audience, Randy is illustrating that the things that we imagine but never believe we could actually achieve can be made real through hard work and persistence. It is exactly this process that has allowed Randy to win the stuffed animals. By giving these animals away, hopefully Randy's message will stay with those who attended the lecture, and they'll remember it whenever they glance at their giant prize.*



## CHAPTER 11: THE HAPPIEST PLACE ON EARTH

When Randy was eight, his family went on a cross-country trip to Disneyland, and Randy loved it. One of his dreams became to grow up to design rides that other kids like him could enjoy. When Randy graduated with his PhD from Carnegie Mellon, he thought it made him “infinitely qualified to do anything,” so he applied to Walt Disney Imagineering, and got rejected. However, Randy kept his mantra in mind that “**brick walls** are there for a reason”—not to keep us out, but to “give us a chance to show how badly we want something.”

Fast-forward years later, to 1995 when Randy is a professor at the University of Virginia. He builds a system called “Virtual Reality on Five Dollars a Day,” completing a low-budget V.R. system which is well ahead of its time. Not long after, Randy learns that Disney is working on an Aladdin Virtual Reality attraction. He calls Disney, explains his credentials, and keeps getting passed up the phone chain until he gets in touch with Jon Snoddy, the Imagineer running the Aladdin project. After talking, Randy tells Jon Snoddy that he is going to be in California for work, and, if possible, he’d like to get together. The truth is, however, that Randy is only going to go to California to see Jon.

Jon Snoddy agrees to get lunch with Randy, and before going to the meeting, Randy does 80 hours of homework about the Aladdin project. When they meet, Jon is wowed by Randy’s preparation. At the end of the lunch, Randy explains that he has a sabbatical coming up, and Jon Snoddy thinks it’d be a good idea to have Randy become a temporary member of his team for six months and write a paper about the experience. The only problem—Randy needs permission from his bosses at the University. As Randy says, “every Disney story needs a villain,” and his villain is a tough dean at Virginia nicknamed “Dean Wormer”. “Wormer” is concerned that Disney will steal all of Randy’s “intellectual property,” and therefore doesn’t think Randy should work there. “Dean Wormer” is proof that “sometimes, the most impenetrable **brick walls** are made of flesh.”

*Randy, as a recent PhD, shows a slight inclination towards entitlement (which he later notices many students feel after graduating). Rather than letting his rejection from Disney stop him, though, Randy decides to hunker down and work hard until another opportunity arises to achieve one of his earliest childhood dreams.*



*When hearing of this Disney/virtual reality opportunity, Randy doesn’t wait for Jon Snoddy and Disney to come to him. Instead, he creates an opportunity to meet face-to-face with the person who can say yes or no to hiring him. This is an example of positive, proactive behavior, and it allows Randy to turn one of his dreams into a reality.*



*When Randy gets his opportunity, he doesn’t just rest on his credentials or past experiences—he works hard, does his research, and impresses Jon Snoddy with his preparation even more than with his résumé. So, Randy gets the offer from Snoddy, but then bumps into another obstacle: “Dean Wormer,” who opposes Randy’s idea to take a sabbatical to Disney, even though it is a unique, dream-fulfilling experience. Many people might stop there, but Randy, having learned that obstacles can be treated as opportunities, refuses to relent.*



So, Randy takes his case to another dean, the Dean of Sponsored Research, and when Randy asks if he thinks it's a good idea, the Dean says he doesn't have enough information to say, but he does know that one of his "star faculty members is in my office and he's really excited." So he asks Randy to tell him more. Randy notes how differently these two deans reacted—they both said the same thing, that they were unsure—but the way in which they said it was totally different. In the end, Randy is allowed to go, and he achieves his dream of working for Disney Imagineering. On his drive to the headquarters for the first time, Randy blasts *The Lion King* music from his car speakers and actually breaks down into tears for having achieved his eight-year-old dream.

*Rather than allowing a nay-saying gatekeeper to impede Randy's ability to achieve his childhood dream of becoming a Disney Imagineer, Randy avoids the brick-wall-like obstacle of "Dean Wormer" by finding an opportunity in the Dean of Sponsored Research, who is happy to help Randy take his sabbatical because he can sense Randy's excitement about it. The difference between "Dean Wormer" and the other dean is a perfect example of how attitude and positivity (or lack thereof) impact the way the world treats you. Because "Dean Wormer" is naturally negative, he attracts negative outcomes, and vice versa with the positive dean.*



## CHAPTER 12: THE PARK IS OPEN UNTIL 8 P.M.

In the summer of 2006, Randy's medical odyssey begins, and doctors eventually discover that he has pancreatic cancer. A Google search lets him know how bad this was at the time—half of people die within six months of a diagnosis, and 96% die within five years. Randy approaches his treatment like he does most things: as a data-seeking scientist. He asks questions, records conversations, does research, brings colleagues for second opinions—anything to give him more information. He tells doctors that he would do any surgery or treatment that might either increase his odds of recovery or prolong his life. When he first meets his surgeon Dr. Herb Zeh, Randy tells him his goal is to be alive and on Dr. Zeh's brochure in ten years.

*Rather than becoming depressed and having an apathetic "woe is me" attitude about his cancer diagnosis, Randy approaches it head-on. As a scientist, he attempts to understand his disease in as full a way as possible in order to know how to best take positive steps to fight it.*



Randy is told he can benefit from a "Whipple operation," a dangerous, complicated surgery that kills a little under 5% of those who undergo it. Randy has the surgery, recovers, and undergoes two months of powerful chemotherapy at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, dropping from 182 to 138 pounds in the process. When he goes home to Pittsburgh, Randy's scans show no cancer, and he slowly regains his strength. Eventually, Jai and Randy fly to Houston for a check-in appointment, treating the trip almost like a romantic getaway—they go to a water park the day before his appointment, and Randy rides the speed slide, "grinning all the way down."

*When doctors tell Randy that he might be able to benefit from a risky surgery and intensive chemotherapy, he trusts the experts, has a positive attitude, and decides to try it. Then, when going in for an extremely important check-in, Randy decides to treat this difficult situation as an opportunity to have a fun trip with his wife. Randy consistently chooses to live in the moment instead of simply shutting down to wait for the end.*



On August 15th, 2007, Jai and Randy arrive at MD Anderson to go over the results of his latest scans with Randy's oncologist, Dr. Robert Wolff. They chat with a nurse, then are left to wait for the doctor. Randy notices that the nurse has left herself logged in on the computer, with his medical records pulled up. When Randy reads the results, he's horrified, and tells Jai his "goose is cooked." Randy pulls up his CT scans and counts his tumors aloud, up to ten. Jai is horrified, as is Randy, and Jai falls into Randy's arms and they cry together. Randy, even in this state, thinks like a scientist, believing the lack of tissues in the office to be a "glaring operational flaw."

When Dr. Wolff shows up, Randy tells him that Jai and Randy already know the news. Jai is hysterical, and Dr. Wolff sits next to her. He calmly explains that they are no longer trying to save Randy's life, but rather to extend the time he has left. Jai is furious, feeling as if the doctors are giving up, but Dr. Wolff explains that they can ease symptoms, maybe buy Randy few months. Randy asks questions and feels stunned, but, at the same time, he's extremely impressed with Dr. Wolff's delivery of the news to Jai—he's "carefully rehearsed," yet also makes everything sound "heartfelt and spontaneous." Randy notes that Dr. Wolff always shifts questions into a more positive light—when Randy asks "how long before I die?" Dr. Wolff responds that he has "three to six months of good health."

This reminds Randy of his time working at Disney. If you ask any Disney employee what time the theme park closes, they're supposed to respond, "The park is *open* until 8 p.m." Back in the doctor's office, Randy says he feels, in a way, relieved, because the wait to find out his prognosis is over—now Jai and Randy can plan the rest of Randy's life, and make plans for after his death.

When leaving the office, Randy remembers what he'd said to Jai the day before at the water park, after riding the speed slide. He'd told her that, even if the results are bad, he just wants Jai to know that he is happy to be alive, right then, with her. And, no matter what, Randy tells Jai he isn't going to die when they get the news, or the next day, or the day after that. Randy says he wants Jai to know just how much he's enjoying being with her. And right then Randy knows—living like he's enjoying every day, like in the water park, is exactly how he must live the rest of his life.

*Randy, having just received the news of his impending death, takes the opportunity to assess his current situation and give feedback on an inherent flaw in the morbid-news-giving-process: a lack of tissues in the room.*



*Randy puts a lot of emphasis on the importance of phrasing, and the attitude with which people give feedback. In this case, Dr. Wolff tells Jai the facts "calmly." He manages to sound empathetic to Jai and Randy's specific situation, but also "carefully rehearsed," which comfortingly implies that they aren't the only ones who have been through this. Dr. Wolff's ability to shift questions into positive territory while also being honest about difficult facts is a skill Randy admires. Attitude, even in the face of death, is an important factor to be cognizant of, especially while giving feedback, advice or permission.*



*Randy even uses the obstacle of being told that he only has months left to live as an opportunity to more clearly plot the rest of his life, as well as to plan for his family's life after his death.*



*Randy's attitude will remain as positive as possible until the end. Just as the Disney theme park is open until the end, Randy will live his life as fully, intentionally, and joyfully as he can until his very last day.*



## CHAPTER 13: THE MAN IN THE CONVERTIBLE

A while after he's been diagnosed with cancer, Randy receives an email from Robbee Kosak, one of his colleagues at Carnegie Mellon. In the email, she tells Randy a story of when she was driving home from work. She was behind a guy in a convertible, and the man had his top down. His arm was hanging out of the door and his fingers were tapping to the music while his head bobbed. Robbee changed lanes, and could see the guy had this huge smile across his face, and Robbee thought to herself, "Wow, this is the epitome of a person appreciating this day and this moment." When the convertible turned the corner, Robbee was shocked to see that, in fact, it was Randy Pausch in the car.

Robbee Kosak writes in her email that this moment meant a lot to her, because it reminded her of what life is all about. Later, Randy re-reads Robbee's email many times, coming to view it as "a **feedback loop** of sorts." Randy says that it hasn't always been easy staying positive during his fight with cancer, and he'd wondered himself whether he was acting like he was okay in order to put on a brave face for his family, or if he truly was doing pretty well. In that moment, Robbee saw Randy totally unguarded, and Randy would like to think she saw him as he truly is—happy, positive, and fully engaged. Robbee's email gives Randy "a window into" himself. He still knows that life is good, and, at least that night, he is doing OK.

*This email from Robbee Kosak shows how, even after being diagnosed with cancer, Randy's attitude is still positive.*



*Robbee giving Randy the feedback that she is happy he's doing well is, in itself, a feedback loop that helps Randy remain positive. Robbee learns the importance of enjoying every moment from Randy, she tells him what she's learned, and Randy then uses the feedback Robbee imparted to him to remind himself of the importance of happiness in times of doubt.*



## CHAPTER 14: THE DUTCH UNCLE

Randy has a healthy sense of self-worth and he tends to speak his mind and say what he believes. Mostly, these traits have served him well, but there have been times when he has come across as "arrogant and tactless. That's when those who can help you recalibrate yourself become absolutely crucial." Tammy, Randy's sister, often had to keep Randy's ego in check as a kid. When Randy was seven and was mouthing off at the bus stop, Tammy had enough and dropped Randy's lunchbox in a mud puddle. Tammy ended up in the principal's office while Randy got cleaned up by a Janitor who threw out his lunch and kindly gave him lunch money.

*Using other people as feedback loops in order to change your behavior—even if you don't necessarily want to listen to them—is extremely important to Randy. Although Randy probably didn't enjoy having his lunchbox tossed in the mud by his big sister Tammy, the feedback that he received from her about how annoying his mouthing off was turned out to be more valuable to Randy than his sandwich.*



The Principal called Randy's parents, and Randy's mom said she would let Randy's dad handle it. When he got home from work and was told the story, Randy's dad burst into a smile, decided not to punish Tammy, and "did everything but congratulate her!" Randy's dad knew Randy was a kid who kind of needed to get his lunchbox thrown in a puddle. Later, when Randy was attending Brown University and his self-confident lack of tact was at an all-time high, his friend Scott Sherman said that Randy was known as the "quickest to offend someone he had just met." Randy didn't notice how he came across to others, until, one day, Randy's mentor and teacher, Professor Andy van Dam, took Randy for a walk and told him "Randy, it's such a shame that people perceive you as being so arrogant, because it's going to limit what you're going to be able to accomplish in life."

