

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

The
LAST LECTURE



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PROFESSOR, CARNEGIE MELLON

with Jeffrey Zaslow

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*An Injured Lion
Still Wants to Roar*

A LOT OF professors give talks titled “The Last Lecture.” Maybe you’ve seen one.

It has become a common exercise on college campuses. Professors are asked to consider their demise and to ruminate on what matters most to them. And while they speak, audiences can’t help but mull the same question: What wisdom would we impart to the world if we knew it was our last chance? If we had to vanish tomorrow, what would we want as our legacy?

For years, Carnegie Mellon had a “Last Lecture Series.” But by the time organizers got around to asking me to do it, they’d renamed their series “Journeys,” asking selected professors “to offer reflections on their personal and professional journeys.” It wasn’t the most exciting description, but I agreed to go with it. I was given the September slot.

At the time, I already had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, but I was optimistic. Maybe I’d be among the lucky ones who’d survive.

While I went through treatment, those running the lecture series kept sending me emails. "What will you be talking about?" they asked. "Please provide an abstract." There's a formality in academia that can't be ignored, even if a man is busy with other things, like trying not to die. By mid-August, I was told that a poster for the lecture had to be printed, so I'd have to decide on a topic.

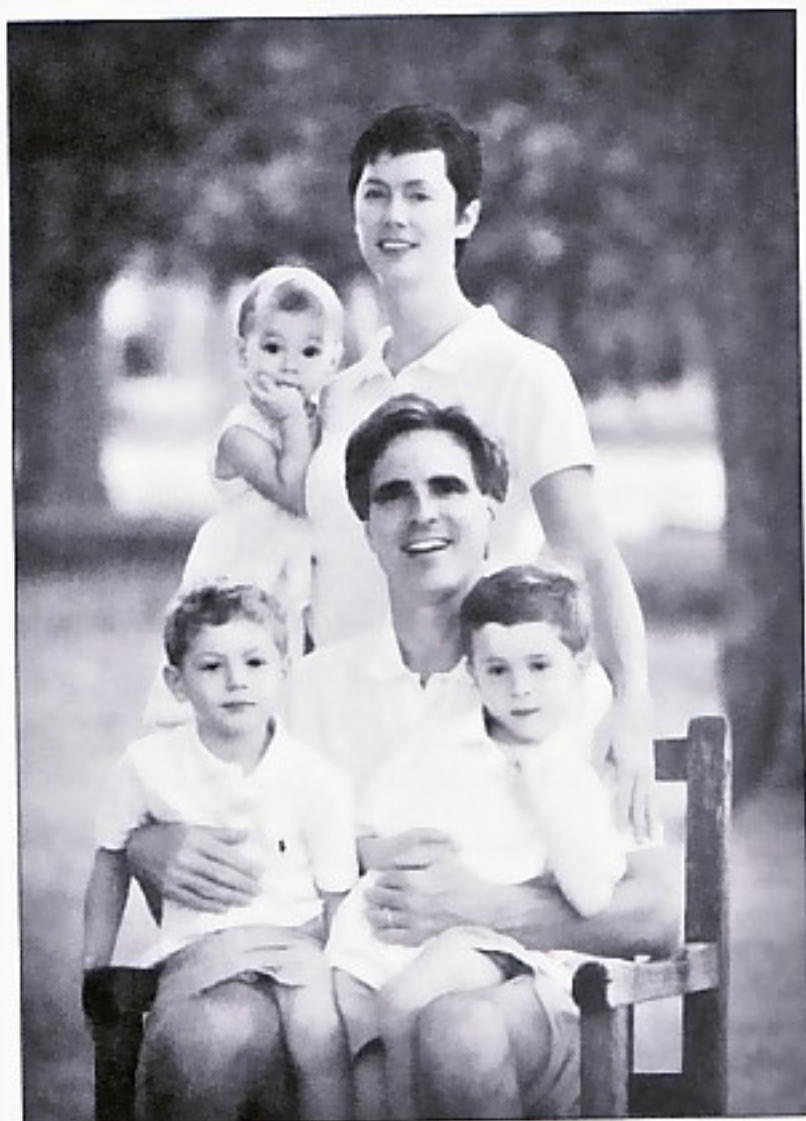
That very week, however, I got the news: My most recent treatment hadn't worked. I had just months to live.

I knew I could cancel the lecture. Everyone would understand. Suddenly, there were so many other things to be done. I had to deal with my own grief and the sadness of those who loved me. I had to throw myself into getting my family's affairs in order. And yet, despite everything, I couldn't shake the idea of giving the talk. I was energized by the idea of delivering a last lecture that really was a last lecture. What could I say? How would it be received? Could I even get through it?

"They'll let me back out," I told my wife, Jai, "but I really want to do it."

Jai (pronounced "Jay") had always been my cheerleader. When I was enthusiastic, so was she. But she was leery of this whole last-lecture idea. We had just moved from Pittsburgh to Southeastern Virginia so that after my death, Jai and the kids could be near her family. Jai felt that I ought to be spending my precious time with our kids, or unpacking our new house, rather than devoting my hours to writing the lecture and then traveling back to Pittsburgh to deliver it.

"Call me selfish," Jai told me. "But I want all of you. Any



Logan, Chloe, Jai, myself, and Dylan.

time you'll spend working on this lecture is lost time, because it's time away from the kids and from me."

I understood where she was coming from. From the time I'd gotten sick, I had made a pledge to myself to defer to Jai and honor her wishes. I saw it as my mission to do all I could to lessen the burdens in her life brought on by my illness.



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