

How to Make This New Year Different from the Last – The Legacy of Randy Pausch

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By Rabbi Stuart W. Gershon

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Abstract: This is Pausch's message to all of us. Life is precious and life is unpredictable. We never know what will come out of left field. Therefore, we must make the most of life. Pausch inspires us to live every day fully and wisely. Pausch teaches us to fill every day with optimism, with humor, with fun, with loving what you do, and with loving who you love.

Our Jewish spiritual tradition calls upon us to engage in the process of *teshuvah*, most especially during these ten days in between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. *Teshuvah* is most frequently translated as “repentance” but that does not do justice to the Hebrew term. Where repentance promotes feeling guilty, *teshuvah* is ennobling. Where repentance is passive, *teshuvah* is about taking positive and constructive action.

Teshuvah comes from the Hebrew root “to turn” or “to return”. *Teshuvah* means “to return” to our highest and best selves, to turn our lives around. *Teshuvah* means to reflect on the past, present, and future directions of our lives. *Teshuvah* is the process of transforming ourselves from who we are to who we can still be.

This past summer, one of the books I read was Randy Pausch's The Last Lecture. Who has read the book? For those of you who haven't heard of it, Professor Pausch delivered a lecture at Carnegie Mellon University on September 18, 2007, knowing full well that he was dying. Unlike other Professors for whom the last lecture was a hypothetical “what if,” this was truly Pausch's last chance to impart his life wisdom to his wife and his children, to his colleagues and students, and subsequently to more than six million people who viewed Pausch's lecture on YouTube. Sadly, Pausch finally succumbed to pancreatic cancer on July 25, 2008.

Pausch's book contains many lovely insights. One of Pausch's most famous pearls of wisdom is to encourage parents to let their children paint on their bedroom walls, to allow their need for creative imagination and unconventional self-expression to roam free, as Pausch's parents had allowed his mind to roam free as a child. He wrote, “If your kids want to paint their bedrooms, as a favor to me, let them do it. It'll be okay. Don't worry about resale value on the house.” Perhaps Pausch's most frequently quoted life lesson deals with treating the disappointments and frustrations of life as challenges to be overcome. Pausch wrote, “Brick walls are there for a reason. They give us a chance to show how badly we want something. “

More than any practical advice, however, Pausch's enduring legacy is the way he chose to live the final year of his life. Pausch refused to be bitter, to engage in self-pity, or to give in to depression. He said, "We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand." And Pausch chose to play his hand with an amazingly optimistic mindset and remarkable courage. Pausch said, "I'm dying and I'm having fun. And I'm going to keep having fun every day I have left. Because there's no other way to play it." Above all, Pausch approached his own mortality with incredible sardonic wit. He said, "There's a limit to how many times you can read how great you are and what an inspiration you are, but I'm not there yet."

Judged by the letters, emails, and blogs that sprung up after Pausch's lecture appeared on the internet, what so many people found in Pausch's words and personal example is the inspiration to liberate themselves. To free themselves from feeling sorry for themselves. To free themselves from a self-imposed paralysis; to move on with their lives and to finally take long-overdue action to realize their dreams, especially their childhood dreams.

This is Pausch's message to all of us. Life is precious and life is unpredictable. We never know what will come out of left field. Therefore, we must make the most of life. Pausch inspires us to live every day fully and wisely. Pausch teaches us to fill every day with optimism, with humor, with fun, with loving what you do, and with loving who you love.