Looking back, Randy notes that Andy van Dam's wording was perfect—he was basically telling Randy he was a jerk, but he said it in a way that let Randy become open to Andy's criticism. There's an old expression, a "Dutch uncle," which is someone who gives you honest feedback. Though few people do it nowadays, Randy believes that giving people honest feedback is crucial to the teaching/learning process. Randy says he's been "lucky enough to benefit over the years from people like Andy," who have cared to tell him the "tough-love" things he needed to hear.

*Randy's dad understood that young Randy crucially needed that feedback from his big sister, and, as an adult, Randy seems to agree. Although the feedback from Professor Andy van Dam (that "people perceive" Randy as arrogant) certainly hurt his ego when he first heard it, in the long-term, being told that he was arrogant led to a change of attitude that was invaluable to Randy for the rest of his life.*



*Rather than flat-out telling Randy he was an arrogant jerk and needed to change his behavior, Andy van Dam's phrasing of "it's such a shame..." framed the problem in a way that made Randy open to addressing it. To Randy, having your flaws pointed out in a direct, helpful way can be an opportunity to change yourself and improve in the future. In order to create a successful feedback loop, then, you have to be mindful about giving feedback in a way that people will be open to receiving.*



## CHAPTER 15: POURING SODA IN THE BACKSEAT

In his twenties and thirties, Randy had no kids, so his niece and nephew, Laura and Chris, became the objects of his affection. Randy spoiled them, but that's not all he tried to do—he also tried to get them to "look at their world from strange new angles," and Randy also tried to impart his perspective on life to them, which drove Tammy crazy. One day, when Chris was seven and Laura nine, Randy picked them up in his brand new convertible. When Tammy gave Chris and Laura a lecture about not making a mess in the car, Randy casually opened a can of soda and poured it all over the cloth backseats. Chris and Laura's jaws dropped, and Randy said he was glad he did that, because later in the weekend, when Chris got sick and threw up all over the backseat, he didn't feel guilty at all.

*Randy uses his sister's lecture as an opportunity to teach his niece and nephew a lesson they'd never forget (and one that his parents long ago taught him): that material things, in the end, aren't significant. Because Randy took the time to demonstrate this, his niece and nephew were able to enjoy their weekend without feeling guilty when Chris threw up on Randy's car. For Randy, love is always more important than possessions.*



Randy says that when he would take his niece and nephew on adventures, there were only two rules: No whining, and, whatever they'd do, no telling mom. This second rule made every excursion into a "pirate adventure" so that "even the mundane could feel magical." Randy, Chris and Laura liked making pancakes, but Randy's dad had always asked, "why do pancakes need to be round?" So, Randy and the kids made pancakes of all shapes and sizes, amusing themselves by guessing what animal each pancake looked most like.

Randy, reminiscing while writing the book, says he's especially grateful that he was able to spend so much time with his niece and nephew, as he will never be able to watch his kids grow up in the same way. Recently, Randy asked both Chris and Laura to do him a favor—after he's gone, Randy wants them to take his kids and "just do stuff," anything fun they can think of, like he did for them. Also, Randy wants Chris and Laura to tell his kids that Randy asked the two of them to spend time with the kids, and that Randy fought as hard as he could to stay alive because he wanted to be around his kids as long as possible. Also, Randy adds, if his kids mess up their cars, he hopes Chris and Laura will think of him and smile.

## CHAPTER 16: ROMANCING THE BRICK WALL

The most "formidable **brick wall**" Randy ever came across was 5'6" and beautiful, but it reduces him to tears and forces him to call his father to ask for advice on how to scale it. This brick wall is Jai, Randy's future wife. Randy reiterates that his courtship of Jai epitomizes the idea that "brick walls are there to stop the people who don't want it badly enough." Randy was 37 when he and Jai met, and lived in a tiny attic apartment despite being a tenured professor. When a friend once asked him what kind of woman would want to live there, Randy replied, "the right kind." But Randy knew that wasn't true; no woman would want to live there. When Randy went to give a guest lecture at UNC, the University assigned Jai to host him. Randy was immediately taken with her, and he flirted "pretty aggressively" despite the professional setting.

*The "no telling mom" rule is a terrific example of attitude and positivity impacting how you interact with the world: turning mundane activities (like making pancakes) into adventures is all about having a positive attitude and being creative with your perception of the activity. To transform pancake making, for example, all Randy had to do was to turn it into a secret activity and make the pancakes look like animals.*



*Just as Randy was able to teach Chris and Laura lessons that helped shape their beliefs and attitudes, Randy hopes Chris and Laura will do the same for his kids. In other words, he wants Chris and Laura to pass on a feedback loop of ideas, behaviors and attitudes. This feedback loop started long before Randy, and hopefully it will be passed down further by Randy's own kids when they one day have children or students of their own.*



*Even at the very beginning of Randy and Jai's courtship, Randy does not allow the "obstacle" of the professional setting to stop him from getting to know Jai better and attempt to get her interested in him. It is perhaps worth thinking about whether Randy's advice in this case is worth taking without at least some additional thought, however. While in this case the story of Randy and Jai works out happily, and in fact many romances begin in the workplace, there is also something a bit jarring about his refusal to adhere to the standards of a "professional setting" and instead to flirt "pretty aggressively." What if, for instance, Jai had not wanted to flirt with him? While Randy's response to "walls" almost always involves a degree of respecting others, it is possible to take his advice the wrong way with the result that one might pursue one's goal regardless of what other people want, which is more likely to lead to unhappy, or even dire, results as opposed to happy ones.*



Randy asked to see Jai for drinks after a faculty event, and she agreed. He thought about her during the whole dinner, and afterward they went to a wine bar. He was supposed to fly home the next morning, but told her he'd change his flight if she'd go on a date with him. Jai agreed and they had a great time. After Randy went back home to Pittsburgh, he offered Jai his frequent flyer miles to go visit him—she considered it, then declined, saying she was “not looking for a long-distance relationship.” Randy wasn't deterred, and he sent her a dozen roses with a card that said he respected her decision and wished her nothing but the best. Of course, that convinced her to get on the plane and visit.

Randy says he'd fallen in love with Jai, even if she was still finding her way. They saw each other almost every weekend through the winter, and eventually, he asked her to move to Pittsburgh. She agreed to move, though not into Randy's apartment, so Randy made arrangements to have a weeklong seminar at UNC to help Jai pack up. When he arrived, Jai told Randy that she couldn't move to Pittsburgh because she didn't love him. Randy was heartbroken, and Jai drove him back to his hotel. Randy spent most of the day on the phone with his parents, “telling them about the **brick wall**” he'd just smashed into. Randy's dad told him that he didn't think Jai meant it. Randy asked what he should do, and his mom told him to just “Be supportive... If you love her, support her.”

So, Randy supported Jai, spending his week teaching and hanging out in his office just up the hall from her, checking in on her once-in-a-while. Eventually Jai called him and told him she was sitting there missing him. She realized she was in love after all, and at the end of the week Jai moved to Pittsburgh with Randy.

## CHAPTER 17: NOT ALL FAIRY TALES END SMOOTHLY

Jai and Randy get married on the lawn of a Victorian mansion in Pittsburgh, but rather than leaving the reception in a ‘Just Married’ car, they are whisked off by a huge hot-air balloon. Jai feels like it is a “fairy tale ending to a Disney movie,” but quickly the balloon smashes into some branches, and The Ballooner becomes worried about the shifting winds. The balloon floats out over urban Pittsburgh, not where they'd planned to be, and they start looking for a safe space to land, but find none. The ballooner spots an open field near a train track and begins to let hot air out, causing the balloon to fall quickly. But Randy notices an oncoming train approaching. He tells the ballooner, who replies that it's unlikely—but not impossible—that the balloon could get caught beneath the train.

*Randy is always positive in his attitude and proactive with his behavior at every turn of his relationship with Jai. He leverages the short length of his trip into a next-day date, and then, after Jai declines to visit him because she doesn't want to be in a long-distance relationship, Randy seizes the opportunity to make an extremely romantic gesture and send roses and a card. Randy's kindness and persistence ultimately convinces her to come see him.*



*Jai's pessimism poses an obstacle to her relationship with Randy: right when Jai is poised to move to Pittsburgh to be with Randy, she gets scared and decides she doesn't love Randy and can't move with him. Randy doesn't try to force her to change her mind—instead, he gets over this brick wall by having a positive attitude, being patient, and supporting Jai in her feelings.*



*So, Randy's patience pays off, and Jai comes to the conclusion on her own that she wants to be with him. Randy's positive belief in Jai's love for him proved successful—had he had a more negative, reactionary attitude, she might have come to a different conclusion.*



*This “fairy tale ending” proves to be more of a nightmare than a dream, as the beauty and romance of the idea quickly turns into very real danger. In this tense situation, Randy maintains his composure and keeps a poised, positive, realistic attitude, so that when he sees an obstacle approaching (the oncoming train), he is able to alert The Ballooner of the danger. Despite the tense situation, though, Randy doesn't let this ruin his trip.*



The whole time it drops, Randy calculates what direction he and Jai should dive out of the balloon to save themselves. They crash land in the field, and luckily they miss the oncoming train. Randy's friend Jack Sheriff arrives in the chase-car, happy to see them both safe. The Ballooner runs over just as they're about to go, informing them they paid for the wedding package, including a bottle of champagne. They take it.

*Again, in the face of danger, Randy has a positive attitude and is ready to take any proactive step possible to improve his and his wife's situation.*



## CHAPTER 18: LUCY, I'M HOME

One day, while Randy is out, Jai accidentally crashes her car into Randy's convertible, leaving both badly dented. She pulls both into the garage and makes Randy his favorite meal before telling him the news. After they are finished eating, Jai and Randy go to inspect the damage. Jai says she promises to go get the cars repaired tomorrow morning, and Randy tells her that isn't necessary. The dents are fine. Randy's parents had taught him, "automobiles are there to get you from point A to point B. They are utilitarian devices, not expression of social status." So, Randy won't let Jai do cosmetic repairs on the car. Jai is shocked, but Randy tells her that she has to accept both sides of him: she was happy when he wasn't mad, so she has to accept that, if the cars still work, they're going to drive them. The "dented cars became a statement" in Jai and Randy's marriage—"not everything needs to be fixed."

*Randy uses the obstacle of the scuffed-up cars to make a statement about his and Jai's marriage—"not everything needs to be fixed." Also, he uses the opportunity of Jai's mistake to give her feedback and teach her a lesson that Randy's parents had taught him—cars are meant to be used for transportation, not social status, and so they do not need to be repaired if the damage is merely cosmetic.*



## CHAPTER 19: A NEW YEAR'S STORY

It is always in your power to make things worse or better, and Randy learns this profoundly one New Year's Eve. Jai is seven months pregnant with Dylan, their first child, when she starts bleeding profusely. Randy rushes Jai to the hospital, and it's quickly determined that her placenta has torn away, and the life of the fetus is giving out. She has to be rushed into emergency surgery after signing insurance documents, and a doctor pulls Randy aside to tell him that his job is to stop his wife from going into shock, to keep her in the present moment. When she's getting rushed into surgery, Jai asks the doctor if this is going to be bad, and the doctor replies that if it was really bad they wouldn't have had her take the time to sign those insurance documents.

*As has often been the case throughout this book, Randy doesn't buckle under the pressure of this scary situation and instead he manages to quickly get Jai to a hospital so experts can help her. Also, the doctor's response to Jai about the insurance documents is an example of shifting a tense situation into a more positive light.*



They begin Jai's C-section, and Randy decides to hold Jai's hand tight and calmly explain everything that the doctor is doing to Jai out of her view. Randy is direct yet reassuring, and when Randy sees the baby come out, he tells Jai. Dylan lets out a huge scream, and the nurses say that's a great sign. Jai is overcome with relief and emotion, and she ends up being okay. Dylan needs to be sent to a special baby care unit to use a respirator, but he gets better and better day after day. One day, Randy and Jai get to the hospital and Dylan's bassinet is gone. They freak out, until a Baby Nurse tells them he was doing so well that they moved him to the normal babies area. Looking back, Randy says that Dylan's birth is a reminder of "the roles we get to play in our destinies." He and Jai could have made things much worse by falling to pieces—they never said to each other "this isn't fair"—they just kept going, and did what they could to "help the outcome in positive ways."

