

Most of Life's Lessons Can't be Learned in a Book

To start out I want to introduce myself a little bit and give you my background story. My name is Kalina Zufelt, I got married 3 ½ years ago, but went through a really tough divorce after my husband walked out on me after three years. I am 23 years old and just graduated from Utah Valley University with a Bachelor's degree in Exercise Science. I have been a runner since I was 8 years old and did my first 5k. I ran on my high school track and cross-country teams and was a collegiate athlete at UVU. I love cross-country as well as the mile, steeplechase and 5k. About 2 weeks after my last ever college track meet I was laying down and noticed a huge lump in my lower abdomen. The next day I got a CT scan and was diagnosed with stage 4 ovarian cancer. A week later I went in for surgery where they removed my left ovary, three large tumors, half of my right ovary, and my omentum (a fatty layer of tissue that protects your insides). I spent 9 days in the hospital recovering. 6 weeks after surgery I was allowed to start running again! 7 weeks after surgery I started weekly chemotherapy. Every Monday I got to spend at the Huntsman Cancer Institute getting liquid poison aka chemotherapy. I had a second surgery on October 9th where they removed the rest of my ovary, my uterus, two chunks of my liver, and a spot on my diaphragm. I had my last chemo treatment on January 7th and was declared cancer free on January 23rd. Now I have to go get a maintenance treatment drug every three weeks for a year at the Huntsman.

In many ways my journey is similar to Randy Pausch who you are reading about in The Last Lecture. Although I do not have terminal cancer necessarily, the odds of survival from stage 4 ovarian cancer are definitely not in my favor. Right now I am not living my life like I am going to die in the next few years. I expect to be fighting and kicking for at least another 60 years! But at the same time, I am not delusional that this might not be the case.

Some may think that I have a really hard and terrible life. To be diagnosed with such an aggressive, late stage cancer at age 22 is a pretty big deal. I mean it wasn't all that long ago that I was sitting in my high school English class. I haven't even had my 5 year reunion yet! But today, I am here for many reasons. Reading about someone in a book is much different than meeting them in person; getting to know them. Although Randy and I are very different, we also have many things in common. I hope that me being here in real life can have an impact on you that just reading about someone can't. I also am here because I want to share my experience. I know what it is to go through hard things. And my trials are so much different than each of yours. I know that. I hope I can share with you today some things that will help you throughout the rest of your life, in every trial, big and small.

I don't want to minimize your struggles. Just because I have cancer, a huge and very obvious struggle, doesn't make your struggles any less or any easier. I think every struggle is just as real and just as hard as any other one. It sucks not getting asked to prom! Yeah, you don't have cancer, but you also don't have a date. And that can hurt. You didn't make the varsity baseball team? Ouch. You were planning on doing that in college. Now what? Now you are lucky because you get to try new things. Explore options that you wouldn't have tried out before. My

ex-husband was a star football, baseball and basketball player in high school. His senior year his family moved from Georgia to Utah. He tried out for the baseball and basketball teams here. However, during tryouts he broke his thumb so the baseball team didn't want him. And when basketball season came around the coach decided he didn't want to invest time in a senior who was going to be leaving them in a year. But if it weren't for all these things, I would have never met him. Because he didn't get to play on the teams he wanted, he eventually went out for track. He quickly became the star high jumper and won state. That led to him getting a scholarship at UVU where we met and fell in love! I use this example to show you that eventually, great things come out of really hard things. And the awesome things that come from trials are usually way better than the okay things you would have had with it.

"Things can always be worse" or "someone somewhere would be grateful to have your trials!" What horrible consolation phrases! I have always hated it when someone would say something like that to me. My life sucks and is hard right now, and you're telling me it could get even worse? Where is the hope in that? And yeah, just because someone else's life sucks too doesn't make mine any easier.

