The Last Lecture
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Professors sometimes deliver what's dubbed a "last lecture" -- common-sense words of wisdom not typically found in a textbook or asked on an exam.

When Randy Pausch, a dying Carnegie Mellon University professor, gave an upbeat, inspirational, 76-minute "last lecture" in September, he didn't envision his words creating an international sensation. But that was before the video hit YouTube and his newly published book aptly entitled The Last Lecture hit bookstores.

"Randy Pausch has all the elements of a great teacher -- incredible knowledge, a playful imagination and the ability to be authentic in front of his students. I think it is a dream of every faculty member to leave a legacy to a whole generation of students," observed Brother Raymond L. Fitz, S.M., Ferree professor of social justice at the University of Dayton who served 23 years as president. "He values the gifts of people who are part of his life. That would be my advice, to love and value the gifts of the people who are part of your life."

As the University of Dayton prepares to graduate another crop of students, Pausch's talk prompted UD professors to reflect on what lessons beyond the text they want to impart to students. Their advice spans the gamut from keeping perspective and having high expectations to seeing God in raindrops on flowers.

"I always tell my students before an exam that while it is important, it is more important to keep perspective," noted Sister Laura Leming, F.M.I., assistant professor of sociology. "Don't sacrifice your (sense of) peace to something that is not worthy of your peace. We should only surrender a part of our peace to things that are truly worthy of it -- the illness or death of someone we love or injustice in the world. I sincerely hope that they remember other things from my classes and that they are better global citizens because they have studied sociology with me, but sometimes I think the part about not sacrificing their peace might be the most important thing I share with my students."

For Donna Cox, professor of music, her lecture is one she delivers to herself daily: Don't lose sight of living life while you're busy making plans. "I would tell people to cultivate the ability to see right now. ... Right now is the time to be kind to someone, not when they've done something to earn it. Right now is the time to love yourself, not when you earn the degree or lose 15 pounds. Right now is the time to enjoy your students, professors, classmates and parents.

"At the end of the day," she said, "our ability to see God in beautiful leaves, rain on the flowers, in a sunset, our children's smiles, a banana split, in the mirror, in the time we spend with other people is going to matter more than most of the things we put on our lists."

Tricia Hart, director of the Honors and John W. Berry, Sr. Scholars programs, would encourage students to set their sights high and value, accept and respect others.

"Have high expectations for yourself and the people you are around. Generally people rise to meet those expectations," advised Hart, professor of teacher education. "There is nothing more important than your family and friends. Value and prioritize the time you spend with them. In life, people are what really matter."

Theologian Dennis Doyle's last lecture would cover a dozen points -- ranging from Saint Augustine's philosophy of "love God and do what you will" to "sticking to your guns." He would encourage students to "reach out to people on the margins" and "remember that what you do is important and that it makes a difference." In moments of despair, he would urge them to "reach out to others for help."

These are all lessons for living a life that requires faith, patience and, at times, the willingness to reside outside one's comfort zone. "If contrary things appear to both be true, try for a while to live within the tension," Doyle suggested.

Chris Duncan, chair of the political science department, would remind students that, even in the face of death, it's possible to choose life. "It is our final triumph over the circumstances we are given that we can choose how to respond to them. This cannot be taken away from us even when everything else might be. It is in effect God's greatest gift -- the human freedom to
choose how we will respond to the world’s givens.”

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