*Once more, Randy has a positive attitude and takes proactive steps to help improve the situation by holding Jai's hand and calmly explaining what the doctor is doing to her. Randy believes that, had he and Jai fallen to pieces, the outcome of the situation for both Dylan and Jai might have been much worse. Instead, they put on a positive attitude and did whatever they could to "help the outcome in positive ways."*



## CHAPTER 20: "IN FIFTY YEARS, IT NEVER CAME UP"

After Randy's father passes away in 2006, they go through his things. Randy finds many items that make him smile—a picture of his dad with a paper bag, likely a toy he was about to give Randy or his sister. However, Randy finds one item he doesn't understand—a citation from 1945, when his father was in the army, for "heroic achievement." Randy learns from the citation that his father risked his life to save the life of a wounded man and give him medical attention. Because of this, Randy's dad was issued the bronze star of valor. And never once, in Randy's 45-years of life, did his father mention it. So, weeks after his father's death, Randy learns another lesson from his father "about the meaning of sacrifice—and the power of humility."

*In some ways, this chapter relates directly to Randy's writing of this book itself. Just as Randy is able to discover things about his father and learn lessons from him after he is gone, Randy's kids might be able to become closer to their father and learn lessons from him, through his lecture and this book, long after Randy is dead. This creates a kind of feedback loop of knowledge through books, which could be more broadly used to characterize the way that books circulate throughout generations.*



## CHAPTER 21: JAI

Randy talks a lot about Jai's character, especially her strength, directness, and honesty. Early in their relationship Jai would tell Randy she had a "gut feeling" about something, but through time she learns instead to present him with scientific data. For example, Randy wants to go visit his side of the family during Christmas, but they all have the flu. Jai doesn't want Randy or the kids to visit while Randy is so sick with cancer, but Randy wants to go because it might be one of his last opportunities to see his family. Jai gets opinions from two doctors, neither of whom think they should go. So, Randy lets Jai and the kids stay home, and he visits his family alone. (He doesn't get sick).

*Jai begins to see obstacles as opportunities just as Randy does. When her intuition-based logic bumps up against Randy's hyper-logical science-based nature, she uses it as an opportunity to get through to him in a way that Randy will certainly understand: through factual, scientific data. So, Jai rightly wins the argument of whether Jai, Randy and the kids should visit his family at Christmas by beating him at his own game and asking medical experts for their opinions.*



Jai handles Randy relatively well, but since he has gotten sick she is learning to let stuff slide. Randy has the habit of leaving his clothing all over the floor, and, rather than argue like they used to, Jai will just kick Randy's clothes to the corner. Jai writes in a journal to take her angst out on something other than Randy, and she also tries to focus on the positive rather than the negative because "It's not helpful if we spend every day dreading tomorrow."

On Randy's last New Years, he takes Dylan to go see the movie *Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium*, and, though Randy had read a review, he didn't know it was about a dying toymaker handing the shop over to an apprentice. Dylan cries at the movie, his head on Randy's lap, and Randy says that if his life were a movie this would be over-the-top foreshadowing. One line from the movie sticks in Randy's mind—the apprentice tells the toymaker that he can't die, that he has to live, to which the toymaker responds, "I already did that."

Later that night, Randy is depressed, and Jai cheers him up by discussing all the wonderful things they've done that past year. Jai says that one of her favorite things is watching Randy interact with the kids—at Christmas, Randy made an adventure of putting the lights on the tree. Rather than do it properly, he had the kids just throw them all around however they wanted. They got a video of the chaos, and Jai says it will always be one of her favorite memories.

Jai goes on websites for cancer patients, but can't stay for too long because it depresses her. However, she finds one comment very helpful: it's from a woman whose husband died before they could go on a family vacation. The woman says to go on those trips you've always wanted to take, and to live in the moment. When things get tough, Jai tries to remember all the wonderful times early in their relationship—like Randy sending her flowers or bringing her huge stuffed animals to put in her office. Jai, too, has lived out many of her childhood dreams, including one of her biggest, which was to have kids and a family of her own. Overall, Jai has taken strength from standing together with Randy "shoulder to shoulder" and being honest with him "heart to heart." Yes, she still gets mad when he leaves his clothes everywhere, but all things considered she'll give him a pass. And Randy says he knows that he owes it to his wife to try to straighten up the mess. His new years resolution is to try harder.

*Letting the little stuff slide is a part of having a positive attitude, and Jai letting Randy's messy clothing habit not bother her so much leads to fewer arguments in their marriage. In a way, this is turning an obstacle into an opportunity, as this might never have happened had Randy not been diagnosed with cancer.*



*Randy sees himself as the toymaker, but rather than being depressed that his life is ending, Randy is able, at least somewhat, to appreciate that he has lived his life to the fullest. Also, Randy uses the obstacle of seeing a film that so closely confronts his own reality as an opportunity to spend an intimate moment with his son.*



*Jai tries to help Randy become less depressed by shifting his focus to all of the positive things his family has done that past year. The Christmas tree video is a wonderful example of an obstacle (chaotic, messy Christmas lights) being an opportunity to look at the messiness in a more positive light and see how creative their kids were able to be and how much fun they were able to have doing an often boring or hyper-organized activity.*



*Using the obstacle of being given a cancer diagnosis as an opportunity to take trips and do the things you've always wanted to do in life is a prime example of using a positive attitude to make a bleak situation into a lighter one. Also, Randy and Jai, while not shying away from their tough situation, are able to remember their positive shared history and focus on the powerful connection of their relationship. And, even though he will die soon, Randy still makes a new years resolution to take Jai's feedback about his messiness and try to work harder to be a bit neater.*



## CHAPTER 22: THE TRUTH CAN SET YOU FREE

Randy gets pulled over for speeding soon after moving to his new home in Virginia. When the Police Officer asks him why he has a Pennsylvania license, Randy responds truthfully that he has “terminal cancer” and that his family moved to Virginia to be closer to his wife’s family. The officer inspects Randy, telling him for a guy with months to live, he sure looks good. Randy says, “It’s really ironic. I look great on the outside, but the tumors are on the inside.” Randy then pulls up his shirt and shows the officer his surgical scars. The officer decides Randy is telling the truth, and tells him to slow his driving from now on. Randy says the “awful truth” is what set him free, before he drives home under the speed limit.

*Randy’s positive, frank attitude when dealing with the police officer allows him to use the truth of his cancer to get out of a speeding ticket. Randy isn’t afraid to show the officer his scars: he uses the obstacle of his surgery as an opportunity to give the cop proof of his disease.*



## CHAPTER 23: I’M ON MY HONEYMOON, BUT IF YOU NEED ME...

When Jai sends Randy to buy groceries, he uses a self-scan machine. It malfunctions, and he accidentally pays \$16.55 twice instead of once. Randy has a decision to make—he could find the manager, tell him or her the story, fill out a form, and get one of the charges removed, which would take ten or fifteen minutes and be no fun for Randy, or he could leave. Given how little time Randy has left, he decides he is happier to have fifteen minutes than sixteen dollars, so he leaves the store having paid extra. All Randy’s life, he has been aware that time is finite, and managing time well is one of the most important skills to leading a successful life.

*While losing \$16.55 isn’t a perfect outcome for Randy, he uses the double-scanning obstacle as an opportunity to think clearly about his situation and decide what the best way to proceed is. So, when he leaves the store, he is happy and positive about his decision to keep ten or fifteen minutes rather than get his money back.*



Randy lists off many pieces of advice regarding time management. First, it must be managed explicitly, with a budget, like money: for example, you shouldn’t waste time on irrelevant details (“it doesn’t matter how well you polish the underside of a bannister”). Randy is a big believer in plans and to-do lists because if you have a plan, you can always change it. Randy urges readers to ask themselves if they are spending time on the right things—he gives the example of a pregnant woman smoking a cigarette while protesting a local construction site because she’s worried the jackhammers will harm her unborn child. Randy also says that a good filing system will save you time later, and that rethinking how you spend your time on hold on the telephone (perhaps by having alternate activities to do while on hold) is a smart idea.

*Attitude and positive behavior are best put to use after having weighed all of the variables. For example, although the pregnant woman at the construction site seems to be taking proactive steps to help her child, her negative behavior of smoking a cigarette while pregnant is almost certainly more harmful than the vibrations of jackhammers that she’s protesting. Being both realistic and positive is needed if you want to actually impact the world around you successfully.*



Randy is also a huge proponent of delegating. He says that it's never too early to delegate, and that he does it with his students and his kids. Randy also recommends taking "a time out" every once in a while, and that it's not a real vacation if you're reading emails or taking work messages. When Jai and Randy went on their honeymoon, his boss felt that people needed a way to contact him. So, Randy made a phone message saying that he waited until he was 39 to get married, so he's going away for a month. Then Randy gave the number to his in-laws' house, and said that if the emergency merits interrupting their only daughter's honeymoon, his in-laws could find a way to get in touch. Naturally, Randy and Jai went a month without getting any calls. Randy ends the chapter by saying "Time is all you have. And you may find one day that you have less than you think."

## CHAPTER 24: A RECOVERING JERK

Randy says that his number one goal in being a teacher is teaching students to "learn how to judge themselves." He wants them to be able to recognize their own abilities and flaws, and be realistic about how others view them. Randy says that many old-school types complain that the current educational model feels like it's all about customer service—that parents feel they're buying a five-subject course load much like they would buy five pairs of jeans. Randy is fine with the customer-service model, but he prefers a different metaphor—college tuition, to Randy, is like paying for a personal trainer at a gym. If the professors are the trainers, giving people access to tools, then it is their job to be demanding. They should praise kids when they deserve it and criticize them when it's honest to do so.

Most importantly, Randy sees it as the teacher's duty to get kids to "judge for themselves how they're coming along." Just like when you work out consistently at a gym, if you put effort in at college, the results should speak for themselves. It is the professor's job to make students aware of their own growth, so Randy tries to come up with mechanical ways for students to listen to feedback and develop their own "feedback loops." This was the hardest thing Randy had to do as an educator, and it saddens Randy that so many teachers have given up on it.

*Believing that other people can do something is often the first step in allowing them to understand their own capabilities. That is why Randy believes that delegating is a powerful way to teach people what they're capable of. In some ways, delegating can serve as a "head fake," because the act of doing whatever task the person is told to do simultaneously teaches them that they are capable of accomplishing things they weren't aware they could do before.*



*Randy believes that teaching and learning should be conducted with complete openness and honesty so that teachers can give their students the ability to "judge themselves" (to create their own feedback loops), which reduces students' reliance on feedback and guidance from others. Randy believes that both criticism and praise should be rightfully earned, and no student is entitled to anything except for access to tools and an honest assessment of how they are doing.*



*Again, giving students the ability to judge for themselves how their capabilities have grown is what Randy sees as the most important part of teaching and learning. This can be thought of as the process of creating and developing students' own feedback loops. Once students have their own feedback loops, they have the tools to constantly assess and improve their own performance.*



When Randy taught the “Building Virtual Worlds” class at Carnegie Mellon, they did peer feedback every two weeks. At the end of the semester, Randy put together a spreadsheet, and each student could see where they ranked in 1) How hard their peers felt they were working, 2) How creative their peers thought their contribution was, and 3) Whether their peers found them easy to work with. Randy’s hope was that, when the bottom-end students saw how poorly they rated amongst their peers, they would change their behavior and improve how they interacted in groups in the future. Still, Randy says, many students were able to entirely ignore this feedback.

For example, in one course Randy taught, instead of showing them the full list, Randy only told students what quartile they fell into (top 25%, bottom 25%, near the middle, etc.). When one Obnoxious Student sees he is ranked in the bottom 25%, he’s unfazed and doesn’t change his behavior. During a meeting, Randy tells this student that he isn’t just in the bottom 25%—out of fifty students, he ranks “dead last.” Randy says he has a serious issue, and the student is shocked. Randy tells him about his own past—that he was in denial about how people perceived him, until he had a professor that showed he cared by smacking the truth into his head. And here’s what makes Randy special: he listened. Randy says that he’s a “recovering jerk,” and that this student can become a recovering jerk, too. For the rest of the semester, the student keeps himself in check. Randy did him a favor, just as Andy Van Dam did Randy one many years earlier.