Instead, I've always liked it when people say things like "Wow, your life really does suck right now! But you know what, you can handle it. I know you can handle it because you are handling it right now. Eventually this hardship will pass, but if you want to cry and kick and scream, that's okay, you deserve to!" And you know what? It's okay to cry. It's okay to be frustrated and discouraged. But the key is to not be that way 100% of the time. The key is that after you are done crying and throwing pillows and punching your bed, you pick yourself up and say, "you know what? My life is hard right now. What can I do with my attitude and my actions to ease this burden and make it a learning experience?" I believe that ALL trials are brought to us for a reason. You just need to find that reason and learn from it. Even the simplest stupid things like losing your keys, dropping your cell phone in the sink...there is something that we can learn from every hardship. Sometimes it is something as simple as "don't set your violin on the ground where your 3 year old brother can step on it" and sometimes the lessons are much deeper. Sometimes you don't realize that you've been growing and learning until you look back after a hard time and realize that it has shaped you and helped you be the person you are today.

To borrow a line from the Last Lecture, "No matter how bad things are, you can always make them worse. At the same time, it is often within your power to make them better" I have chosen to make my life better when faced with adversity. However, it has not always been easy for me. As a collegiate athlete, there is a lot of pressure to perform well. My first two years at UVU were a bit of a struggle. The spring of my sophomore year was especially hard. I was doing horrible in every race and every practice. A lot of practices I couldn't even finish the workout. I was racing slower than I had been in high school. I was very very discouraged. Finally, I had had enough. I decided I needed to quit. I was so discouraged and frustrated and sick of feeling horrible about running. I was in my car driving to my coach's office to tell him I was quitting when for some reason I realized I couldn't quit. Just because it got hard and discouraging didn't mean I could quit at something that was my life. I realized that I needed to change my focus a little. It was too

hard to change my attitude at the time because I was far too depressed. But I could change my perspective and focus. I was placing so much emphasis on being good and being fast that I had forgotten what running, and any hobby, is all about. It's about having fun. Your life should be fun. If you love something and you work hard at it, you should never ever forget that you love it because you think it is fun. It should make you happy. When I decided that running was going to be fun and I "accepted" the fact that I was just going to be "slow", my attitude changed. Slowly I became happier. I was way less stressed. I didn't get faster right away, and I continued to have workouts that I couldn't finish. But slowly, those things that had frustrated me and made me so discouraged didn't matter as much anymore. It wasn't because they were any easier. But it was because I realized that this was a trial I had to accept and I could choose to continue to be depressed, or I could choose to find another perspective to view my life from and be happy. Eventually, I was able to get better as a runner. I had an amazing breakthrough race and made it back on the varsity team again. My last two years were so much better. Sometimes when you change your attitude your trial does get better. Sometimes it doesn't. But no matter what, when you make the choice to improve your situation, it gets easier.

Another example I would like to talk about is my hair. From the moment I knew I would have chemo I made up my mind that I was NOT going to be sad about losing my hair. This was not a small thing for me. My hair has always been my favorite part about myself. I know that is so vain, but I had long brown perfectly straight hair and people always told me how pretty it was. However, instead of worrying about my hair, I chose from the very beginning to have fun with it. Hair grows back, why be sad over something I can't control. And this way I get to experience every hair length possible and decide which one I like best! Plus I have gotten the coolest ever wigs and awesome hats and I look like a fuzz ball. But the best thing by far is showering. Guys, I can shower and get ready in like 5 minutes. How great is that?! No more worrying about going out with wet hair! Its awesome.

(talk about my monkey and how I gave him surgery)

Remember- no matter the situation, you can always choose make it worse. Or you can choose to make it better. So face your adversities with the mindset that you are going to choose to make the best of whatever life brings you.

The biggest thing I've come to learn while having cancer is that I make a difference. Me, one person, one totally normal nothing special about me person, I have made a difference. I cannot tell you how many many people I have affected by the blog I write and the way I have handled my adversity. I have had countless old friends and acquaintances, including people I haven't talked to since elementary school, email or message me about how much of a difference I have made in their life because of the way I am handling my own life. One of my cousins whom I only see about once every other year wrote me a message a couple months ago on Facebook. He got in a very severe motorcycle accident on the freeway and was hurt pretty badly. I didn't know about it until he messaged me. I would like to share part of what he sent. "For the first couple days i was in so much pain and was so mad at the world and depressed I almost wished I