*Because Randy believes that feedback is so important to the teaching and learning process, he makes peer feedback a required part of his classes. Still, Randy says, giving feedback isn’t always enough for it to sink in: the person receiving the feedback needs to acknowledge it, have a positive attitude, and make a concerted effort to change their behavior and attitude after receiving the feedback. If people simply ignore feedback, nothing changes.*



*Here, Randy uses the obstacle of the Obnoxious Student’s attitude as an opportunity to give back the gift of feedback that Andy van Dam gave Randy when he was a college student. So, Randy gives this student the same advice Andy van Dam gave him so long ago: he’s an arrogant jerk, but he doesn’t have to be. There is a problem, but this student can rectify it and become a recovering jerk just like Randy. So, the student accepts this feedback, changes his attitude and behavior, and is better off for it. The cycle of teacher helping student continues, so that perhaps this obnoxious student might one day pass this piece of feedback along to a student of his own.*



## CHAPTER 25: TRAINING A JEDI

Achieving your own childhood dreams is thrilling, but enabling the dreams of others might even be better, according to Randy. In 1993, Randy interviewed a student at the University of Virginia named Tommy Burnett to be on his research team. During the interview, Tommy says that his greatest childhood dream was to work on a *Star Wars* film. Though Randy tells him they’re done making those films, Tommy is resolute that they’ll one day make more, and when they do, he’s going to work on them. When he was a kid, though other kids wanted to be Han Solo, Tommy always wanted to work on the technical aspects. Randy has a flashback to his own experience at Disneyland as a child, so he asks Tommy to join his research team.

*The topic of achieving childhood dreams becomes extremely tangible for Tommy Burnett. Tommy’s deep-seated, positive, optimistic dream of working on *Star Wars* films reminds Randy of his own Disney dreams, and this largely plays into why Randy chooses to hire Tommy to be a part of his research team.*



Randy is tough on Tommy Burnett, and Tommy compares Randy to a demanding football coach. Tommy says he learned not only about virtual reality programming from Randy, but also “how work colleagues need to be like a family of sorts.” Randy teaches Tommy that being smart isn’t enough—Randy wants people “who will help everyone else feel happy” to be there. Tommy becomes a team player, and Randy brings everyone on the research team down to Disney World as a thank you. When Randy moves on to Carnegie Mellon, he brings every member of his team along except Tommy—not because he doesn’t want to, but because Tommy got hired to work on all of the new *Star Wars* films.

A few years later, Tommy Burnett invites Randy and his students on a trip to Industrial Light & Magic, which is George Lucas’s effects company. One student asks Tommy how big a part luck plays in the film industry. Tommy says that luck plays a huge part, but being in Randy’s class already makes these kids lucky, because Tommy wouldn’t be where he is without having known Randy. Randy says that day became a turning point with that class of kids, and Tommy had passed on the favor that Randy had granted him many years earlier.

*Randy gives Tommy tough feedback (that he isn’t enough of a team player), but Tommy takes it, changes his behavior, and becomes a positive part of the work environment. Randy, as a way to actively show gratitude, takes his whole team down to Disney World—in a way, this is Randy sharing his childhood dream with his team. Tommy, for his part, earned his way to working on Star Wars not by dreaming big, but by joining Randy’s team, working hard, and acquiring the requisite skills so that he had something to “bring to the table” once Lucas Films announced they were making more films.*



*Tommy’s answer to Randy’s student’s question (that luck plays a huge part in the film industry, but that the students are already lucky because they’re in Randy’s class) is Tommy’s way of suggesting that this student shift his attitude and be more positive about the advantages of his own situation. Just as Randy’s feedback and guidance helped Tommy, Tommy’s enlightening response to this student’s question helped Randy break through to this class for the rest of the year.*



## CHAPTER 26: THEY JUST BLEW ME AWAY

Randy says that his obsession with efficiency led him to wonder if he could help students achieve their dreams on a larger scale than just one-on-one. That’s when Randy created the “Building Virtual Worlds” course, opening it up to students all across Carnegie Mellon University (not just computer science students). The students were put into groups of four and given two weeks to program a helmet-based virtual world, dreaming up whatever they wanted. There were only two rules: no shooting violence, and no pornography. Most students rose to the challenge; when they had their first presentations, Randy was blown away, their work far exceeding his expectations. Randy wasn’t sure what to do, so he called his mentor Andy Van Dam, explained the situation, and Andy advised Randy to go back to class the next day and say, “that was pretty good, but I know you can do better.”

*Randy combines his love of achieving dreams with his commitment to being practical and efficient in order to create this unique, creative course with nearly boundless parameters. However, after the first week this poses an enormous obstacle for Randy—the projects the kids made already exceeded his expectations for the whole course. So, Randy calls Andy van Dam, who wisely advises Randy to respond to these amazing projects not by coddling the kids and telling them how impressed he was, but instead by telling them that these projects are good, but he knows they can do better.*



Randy was unsure, but he followed Andy Van Dam’s advice anyway, and it turned out to be exactly the right thing to do—the projects kept getting better and better. Andy was telling Randy that Randy didn’t know how high the bar should be for the class, and that he’d do the students a disservice by ceasing to challenge them. Eventually, on show-and-tell days, the classroom would become so packed that they had to move into an auditorium, with more than 400 people cheering for their favorite virtual reality presentations. Randy says that on presentation days he could always tell which projects would be the best based on the body language of a group—if they were standing close together, Randy knew they’d bonded and their virtual world would be worth seeing.

Randy, along with Carnegie Mellon drama professor Don Marinelli, decided to take it up a notch and create The Entertainment Technology Center, which is a two-year master’s degree in which artists and technologists come together to design rides, games, or anything else. At times, Randy and Don became each other’s **brick walls**, as their right-brain vs. left-brain thinking was so different, but they always managed to find a way to compromise and make things work. They’re expanding the Entertainment Technology Center to other places around the world, meaning that hundreds of students Randy will never know might have the opportunity to fulfill their craziest childhood dreams because of him.

## CHAPTER 27: THE PROMISED LAND

Randy says that enabling the dreams of others can happen one-on-one, fifty to a hundred people at a time like at the Entertainment Technology Center, or you can “attempt to do it on a grand scale, trying to enable the dreams of millions...” That is the story behind Alice, the Carnegie Mellon software tool Randy developed. Alice is software designed to allow anyone, young or old, create animations for storytelling, games, or making videos. Randy’s end-goal is to have tens of millions of kids use it to chase their dreams. He sees Alice as a prime example of the “**head fake**,” because students think they’re using Alice to make movies or create video games, but instead they’re actually “learning how to become computer programmers.”

*Randy, having learned from the advice of Andy van Dam, teaches his students that they can do better no matter how good their project is already. So, the groups work hard to quite literally turn their imaginations into reality and share it with their friends and family. In a way, this process of turning imagination into reality is reminiscent of how Randy painted his bedroom walls to externalize his imagination years earlier.*



*Randy and Don use the obstacle of their different approaches to thinking (logical vs. creative) as an opportunity to come to compromises that satisfy both of them. This leads to enormous success for the program. Randy is also happy that the existence of the program, and its expansion, will mean that other people will be able to achieve their dreams because of him.*



*Allowing other people to turn their dreams into realities is at the heart of the Alice project. But, even more than that, Randy uses the “head fake” (which he learned from Coach Graham) as a central part of Alice, so that users will learn practical computer programming skills while trying to make movies or create games.*



Walt Disney’s dream for Disney World was that it would never stop growing and changing, even after he died, and Randy has the same hopes for Alice. Alice’s lead designer is Dennis Cosgrove, one of Randy’s former students. Caitlin Kelleher, another of his students, helped Randy early on in noting that the program might be fun for boys, but it wasn’t really for girls. So, for her PhD dissertation, Caitlin built a system called “storytelling Alice,” and to this day she develops new systems to revolutionize how young girls get their first programming experiences. Caitlin figured out that if programming is presented as storytelling rather than software writing, girls are perfectly willing to learn how to write software—everybody loves telling stories, and, in Randy’s mind, Caitlin wins the “All-Time Best **Head-Fake** Award.”

During Randy’s last lecture, he mentions that he understands the story of Moses better, as he knows he will never see Alice ascend into the popularity he imagines for it, but he is confident in knowing that it will go on to great things. If Randy has to die, he’s comfortable having Alice as his professional legacy, because “millions of kids are going to have incredible fun while learning something hard.” And they’ll develop skills “that could help them achieve their dreams.”

## CHAPTER 28: DREAM BIG

Randy first knew that pretty much anything was possible when he was eight years old and men first walked on the moon. Randy was at camp, and all the kids were brought to the main farmhouse where a TV was set up to watch the landing. The astronauts took a long time to get organized, and, though Randy was happy to wait, the organizers of the camp felt it was taking too long and forced the kids to go back to bed. Even as an eight-year-old, Randy was mad at the camp directors; considering that his species made it off the planet, Randy thought caring about bedtime was kind of dumb.

However, when Randy got home a few weeks later, he found that his dad had taken a photo of their TV set the moment Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon. His dad had preserved the moment, knowing it could “help trigger big dreams.” Randy says he understands the money for the space program could be used to fight poverty, but, as a scientist, he sees “inspiration as the ultimate tool for doing good.” So, he tells the reader to give themselves permission to dream, and fuel their kids’ dreams, too, even if that means staying up past bed time every once in a while.

*Shifting how the Alice software is presented to girls helps further the “head fake” embedded in Alice. When presented as “programming,” girls aren’t as apt to enjoy using the Alice software, but when it is presented as a “storytelling exercise,” girls are just as willing as boys to use it and enjoy it (and learn the same programming skills along the way).*



*Randy is optimistic that, by leaving Alice in the hands of professionals he knows and trusts, he has taken proactive steps to ensure that his program will help as many other people achieve their dreams as possible after his death.*



*Even as a kid, Randy knew that his camp directors should have had a more open attitude about the campers’ bedtimes—they would never have another chance to watch the first man landing on the moon. If Randy were in charge, all of these kids would have witnessed a historic, dream-enabling moment.*



*Randy’s dad had the right idea about the moon landing: he knew it was important to document so that it could enable Randy and Tammy’s dreams and make them aware that anything is possible. Randy believes that inspiration is the ultimate tool for enabling others’ dreams, and he believes that rules should sometimes be bent in order to share inspiration.*



## CHAPTER 29: EARNEST IS BETTER THAN HIP

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Earnestness comes from the core, whereas being hip or cool is all about trying to impress from the surface. The perfect example of earnestness to Randy is being an Eagle Scout. Whenever he's interviewing people and learns that they were an eagle scout, he tries to hire them, because he knows there has "to be an earnestness about him that outweighed any superficial urges toward hipness." Fashion, Randy adds, is "commerce masquerading as hip." That's why he rarely buys new clothes—his parents taught him that you should buy new clothes when the old ones wear out. So, though Randy's wardrobe is far from hip, it's kind of earnest, and that's going to carry him through just fine.

*Randy sees wardrobe as an extension of your attitude—rather than trying to be trendy and cool, Randy believes you should be practical and earnest. As such, he wears all of his articles of clothing until they wear out.*



## CHAPTER 30: RAISING THE WHITE FLAG

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Randy's mom always calls him Randolph, even though he hates that name. As a teen, Randy confronted her about it, but she remained resolute in her right as his mom to call Randy whatever she wanted. When he was in college, Randy would return the mail his mom sent him unopened because she addressed the letters to "Randolph." In an act of compromise, his mom began to address them "R. Pausch," and those ones he would open. However, all these years later, Randy has given up on getting his mom to call him Randy. He has realized that he's so appreciative to have her that if she wants to add an "olph," he's willing to put up with it, because "Life's too short."

*Randy learns over time that he should adjust his attitude about how upset it makes him when his mom refers to him as "Randolph" instead of "Randy." Although the "olph" at the end of his name annoys him, Randy decides that he appreciates his mother too much to let his annoyance affect their relationship. Maturely, he decides to move on and simply take on the attitude of not letting the extra "olph" at the end of his name bother him.*



## CHAPTER 31: LET'S MAKE A DEAL

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In grad school, Randy developed a habit of tipping back the chair at his dining room table. When Randy went back home his Mom would always yell that he was going to break it. Randy liked doing it, so they would get into this argument over and over. Finally, they created a contract—if Randy broke the chair, he'd have to replace not just the chair, but the whole dining room set. But, until he broke it, Randy's mom could no longer lecture him. So, both of them got what they wanted—Randy's mom stopped lecturing him, and Randy kept leaning back, never actually breaking the chair. Until the day Randy died, that agreement was in place. In fact, the whole dynamic eventually changed—Randy believes his mom might actually want him to break it, as she's long had her eye on a new dining-room set.

*Similar to the Randolph vs. Randy issue, Randy's mother hates when Randy tips back the chairs in her dining room. This time, Randy is proactive and strikes a compromise with his mother. Randy uses the obstacle of his mother's disapproval to create a bargain, which makes them both happy and ends their conflict.*



## CHAPTER 32: DON'T COMPLAIN, JUST WORK HARDER

Randy thinks people spend far too much complaining about their problems, and should instead channel that energy into fixing them. Randy has known some “terrific non-complainers” in his life, a chief example being Sandy Blatt, Randy’s landlord during graduate school. When Sandy was a young man, a truck backed into him while he was unloading boxes and knocked him into the cellar of a building, breaking his back and making Sandy quadriplegic. At that time, Sandy was a star athlete and engaged to be married, but he didn’t want to be a burden to his fiancé, so he gave her the option of leaving him without any hard feelings, which she did. So, Sandy worked hard, became a licensed marriage counselor, and eventually got married and adopted kids.

Randy’s favorite non-complainer is Jackie Robinson, who, as the first non-white baseball player, endured racism that many people today couldn’t fathom. Jackie “knew he had to play better than the white guys, and he knew he had to work harder.” So that’s what Jackie Robinson did—and he never complained, not even when fans spit on him. Randy is saddened that many kids today don’t know anything about Jackie Robinson, as the message in his and Sandy Blatt’s stories is that complaining doesn’t work as a strategy. We all have finite time and energy, and “any time we spend whining is unlikely to help us achieve our goals. And it won’t make us happier.”

*Sandy Blatt is a great example of the importance of earning success rather than being entitled. Sandy never wallows about the bad hand life dealt him: instead, he takes on a proactive attitude and does positive things to improve his life. By doing this, he helps other people improve their relationships and he is ultimately able to find love himself. Sandy was able to achieve his dream of having kids by working hard at it, being positive, and not stopping until it happened.*



*Jackie Robinson, like Sandy Blatt, is a prime example of having a positive attitude in the face of harsh circumstances. Jackie Robinson saw in the obstacle of racism an opportunity to outwork everyone else in the league. His success and his refusal to feel entitled paved the way for the diverse makeup of Major League Baseball today. And yet, at the same time, Randy’s description of Jackie Robinson seems to imply that Robinson wouldn’t have been as good a player in a non-racist context, and it seems to implicitly blame other minority players at the time for not working as hard as Robinson and earning their places in the league alongside him. Further, what does it mean to refuse to complain about racism? Were civil rights protesters “complaining” about racism? This is not to say that Randy’s advice is wrong, but rather to point out that it is very much focused on how one individual should react to personal obstacles, and that such advice starts to get complicated when you start thinking about it in terms of how someone should react to other types of “obstacles,” such as the injustice of segregation. In such situations, an insistence on “not complaining” can often be used as a weapon by the powerful to quiet those whom the powerful are exploiting or oppressing.*



## CHAPTER 33: TREAT THE DISEASE, NOT THE SYMPTOM

When Randy was a young man, he dated a woman who was totally stressed about being a few thousand dollars in debt. Every month, interest raised Randy's Ex's debts higher, and to deal with the stress, she would go to a meditation and yoga class every Tuesday night. Thinking the class helped her to de-stress, she went to it for a long time. One day, Randy looked through her finances and determined that if she got a part-time job on Tuesday nights instead of going to yoga and meditation class, she could pay off all her debts within a few months. She took his advice, became a Tuesday-night waitress, paid off her debt, then went back to yoga afterward and found herself truly able to relax.

*When Randy gives his then-girlfriend feedback about how she can confront her problem head-on, she changes her attitude and her behavior and fixes her debt problem by getting a job on Tuesday nights instead of going to yoga class. Being able to take in feedback (and look at yourself critically) is an important way to solve problems and, ultimately, achieve your dreams.*



## CHAPTER 34: DON'T OBSESS OVER WHAT PEOPLE THINK

Randy says that we'd all be 33% more effective if we stopped worrying what other people think about us. Randy would tell his research team they never needed to worry about what he was thinking—whether he was happy or unhappy with something, he'd speak up. So, his students and colleagues were never worried about what Randy was thinking. Most of the time, he claims, he was thinking that the “people on my team are 33% more effective than everyone else.”

*In a work environment, Randy turns himself into a constant feedback loop for those around him. Randy believes that this honesty and bluntness allow everyone working with him to stop worrying about what he is thinking, which means that they can be much more productive at focusing on the tasks at hand.*



## CHAPTER 35: START BY SITTING TOGETHER

Randy says that being able to work well in a group is a vital and necessary skill “in both the work world and in families.” So, Randy makes his students work in teams on group projects, and, over the years, improving these group dynamics becomes an obsession of Randy's, leading him to create a sheet entitled “Tips for Working Successfully in a Group.” When he'd go over it with students, they often rolled their eyes and thought it to be beneath them, but the most self-aware students embraced the advice, as it was “a little like Coach Graham coming to practice without a football”—they were learning the fundamentals.

*The students with the most open, positive attitudes get the most out of Randy's group dynamics lesson. Also, because these students are paying more attention, they may be more apt to take in the “head fake” that comes along with the group dynamics lesson: they must be open-minded and not overlook fundamental skills and details.*



The tips include “Meet people properly” (including learning names and getting contact information), “Find things you have in common” to better relate to your group members, “Try for optimal meeting conditions” (like making sure no one is hungry or distracted during meeting times), “Let everyone talk” (as in, don't hog the whole discussion), “Praise each other,” and “Check egos at the door.”

*Randy's tips are all about attitude and positive behavior: he wants his students to focus on group dynamics and making everyone around them comfortable enough to share their ideas.*



The last thing on Randy’s list is “Phrase alternatives as questions,” so that people can offer comments rather than A vs. B choices. At the end of the lesson, Randy calls off the groups again, making them raise their hands to say what group they’re in. On each number, hands shoot up from all over the room, and Randy keeps repeating the exercise over and over until he finally asks, “Why on earth are all of you still sitting with your friends ... [instead of with] the people in your group?” Randy leaves the room, comes back, and sees they’ve all switched into their groups. Randy wanted to show “them that they had missed something simple...so they could certainly benefit from reviewing the rest of the basics.” The next class, everyone sits with their groups.

*The head fake of Randy’s lesson is that everybody is capable of overlooking fundamental things—we all make assumptions and errors, and reviewing the basics can never hurt anyone. Randy is giving his students a version of the lesson his father gave him when he came home from picking strawberries with the attitude that he was above doing physical labor: nobody is above anything, and (like the lesson Coach Graham gave about practicing without footballs) no one is too good to review the fundamentals.*



## CHAPTER 36: LOOK FOR THE BEST IN EVERYBODY

Randy got great advice once from Jon Snoddy, an Imagineer at Disney. “If you wait long enough... people will surprise and impress you.” Randy repeats that Jon told him “Almost everybody has a good side. Just keep waiting. It will come out.”

*Jon Snoddy’s advice is an example of having a positive attitude towards others—no matter how much you disagree with them, you should be open to taking their feedback at its face value, because good ideas or advice can come from anywhere.*



## CHAPTER 37: WATCH WHAT THEY DO, NOT WHAT THEY SAY

Randy wants his daughter Chloe to know that, pound for pound, his colleague once told him the best dating advice he’d ever heard. “When it comes to men who are romantically interested in you, it’s really simple. Just ignore everything they say and only pay attention to what they do.” Randy says Chloe should listen to his advice, and that it could come in handy for his boys Dylan and Logan, too.

*Again, this advice essentially boils down to always discerning a person’s character from their behavior rather than believing what’s on the surface (their words).*



## CHAPTER 38: IF AT FIRST YOU DON’T SUCCEED...

Randy loves clichés. Randy says educators shouldn’t shy away from clichés, because oftentimes young people haven’t heard them, and old clichés can sometimes be inspirational. Randy lists off many clichés and their virtues. “Dance with the one who brung you” offers a reminder about loyalty and appreciation. “Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity” has been around for 2,000 years and should last at least another 2,000, Randy believes. “Whether you think you can or you can’t, you’re right,” affirms Randy’s feelings about positivity shaping reality. “Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how was the play?” reiterates Randy’s reminder not to focus on little issues while ignoring major ones.

*The cliché “Whether you can or you can’t, you’re right,” directly parallels Randy’s ideas about attitude and positive (but realistic) behavior. Randy’s advice of embracing clichés also corresponds with Randy’s ideas about learning and feedback loops: most clichés have been passed down for generations, and, as such, they often impart universal lessons.*



Randy also loves pop culture clichés, including Superman (“Truth, justice, and the American Way”), Rocky (“It’s not how hard you hit. It’s how hard you get hit...and keep moving forward”), and most of all, Randy loves football clichés. Oftentimes, Randy’s computer science students would have trouble adjusting to his football metaphors, but they eventually figured them out. He repeatedly told them to “win one for the Gipper,” to “go out and execute,” to “keep the drive alive,” to “avoid costly turnovers,” and to “win games in the trenches even if they were gonna feel it on Monday.” Randy’s students knew: “It’s not how you win or lose, it’s how you play the cliché.”

*The Rocky quotes, as well as all of Randy’s football clichés, harken back to Coach Graham, who taught Randy that it’s important to master the fundamentals, have a good attitude, work hard, and do anything in your power to win. Randy is able to take lessons he learned as a kid and pass them down to his students, which spreads Coach Graham’s feedback to many more people than just Randy and the rest of his team.*



## CHAPTER 39: BE THE FIRST PENGUIN

“Experience is what you get when you didn’t get what you wanted.” Randy learns this expression during his sabbatical working at Electronic Arts, and he thinks it’s a phrase worth considering at every **brick wall** we encounter, and at every disappointment. When Randy teaches the “Building Virtual Worlds” course, he has an award at the end of each semester called “The First Penguin Award” that goes to the team that takes the biggest gamble in trying new ideas or technology. Essentially, this is an award for an ambitious failure that celebrates out-of-the-box thinking.

*Learning to find life lessons in failure or disappointment is a prime example of Randy turning obstacles into opportunities. “The First Penguin Award” is essentially a celebration of ambitious failure. Just by existing, this award teaches Randy’s students to celebrate the attempt instead of the result and recalibrate their attitudes about what constitutes success and failure.*



The title comes from the idea that when penguins are about to jump in water that might have predators, someone has to jump first. Randy notes that the entertainment industry is very different than building a house—sometimes a game will never come out, or it will come out and no one will want to play it. However, start-up companies “often prefer to hire a chief executive with a failed start-up in his or her background” because people “who know only success can be more oblivious to all the pitfalls.” Experience, to Randy, is the most valuable thing you have to offer.

*Seeing a failed attempt as an asset rather than a demerit is another great example of using positive attitude to turn an obstacle into an opportunity. As Randy notes, many CEO jobs are filled by people with failed start-ups in their past, because their experience makes them far more aware of what roadblocks to avoid and how to overcome adversity.*



## CHAPTER 40: GET PEOPLE'S ATTENTION

Randy believes that engineers and scientists are often terrible at explaining complex tasks in simple ways, and they have the potential to frustrate millions of people because of it. So, Randy tries to illustrate with a visual example the importance of considering the end-users when creating software. The first day of class, Randy puts a VCR on his desk and smashes it to bits with a sledgehammer. He then says that when people “make something hard to use, people get upset. They become so angry that they want to destroy it. We don’t want to create things that people will want to destroy.” Randy says this example sure got the kids’ attention—and that’s always the first step to solving an ignored problem. Randy hopes that, once in a while, his former students in the workforce remember his lesson with the sledgehammer, reminding them of the frustrated masses, yearning for simplicity.

*Randy’s lesson with the sledgehammer is, in some ways, reminiscent of Coach Graham denying the football team a water break. Randy uses a grand, unforgettable display to teach his students a lesson he hopes they won’t forget—that software can be immensely frustrating to users. Just as Coach Graham sometimes pops into Randy’s head to urge him to work harder, perhaps this display will turn Randy into a feedback loop in his students’ lives, always urging them to make things more simple.*



## CHAPTER 41: THE LOST ART OF THANK-YOU NOTES

Despite Randy’s love of efficiency, he believes that thank-you notes should still be done with pen and paper. Randy says admissions officers see lots of great resumés with activities and fantastic grades, but they rarely see hand-written thank-you notes, and “because handwritten notes have gotten so rare, they will remember you.” His advice isn’t about being a calculating schemer, but more that there are respectful and considerate things you can do in life that will be appreciated by the recipient.

*Taking the time to do positive, little things that show other people you appreciate them (like writing thank you notes) can make the world treat you more positively in turn.*



For example, a young woman applies to the Entertainment Technology Center, and, though her application is good, it’s not quite good enough to get her in. Randy is about to reject her when he notices a handwritten thank-you note, not to Randy or Don Marinelli, but to a non-faculty support staffer who had helped her with arrangements. The staff member has no sway over the application, and Randy decides that the note tells him more about this girl than anything else in her application. She was accepted, got a master’s degree, and is now a Disney Imagineer.

*This applicant’s hand-written thank you note helps make her dream of becoming a Disney Imagineer a reality, as it is the deciding factor in Randy admitting her into the ETC. This girl’s proactive, positive behavior earned her a spot in a program—if she’d felt entitled to the staffer’s help instead of grateful enough to write a note then she wouldn’t have gotten in.*



## CHAPTER 42: LOYALTY IS A TWO-WAY STREET

When Dennis Cosgrove was a student at the University of Virginia, Randy was impressed by him. Dennis was an A-student in all his classes except Calculus, in which he was an F student. A certain dean wanted to expel Dennis because he believed the F was due to a lack of effort. Randy decided to go to bat for Dennis, and the dean, who still wanted to expel Dennis, wasn't happy. Randy asked what would happen if Dennis got a lawyer and Randy testified on Dennis's behalf against the university. The dean was taken aback, asking why a non-tenured professor would stick his neck out for a student. Randy responded, "...because I believe in him." The dean said he would remember this when Randy went up for tenure, and Randy said they had a deal. Dennis passed Calculus, became an award-winning computer scientist, and was even one of the early people brought in to work on Randy's Alice project. Now, Randy has entrusted Dennis with carrying Alice into the future. He enabled Dennis' dream back then, and now that Randy needs it, Dennis is enabling Randy's dream.

*Randy stuck his neck out for Dennis and enabled him to graduate and chase his dream in the computer programming field. Now that Randy is sick and dying, Dennis is repaying the favor (and participating in a feedback loop) by enabling Randy's dream of completing the Alice software project so that it can impact millions of kids after Randy's death. Enabling the dreams of others can sometimes, like a feedback loop, wrap back around and, in turn, enable your own dreams (which is somewhat parallel to the idea of karma).*



## CHAPTER 43: THE FRIDAY NIGHT SOLUTION

When Randy gets tenure a year early and one of his colleagues asks him how he managed it, Randy says, "It's pretty simple. Call me any Friday night in my office at ten o'clock and I'll tell you." Randy believes that a lot of people want a shortcut, but the best shortcut is the long way, which is two words: "Work hard." In Randy's view, hard work is like compounded interest in the bank: the rewards build faster the longer you do it. This is true for work, as well as marriage. If you ask most long-married couples how they did it, they'll respond, "We worked hard at it."

*Randy didn't feel entitled to becoming a tenured professor—he simply worked very hard toward that goal and earned the position. Marriage, Randy argues, is just like any other part of life: you must work hard at it in order for the relationship to be successful, rather than feeling entitled to a perfect marriage.*



## CHAPTER 44: SHOW GRATITUDE

Not long after Randy gets tenure at the University of Virginia, he takes his whole fifteen-person research team to Disney World as a thank you. A fellow professor pulls Randy aside and asks how he could possibly do that, to which Randy replies that these people worked hard for him, so how could he *not* do it. Randy says the Disney trip was gratitude easily delivered, as it was an experience he could share with people he cared about. Not everyone is so easily thanked, though, like Randy's mentor Andy Van Dam—nothing Randy can do will adequately pay him back. So, Randy says, he just has to pay that forward, and Randy often advises people to "Go out and do for others what somebody did for you."

*Going out and doing for others what somebody did for you is a prime example of Randy advising people to not be entitled about their accomplishments. Randy believes that being honest with other people and teaching them about their flaws is another way to show gratitude for the people who helped him, as mentoring students and giving tough feedback is, for Randy, an example of passing down a crucial lesson Andy van Dam gave to him.*



## CHAPTER 45: SEND OUT THIN MINTS

Randy was an academic reviewer, which meant he had to ask other professors to read dense research papers and review them. Because this is tedious work, Randy came up with the idea to send a box of Girl Scout Thin Mints with every paper, along with the caveat “The enclosed Thin Mints are your reward. But no fair eating them until you review the paper.” Randy never had to call and nag—the Thin Mints were a constant reminder of what they had to do. And even when Randy had to send a reminder email, he’d just ask, “Did you eat the Thin Mints yet?” Randy finds Thin Mints a great communication tool, as well as a sweet reward for a job well done.

*The box of Girl Scout Thin Mints cookies is an example of Randy showing gratitude. More than that, though, the cookies incentivize quick reviews of papers by making the people reviewing the papers think about entitlement vs. earning. The reviewers want the cookies, but the fact that Randy explicitly sent them as a reward makes them understand that they must earn the cookies rather than feeling entitled to eat them before they do their work.*



## CHAPTER 46: ALL YOU HAVE IS WHAT YOU BRING WITH YOU

Randy has always felt the need to be prepared. When he was seven-years-old, Randy’s mom took him to the grocery store, and when they got to the checkout counter she realized she’d forgotten something and ran back to grab it. While she was gone, Randy loaded everything onto the counter and the Cashier jokingly asked young Randy, “Do you have money for me, son?” Randy didn’t realize she was joking and became mortified, yelling at his mom when she got back for not leaving him with any money. Now, as an adult, Randy goes nowhere without \$200 in his wallet, because he’d always rather be prepared.

*Randy uses the obstacle of his childhood embarrassment as an opportunity to change his behavior as an adult and never allow this situation to happen to him again. Randy learns from this situation and takes on the positive action of always having cash on him no matter where he goes.*



Randy has always admired people who are over-prepared. In college, Randy’s classmate Norman Meyrowitz was giving a presentation when a light bulb on the projector blew out. There was a groan from the audience, until Norm took a spare bulb out of his backpack and installed it. Randy’s Professor, Andy Van Dam, leaned over and told Randy “This guy is going places,” which turned out to be true. Randy says that one way to be prepared is to think negatively, always anticipating the worst-case scenario, which Randy calls the “Eaten By Wolves Factor.” Randy says one thing that makes it possible to be an optimist is to have contingency plans just in case all hell breaks loose. Randy urges people to imagine the wolves out there—“take money. Bring your repair kit... pack a light bulb. Be prepared.”

*One way to be positive and proactive is to envision negative scenarios, and prepare for ways to counteract them, just like Norm Meyrowitz did by bringing a projector bulb to class. This obstacle of a possible blowout presented Norm with an opportunity to show just how prepared he was.*



## CHAPTER 47: A BAD APOLOGY IS WORSE THAN NO APOLOGY

In giving an apology, “any performance lower than an A doesn’t really cut it.” Randy says that working in groups in his classes was crucial, so arguments and friction were inevitable. By mid-semester, apologies were always necessary, and he’d often give his classes a lesson by describing bad apologies and good apologies. Bad apologies, for example, might start “I’m sorry you feel hurt by what I’ve done” or “I apologize for what I did, but you also need to apologize to me for what you’ve done.” Neither of these is effective. Instead, Randy says good apologies have three parts: 1) What I did was wrong. 2) I feel bad that I hurt you. 3) How do I make this better? Yes, Randy says, #3 can open you up for people to take advantage, but most of the time they are reasonable. Students have asked Randy what happens if they apologize and the other person doesn’t apologize back, and Randy advises being patient.

*An argument is an obstacle that presents the opportunity for a resolution through an apology. Often, after a big fight, the process of confronting and resolving a problem can make the relationship better and more honest than it was before. Treating an apology honestly, earnestly, and with total positivity is the best attitude to have when trying to repair strained relationships.*



## CHAPTER 48: TELL THE TRUTH

If Randy could only give three words of advice, they’d be “tell the truth,” and if he could add three more, they’d be “all the time.” Randy says people lie for lots of reasons, but usually it’s because “it seems like a way to get what they want with less effort.” However, Randy says this perception isn’t true—“like many short-term strategies, it’s ineffective long term. You run into people again later, and they remember you lied to them. And they tell lots of other people about it.” Randy is amazed that people often think they’ve gotten away with lying, even if they haven’t.

*Telling lies is an example of not having a good attitude or positive behavior. Though people often tell lies in order to get away with mistakes without spending the effort of rectifying them, the lie often leads to more complications and setbacks in the future. Lies can also damage a person’s reputation, which can take away opportunities that people aren’t even sure why they lost.*



## CHAPTER 49: GET IN TOUCH WITH YOUR CRAYON BOX

Randy has been accused of seeing things as black or white, and Randy admits that when he was younger he used to say his crayon boxes had only two colors: black and white. That might be why Randy likes computers so much—most everything is either true or false. However, as Randy has gotten older, he’s grown to appreciate multi-colored crayon boxes, and, in any case, Randy loves crayons. At his last lecture, he had planned to have people pass out a crayon to everyone in the audience, but he forgot. His plan was that, as he spoke about childhood dreams, everyone in the crowd would take the crayon to their nose and smell it. When Randy needs to go back in time, he puts a crayon under his nose and takes a sniff, as it “takes you right back to childhood...”

*Smelling a crayon is one way to change your attitude, Randy believes. It helps bring you back to your childhood mindset and it can often help you get in touch with what your childhood dreams were. Reconnecting with childhood dreams can help you bring them into focus in your current reality.*



## CHAPTER 50: THE \$100,000 SALT AND PEPPER SHAKER

When Randy was 12 and his sister Tammy was 14, their parents brought them to Disney World and figured the kids were old enough to roam the park themselves. They picked a spot to meet in 90 minutes, and Randy and Tammy went off on their own, deciding that their first order of business would be to buy a present to thank their parents for the trip. They went into a store and found a ceramic salt-and-pepper shaker, paid for the gift, and went looking for the next attraction. Randy accidentally dropped the shaker, shattering it, and when an Adult Guest saw this, they suggested that Randy and Tammy take it back to the store. Randy said that it was his fault it broke, but the adult guest urged them to try anyway.

Randy and Tammy took the broken salt-and-pepper-shaker back to the store, told the truth, and the employees decided to replace it. Randy was in shock, and he and Tammy left the store totally giddy. They gave the present to their parents, told them the story, and Randy's mom and dad were especially impressed by Disney's customer service. This impressive customer service, Randy claims, has earned Disney more than \$100,000 from his family.

When Randy later works at Disney, he tells them this story. He says that Disney made his family feel so good that Randy's parents incorporated trips to Disney into their volunteer work, hauling hundreds of English-as-a-second-language students on bus to Disney World. Randy then asks the Disney executives if, today, their policies would allow the workers to replace the salt-and-pepper shaker, and the executives squirm at the questions because the answer is "Probably not." Randy's message is: "There is more than one way to measure profits and losses. On every level, institutions can and should have a heart." Randy's mom still has that \$100,000 salt-and-pepper-shaker.

*Showing gratitude was important to Randy, even as a kid. When his and Tammy's salt-and-pepper shaker (a gift for their parents) shatters, Randy is unsure what to do until a passerby advises them to simply return to the store and ask for a new one. Here, Randy takes a guest's feedback (he has said previously to be open to advice), and he decides to be proactive about fixing the situation.*



*By simply telling the truth and asking for a replacement, Tammy and Randy's positive behavior earns them a new salt-and-pepper shaker, and they were able to give it to their parents. At the same time, Disney earns four valuable life-long customers in the process. Positivity, it seems, is a two-way street.*



*The Disney employees turn the obstacle of a customer having broken a souvenir into an opportunity to show loyalty to their customers. This positive interaction, in turn, makes Randy's family have a positive attitude toward Disney, which leads them to make Disney's theme parks an important part of their ability to share joy through their lives.*



## CHAPTER 51: NO JOB IS BENEATH YOU

Randy laments the growing entitlement in young people today. His attitude is that kids should be thrilled they got a job in the mailroom, and they should strive to become the best mail sorter there. When Randy asks employers for feedback on his students, the negative feedback is always about new employees being too big for their britches rather than being unqualified. When Randy was 15, he worked as a day laborer hoeing strawberries. Some of his co-workers were teachers, and when Randy made a comment to his dad about the job being beneath them, his dad gave Randy "the tongue-lashing of a lifetime" telling Randy that manual labor is below no one, and he'd prefer Randy to be "the best ditch-digger in the world rather than coasting along as a self-impressed elitist..." Randy still didn't like the job, but the next day he hoed a little harder.

*The story about hoeing strawberries epitomizes Randy's ideas about earning your place in the world rather than being entitled to it. Randy's dad's feedback, that nobody is above manual labor, changes Randy's attitude and behavior immediately: the next day, he hoes harder, feels less entitled, and has more respect for all laborers.*



## CHAPTER 52: KNOW WHERE YOU ARE

The Disney Imagineers, including Mk Haley, the 27-year-old assigned to babysit Randy during his sabbatical, are skeptical about what value a professor can add to their operation. Randy, as the odd duck, knows that he has to quickly show them he can be a valuable member of their team. When Randy is interviewing guests who had tried out their *Aladdin* virtual reality ride, many of his new co-workers complain that he is applying academic values that don't work in the real world. In other words, Randy is too obsessed with poring over data and approaching things scientifically rather than emotionally.

However, when Randy figures out a way to save twenty seconds per guest by loading the ride differently, he gains some respect from those who had doubts about him. After the sabbatical is over, Disney offers Randy a full-time position with the Imagineers, and, though he declines, Disney keeps Randy on as a once-a-week Imagineering consultant. "If you can find your footing between two cultures, sometimes you can have the best of both worlds."

*Randy doesn't feel entitled to respect from his Disney Imagineer co-workers because of his prior accomplishments—he knows he has to have an open attitude and make positive, proactive steps to prove his worth to them and earn their respect*



*Randy listens to his co-workers' feedback, and he goes on to prove to them that his scientific, analytical approach has some merit in certain aspects of ride-design. Because of his positive, hard-working attitude, Randy is able to work in academia while also consulting for the Disney Imagineers. His attitude, then, is what enables him to successfully achieve his childhood dream of designing rides.*



## CHAPTER 53: NEVER GIVE UP

When Randy is in high school, he applies to Brown University and doesn't get in, but is instead placed on the wait list. Randy continually calls the admissions office until eventually they decide that "they might as well accept" him. Tenacity got Randy over that **brick wall**.

When Randy graduated from college, it never occurred to him to go to graduate school until Andy Van Dam, Randy's mentor, told him to get a PhD and become a professor. Randy asks why, and Andy tells him that Randy is a good salesman and any company will use him as such, so he might as well sell something worthwhile "like education." So, Randy applies to Carnegie Mellon at Andy's urging, and promptly gets rejected despite a letter of recommendation from Andy. Randy tells Andy, who wants to call the head of admissions at Carnegie Mellon, but Randy stops him, saying he doesn't want to be accepted that way. They strike a deal that Randy can look at other programs, but if he doesn't find another fit, he'll let Andy make a call.

*Randy uses the obstacle of being put on the waitlist as an opportunity to show how badly he wants to get in by calling Brown every day. Randy's proactive positive behavior earns him admission to the university.*



*Randy listens to his teacher and mentor Andy van Dam, takes in his feedback, and decides to apply to grad school. However, this time when he runs up against a brick wall of being flat-out rejected, Randy refuses to accept Andy's help in making a personal call to have his application reconsidered. In this case, Randy—at least temporarily—fails at treating this obstacle as an opportunity.*



Randy tells Andy Van Dam he's decided to skip grad school and get a job, but Andy refuses to let him do that, instead calling Nico Habermann, the head of Carnegie Mellon's computer science department, to inform him of Randy's credentials. Randy visits Nico's office the next morning, and Nico asks why they should reconsider Randy's application. Randy replies that he won a fellowship from the Office of Naval Research, and, though Nico gets frustrated and says that money isn't part of Carnegie Mellon's admissions criteria, Randy apologizes, saying he only mentioned it because it was an honor he thought might be relevant. Eventually, Randy is accepted to Carnegie Mellon, and, until his last lecture, Randy had never told another person that he was initially rejected. Randy regrets having waited that long to tell the story, because "the moral is: If you want something bad enough, never give up (and take a boost when offered)." **Brick walls** are indeed there for a reason, even if someone else has to throw you over them.

*Randy was worried for many years that accepting Andy van Dam's help in getting admitted to Carnegie Mellon was an entitlement rather than something he earned. What he realizes now is that being humble enough to accept other people's help is what earned him the right to make his case for why he should be accepted. All this time later, after having returned to Carnegie Mellon as a tenured professor and having so much success there, Randy believes he should hold this story up as the ultimate example of how he turned an obstacle into an opportunity by taking a mentor's help and advice.*



## CHAPTER 54: BE A COMMUNITARIAN

Randy says people's rights should also come with responsibilities to their communities. Randy uses the example of people wanting the right to a jury trial, while "many people go to great lengths to get out of jury duty." In his classes, Randy makes his students sign a contract that outlines their rights (to get their work critiqued and displayed) and responsibilities (to attend class, give their peers honest feedback, work in groups, etc.)

*Signing a contract in Randy's class ensures that students know that they're not entitled to their place in the class and instead they must earn the ability to have their work critiqued and displayed by giving other students the same attention, courtesy, and honest feedback that they want to receive.*



Randy's dad taught Randy this lesson when he was young, and he exemplified it as Little League Baseball commissioner. Randy's dad was having trouble finding volunteer umpires—it's a thankless job, with every call disputed by a kid or parent. So, Randy's dad decided that players from the older-age divisions would serve as umps for the younger kids, making it an honor to be selected as an ump. So, the kids who became umps realized how hard it was and rarely argued with umpires again, and the younger kids saw role models who had embraced volunteering, making them more likely to do so in the future. Randy's dad knew that when "we're connected to others, we become better people."

*Randy's dad turns the obstacle of nobody wanting to be an umpire into an opportunity to institute a feedback loop for volunteerism in the Little League Baseball community. Randy's dad accomplishes this by turning the job of the umpire into a respected task. With older kids umping for younger ones, the younger kids learn to treat the older kids with more respect, the parents don't yell (at least as much) at the kid-umps, and the whole thing creates a more positive attitude around sportsmanship and community service.*



## CHAPTER 55: ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS ASK

On Randy's dad's last trip to Disney World, Randy, his dad, and Dylan were waiting for the monorail, and Dylan wanted to sit in the vehicle's front-car with the driver. Randy's dad thought that would be a lot of fun too, and Randy said he learned a trick while working at Disney for how to sit up front. When they got on the monorail, Randy simply asked an employee if they could sit up front next to the conductor, and the employee happily moved them into that car. "Sometimes," Randy says, "all you have to do is ask."

For example, Randy once got up the courage to contact Fred Brooks Jr., one of the most highly regarded computer scientists in the world. In his twenties, Randy emailed Brooks Jr. to ask if Randy could drive to North Carolina and have thirty minutes to talk. Brooks Jr. responded that he'd give him more if he drove all the way down there, and they spoke for an hour and a half. Years later, Brooks Jr. was the one who invited Randy to do the guest lecture during which he met Jai. Now that Randy is sick, he always asks if he can get his medical results as fast as possible, often leading him to receive them within hours rather than waiting days. Randy urges readers to "Ask those questions" because "more often than you'd suspect, the answer you'll get is, 'Sure.'"

*Being positive and taking direct actions to improve your situation is exactly how Randy is able to move his family into the front-most car of the Disney monorail—he simply asks for what he wants, and the people are happy to assist.*



*Randy is able to meet one of his idols, Fred Brooks Jr., simply by asking Fred for a half-hour of his time. Fred is kind enough to grant Randy an hour and a half, and, through their conversation Randy and Fred strike up a relationship. Many years later, Randy's relationship with Fred affords him the opportunity of meeting Jai, which leads to him accomplishing his dream of having a family.*



## CHAPTER 56: MAKE A DECISION: TIGGER OR EYORE

When Randy tells Carnegie Mellon's president, Jared Cohon, that he is giving a last lecture, Jared urges Randy to tell the audience about having fun, because that's what he'll remember Randy for. Randy says, very early in life, we all make a decision that is perfectly captured by Winnie-the-Pooh characters: are you a fun-loving Tigger, or a sad-sack Eeyore? Randy is clearly in the Tigger camp. For Randy's last Halloween, he decided to have fun, with Jai, the kids and Randy all dressing as *The Incredibles*. On his website, Randy posted the picture with a caption that said chemo didn't effect his superpowers.

*Tigger vs. Eeyore is all about positivity vs. negativity—Tiggers see the world as full of opportunities for positive interactions, while Eeyore's dread every inevitable conflict. Each of these experiences of the world is directly caused by attitude. Randy, a definite Tigger, chooses to write more on his website about his family's Halloween costumes than his terminal cancer.*



Recently, Randy went on a short scuba-diving vacation with three of his best friends: his high school friend Jack Sheriff, his college roommate Scott Sherman, and Steve Seabolt, who Randy met at Electronic Arts. Though the three friends didn't know each other, they quickly formed strong bonds. For most of the trip they all acted as Tiggers, successfully avoiding any emotional "I love you, man"-type dialogue about his cancer, and instead just choosing to have fun the whole trip. Mostly, Randy's friends made fun of him for the "St. Randy of Pittsburgh" reputation he'd received after his last lecture went viral. In the end, even with cancer, Randy can't let his inner-Tigger go, as he sees no upside in becoming Eeyore. Randy promises to pack as much fun as possible into whatever time he has left.

*Randy treats the enormous obstacle of his impending death as an opportunity to spend time with those he cares about. Though Jack Sheriff, Scott Sherman, and Steve Seabolt have never met, they become fast friends and they, like Randy, use the opportunity of Randy's near-death not to dwell on negative thoughts, but to seize the moment, immerse themselves in nature, and poke fun at each other.*



## CHAPTER 57: A WAY TO UNDERSTAND OPTIMISM

After Randy learns of his cancer diagnosis, a doctor urges him to behave as if he's going to live a long time. Randy replies that he's way ahead of the doctor, in that he just bought a convertible and got a vasectomy. Randy says he's not in denial about his situation, and that he's living like he's dying, but he's also living like he's still living.

*Being realistic but positive in your attitude and actions is the core of Randy's beliefs about behavior. We all must confront our realities, but we can do so in a positive and hopeful light.*



Dr. Herbert Zeh, Randy's surgeon in Pittsburgh, says he worries about patients who are too optimistic or ill-informed, but he is also upset when patients are told that they "have to be optimistic or their treatments won't work," because it pains him to see patients who are having a tough time believe that their lack of positivity causes their pain. Randy's take is that optimism is a "mental state" that can enable you to do "tangible things" to improve your physical state. Dr. Zeh sees Randy as perfectly balancing optimism and realism, and Randy says that he loves how his vasectomy doubles as appropriate birth control "and an optimistic gesture" about his future. Even if Randy doesn't beat cancer, having the mindset that he might helps him get through each day.

*Optimism and positivity are mental states that can enable a person to take real actions to improve their physical state or condition, and that is how Randy treats his battle with cancer. Randy will be realistic, but he also doesn't shy away from getting a vasectomy, as it represents his determination to do every possible thing to tell himself he can get through this and he's still okay.*



## CHAPTER 58: THE INPUT OF OTHERS

Since Randy's last lecture went viral on the internet, he's heard from many people he had previously lost touch with. A colleague recalls advice Randy gave him, and a former student tells Randy that he has inspired that student to create a personal-development website designed to help people stop living below their potential. One of Randy's high-school crushes even writes to remind him that he was (and still is) way too nerdy for her.

*The recording of Randy's last lecture, initially just meant for his students and kids, shockingly goes viral on the internet. The popularity of the lecture on the internet creates another kind of feedback loop where Randy receives messages from friends, people he had forgotten about, as well as strangers.*



Also, Randy has been buoyed by the good wishes of thousands of strangers. One woman recalls a story of her husband's "last speech," during which he told his children, parents and siblings everything that was important to him, much like Randy did during his last lecture. Another woman, whose husband died of a brain tumor when her kids were young, wrote to Jai to say that her children will become the reason she is able to move on, as they're a tremendous source of comfort and love. Randy also heard from a man with heart problems about Krishnamurti, a spiritual leader in India who, when he was asked what to say to someone who was about to die, told his followers to tell their friends that "in his death, a part of you dies and goes with him. Wherever he goes, you also go. He will not be alone." The man tells Randy that he, too, will not be alone.

Randy also gets interviewed by Diane Sawyer after his lecture becomes popular, and Randy says that when the camera was off, Sawyer gave him an incredible piece of advice in telling Randy to tell leave notes for his kids explaining to them the specific ways in which he related to each of them, giving them specific stuff they can grasp. Dr. Reiss, Randy and Jai's marriage counselor, has also helped Randy to focus on his family and maintain a positive outlook despite his situation. Randy spent much of his life doubting the effectiveness of counseling, but now, with his "back against the wall," he sees how helpful it can be.

Many people have written to Randy about matters of faith. Though Randy didn't want to talk about faith during his lecture, now he does mention that M.R. Kelsey, a woman from his church, came and sat with Randy in the hospital for eleven days after his surgery. Later, the day after Randy finds out he is terminal, he sees his Minister at the swimming pool, winks at him, and does a flip off the diving board. When Randy swims over, his minister tells Randy that he's the picture of health. When Randy tells the priest his situation, the minister advises that Randy needs "emotional insurance," to be paid with time instead of money. The minister suggests Randy spend hours making videotapes of himself with his kids, so they'll have a record of how they played, laughed and were together. This way, when Randy gets sicker, he'll feel more at peace. Every day, Randy says he gets to see the best in humanity thanks to people reaching out to him, and he feels grateful to never feel alone on the ride he's taking.

*The enormous obstacle of Randy's cancer (and the fact that the YouTube video of his last lecture went viral) gives Randy the opportunity to connect with many people he had never met before and whom he almost certainly never would have heard from. Much of the feedback Randy receives is positive and some of it gives Jai and Randy strategies for coping with their situation.*



*One way that Randy can be as positive and proactive as possible about his approaching death is by taking practical, positive steps (like writing letters to his kids and making personal videos for them) to ease his family's grief once he dies. Randy also never stops learning, even when close to the end, as going to couples counseling with Dr. Reiss turns Randy into a believer in the transformative power of therapy.*



*The minister recommends that Randy take proactive, positive steps to ease his own conscience and also to leave parts of himself behind for his kids and wife to absorb later on when he's gone. Though Randy surely wishes he didn't have cancer, he uses his impending death as an opportunity to truly, fully say goodbye to his kids, which he couldn't have done if he'd had a heart attack or died in some other sudden way.*



## CHAPTER 59: DREAMS FOR MY CHILDREN

There are many things Randy wants to tell his children, but right now they're too young to understand. Dylan is six, Logan three, and Chloe eighteen months. He wants them to know who he is, what he has believed, and the ways in which he's come to love them, but he fears it will go over their heads. Randy and Jai have yet to tell the kids that Randy is dying because Randy still looks healthy. Randy says it pains him to think of his kids without a father, and he's more focused on what they're going to lose than what he is going through. Randy knows their memories of him might be fuzzy, so he's trying to do things they'll find unforgettable. Dylan and Randy go on a mini-vacation to swim with dolphins. He also plans on bringing Logan to Disney World, a place Randy knows "he'll love as much as" Randy does. Randy decides to bring Dylan along, as Logan loves to be engaged in action with his big brother.

Every night, Randy asks Logan the best and worst parts of his day, and to both he always answers "Playing with Dylan." Randy acknowledges that Chloe may have no memory of him at all, but he still wants her to grow up knowing that he was the first man ever to fall in love with her. Randy knows there will be much Jai will be able to tell his kids about their father when they're older—his optimism, his overly analytical approach to life, his insistence that he knows best. Randy worries, though, that Jai might not tell them she married a guy who "deeply truly loved her," and that she also won't tell the kids about all the sacrifice Jai herself had to make in always dealing with other people's needs before her own.

Lately, Randy has been interviewing people who lost their parents early in life. They've told Randy that they wanted to know how much their parents loved them, and "the more they knew, the more they could still feel that love." They also wanted reasons to be proud of their passed-away parent, and they wanted to know, since they had so few memories of their parent, that their parent had great memories of them. To that end, Randy wants his kids to know that he's chock full of memories of them: he remembers Dylan's empathy, always caring for another kid if they got hurt, as well as his analytical nature. Dylan reminds Randy of himself, in that Dylan's inquisitiveness goes beyond his years. Dylan is the "king of curiosity," in that, wherever he is, he's always "looking somewhere else and thinking, "Hey, there's something over there!"

*Because Randy knows his young children might have only fuzzy memories of him, he's doing proactive things to try to cement experiences in their memories. Taking Dylan to swim with the dolphins is an example of Randy using his impending death as an opportunity to do something unforgettable with his son. This is something he might not have thought to do with such urgency had Randy not been diagnosed with cancer.*



*While Randy does admit that he's sad that his kids will grow up without their father, he uses the obstacle of writing this sad, part of his book as an opportunity to impart to his readers, his kids, and Jai that he really, truly, positively, wholly loved his kids and his wife.*



*Randy uses the book to try to fill in for some of the things his kids will miss, like hearing Randy's memories about them. Although it's tinged with sadness, Randy's recounting of Dylan's empathy and inquisitiveness is an example of being positive and proactive until the end. Randy could easily have shut down and not found the energy to write this book, but, by writing it, he is able to leave memories for his children to absorb.*



Logan “makes everything into an adventure.” From the moment he was born, it took two doctors, pulling with forceps, to get him out of the birth canal. Once Logan started moving, he never really stopped—in Randy’s mind, Logan is the ultimate Tigger, up for anything and befriending everyone. Randy predicts that Logan, despite being only three, will likely be the social chair of his college fraternity. Chloe, on the other hand, is all girl, in that she is careful and even dainty. Looking into her face after she was born was one of the most spiritual moments of Randy’s life. He loves watching all her efforts going into not getting hurt, slowly moseying down the staircase while her brothers barrel down headfirst.

Given his limited time, Randy is building separate lists of memories of each of the kids, and making videos so they can see him talking about what they’ve meant to him. Randy also sees the video of the last lecture—and this book—as pieces of himself that he can leave for his kids. Because Randy has been so vocal about dreams, many people have been asking him about the dreams he has for his children. And Randy has a direct answer for that—he wants them to find their “own path to fulfillment.”

Randy thinks that parents having specific dreams for their kids can be disruptive and make the kids unhappy because they might follow dreams that were never their own. Randy wants his kids to become what *they* want to become. Randy says he’s not even sure if he should’ve made that comment about Logan becoming social chair of a fraternity, as he doesn’t want Logan to think Randy expected or wanted him to join a fraternity or anything else. Randy wants his kids’ lives to be their own. He just wants to urge his kids to “find their way with enthusiasm and passion.” And he wants them to feel that he’s there with them, whatever path they choose.

## CHAPTER 60: JAI AND ME

Randy notes that caregivers often get pushed to the sidelines. So, during his Last Lecture, Randy wanted to show Jai, and everyone else, how much he loves and appreciates her. During the part of his lecture where Randy reiterates how focusing on other people is important, Cleah Schlueter, one of Jai’s friends, pushes a huge cake with a single candle on it to the center of the stage, and Randy gets the 400-person crowd to sing her happy birthday. As they sing, Randy finally looks over at Jai, and sees her wiping away tears and smiling.

*Logan embodies Randy’s ideas about going through life with optimism and proactive action, and Chloe teaches Randy that kids can be prudent and careful. Logan, as the “ultimate Tigger,” will hopefully be able to carry on Randy’s belief that having a positive attitude will make the world react positively to you in turn.*



*Randy believes this book to be capable of passing lessons to his kids (and his readers) after his death. Randy doesn’t have specific dreams for his kids—he simply wants them to have specific dreams of their own, so that they’re passionate about whatever path they choose. Being positive and proactive is much easier when you’re passionate about whatever it is you’re doing.*



*Again, Randy wants his kids to dream whatever dream they want to, and to chase it passionately and enthusiastically with as much effort as they can. Randy also wants his kids to feel that he is there with them on their journeys, and he hopes that this book—and all the lessons and advice in it—as well as the video Randy has left for his kids, might be filled with enough feedback so that, though they didn’t know him for very long, Randy is able to remain in his kids’ heads.*



*Though Randy missed celebrating the actual day of Jai’s birthday in order to prepare for his last lecture, Randy is optimistic that he can make the situation up to her by arranging this ceremony, in front of hundreds of people (and filmed for posterity), in which he publicly celebrates her. Randy makes the best of an imperfect situation, making his wife happy in the process.*



Randy says he feels lucky to have had cancer rather than having been hit with the “proverbial bus” because it has given him time to have vital conversations with Jai that wouldn’t have been possible if he’d died suddenly. Randy tries to remind Jai that some of the best caregiver advice comes from flight attendants, in that people have to put on their own oxygen masks before they can help anyone else. So, Randy reminds Jai that giving herself permission to recharge will be even more important after he’s gone. He also says that she’s going to make mistakes, but that’s a part of being a parent, and she shouldn’t attribute all of them to the fact that she’ll be raising the kids herself. Randy also says Jai knows not to try to make up for the loss of Randy with material things.

Randy is saddened that he won’t be there when the kids become teenagers, as he thinks he would have come into his own when the kids reached that age. The good news, though, is that friends and family will want to help out, and Jai plans on letting them. Just as Randy’s dad signed him up for football, Jai will be on the lookout for potential Coach Gramms to insert into her kids’ lives. Most of all, Randy wants Jai to be happy in the future, whether she finds happiness by remarrying or staying single. Randy says he and Jai work hard at their marriage, and it saddens him that they won’t experience their relationship’s richness for the next 40 years. They try to be positive, but they’ve often cried together, though someone (usually Jai) has to sleep eventually so they can get up and take care of the kids.

Sometimes, Jai tells Randy things he doesn’t know how to respond to—like that she can’t imagine Randy not there on family vacations, or that Randy is the planner, and without him “Who’s going to make the plans?” Randy says he’s not worried, and Jai will make plans just fine. Randy returns to that day of the last lecture, saying he had no idea what he would do or say after the audience sang “Happy Birthday” to Jai. But as he got her on stage, a natural impulse overtook Randy and he kissed his wife, first on the lips, then on the cheek. As they held each other, Jai whispered to Randy, “Please don’t die,” and all he could do was hug her more tightly.

*Randy, though not happy to have cancer, embraces the advanced warning of his death as an opportunity to get his affairs in order, say his goodbyes, and leave pieces of himself (like this book and his last lecture itself) for people in the future to learn from, especially his kids. Randy also urges Jai to be positive toward herself and her situation, and to embrace mistakes as inevitable and try to correct them as they come.*



*Though there will be no replacement for the real, flesh-and-blood Randy, Jai will be on the lookout for imperfect solutions and feedback loops (in the form of mentors) to insert into her kids’ lives. Randy, as always, is positive and open-minded about Jai’s future without him—surely he doesn’t enjoy imagining his wife with another partner, but he’s also selfless enough to acknowledge that, above all else, he wants Jai and his kids to be happy no matter what that entails.*



*Sometimes it’s hard to be positive, and you simply have to sit with the sadness. But even in his and Jai’s saddest moments, Randy remains resolute in his faith in Jai to raise their kids just fine. Although Randy is unable to promise his wife immortality, his freezing of this moment in the book is, in a way, a way for this moment to never die—he has passed it along to anyone who reads the book.*



## CHAPTER 61: THE DREAMS WILL COME TO YOU

Before his lecture, Randy was worried he'd be too choked up to say the final lines. That day, he'd been on stage for more than an hour, and, thanks to the chemo and his emotions, he was feeling fully spent. But, at the same time, he felt "at peace and fulfilled." Randy felt his life had come full circle; he first made a list of his childhood dreams at eight-years-old, and now at thirty-eight, that list helped him say what he had to say and carried him through. Though Randy isn't grateful to his cancer, he's grateful for the advance notice of his death, as it gave time to prepare his family for the future and, in giving his last lecture, let him "leave the field" under his "own power." Randy also says that without his list of dreams, he might never have been able to say goodbye to those who meant so much to him, and for that opportunity he is grateful.

Additionally, as a tech person, Randy never understood when actors and artists would say that things inside of them "needed to come out." He thought it was self-indulgent. But that day, Randy realized he gave that lecture not because he wanted to, but because he had to. As Randy wound down from the lecture, he offered a summary, but with a twist ending. He told the audience that the talk was about achieving childhood dreams, but there was a **head fake**—the talk isn't "about how to achieve your dreams. It's about how to lead your life. If you lead your life the right way, the karma will take care of itself. The dreams will come to you."

Lastly, Randy goes to a slide that reads, "Have you figured out the second **head fake**?" Randy then tells them—"The talk wasn't just for this in the room." It was for his kids, too. Randy clicks to the last slide, which is a picture of Randy standing by the swing set, smiling with Logan and Chloe in each arm, and Dylan sitting happily on his shoulders.

*Randy's childhood dreams enabled him to give a lecture about how other people might go about achieving their own childhood dreams. Again, Randy isn't happy about his cancer, but he is grateful that the advance warning of his death allowed him to give his last lecture and end his career with a strong final performance (rather than a career-ending injury, to follow the football metaphor).*



*Even near the end of his life, Randy is open to learning new things and changing his mind, as he does about his long-held belief of the self-indulgence of actors and artists. Also, Randy's "head fake" throughout the lecture—that this lecture was really about how to live your life, not how to achieve your dreams—is the ultimate example of a feedback loop. Randy gives a lecture about people achieving their dreams, so that they learn how to live their lives, so that they can accomplish their dreams.*



*Randy giving his last lecture (and writing this book) serves two purposes: first, it cements his legacy and leaves a record of his most important beliefs, triumphs, and advice, but it also serves as a direct way to communicate who he was to his kids.*





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