wouldn't have survived. But then I started reading your blog and fb comments. You're going through something that's tougher than what happened to me and you've had nothing but positivity. I figured if you can do it why can't I? You literally inspired me and took me out of one of the lowest points in my life and for that I thank you." I don't tell you this to brag or show-off, only to emphasize my point. YOU **DO** influence others. I want to share one more example. This is an email from a girl I was good friends with in elementary school, but haven't talked to much since then. "[Kalina] I just wanted to say thank you for always being such a good friend to me when we were younger! I know I haven't seen you in years and so this probably seems super random but you really did make an impact on me. You were always so sweet and friendly and you would constantly say things to boost my self-esteem. I just want you to know that it really meant a lot to me." You don't have to have cancer to be that one person that makes a difference. I have always thought that I needed to have some great experience or be in a position of fame to have a great impact on others. But I have come to see that my actions *every single day* influence those around me. Because I chose to reach out to a really shy girl in elementary school and be her friend, I changed her life. She still remembers that 15 years later. What are people going to remember about you? Are you going to be the person that made someone feel like they had a friend? Is the way you are dealing with the adversity in your life going to help someone be able to deal with the adversity in theirs? People are watching you. Always. Every choice you make WILL affect someone else for good or bad. Choose to live your life in a way that will affect others for good. Your life is not about you. You may think a careless decision like staying out past curfew, trying drugs or alcohol, or breaking the speed limit will only affect you, but I promise they affect so many others. I could have chosen to be self-pitying and distraught that I have cancer. I could cry every day that I am tired and don't have any hair. I could complain about how horrible chemotherapy is and how hideous my scar is. But how would that affect those around me? I wouldn't be helping anybody. Instead I have been an example to hundreds of people, some I don't even know. And the way I have been living my life has helped other people be happier. What great satisfaction and comfort it is to know that I can influence somebody. So can you.

As a side note to this point, why wait until a tragedy strikes to tell people how much they have influenced you? We all do it, it's human nature. We assume that the people we interact with know how they affect us. They don't. I challenge each one of you to chose 5 people who have made a difference in your life and tell them. Go home and send them a Facebook email, write them a letter, or send them a text and tell them "thank you for being a friend to me when I was lonely" "thank you for being such a great teacher, I know you were strict but I learned so much from you". Don't wait until it is too late. It shouldn't take cancer or any other tragedy to wake you up and give you the motivation to thank people.

So, how you react to trials affects the people around you. They are watching. Be the person that can change their life. Even small things can have a huge effect.

I want to point something out that is probably a foreign concept to you, because it was to me for the last 22 years. All you have to do in life is BE YOURSELF. It's simple. Be yourself, but be your BEST self. I always thought that being a great person was a lot of work. I thought I had to

suddenly become something I wasn't. I thought I would have to make so many changes and try really hard to reach out to people.

Then I got cancer. And I wanted to write about it. So I did. I wrote on my blog anything and everything that I wanted. I wrote my true emotions and shared them with the public. I didn't spice anything up, I didn't change who I was or what I was doing. And guess what? That was all I needed to do. Just be who I am. Especially in high school we want so badly to fit in, but we also want to stand out and be important. If we could just be the people we really are, we could make so much more of an impact on others.

Sometimes being our best self means allowing others to help us. We all want to be so independent and strong that sometimes we are too stubborn to accept help from people. When you get sick, people REALLY want to help you. They think that they want to help you to make you feel better. But really, people want to serve because it makes them feel better. It makes them feel like they are helping someone and that is a good feeling. Do you want to take that away from someone because you are too stubborn to accept what they have to offer? Don't be prideful. Accept humbly and graciously the sacrifices that others make for you. Be grateful that someone is willing to help you. And in return, go help someone else. Because everyone at one point will need help from others.

My next story kind of goes along with the point that your life isn't about just you. Because of my situation, my family has been very affected. It has been really hard on all of them. I have a lot of dear sweet cousins. There are about 7 or 8 cousins in the family that are 12 and younger. When these young children found out I had cancer, they immediately wanted to do something. They knew I was going to be so sick and in the hospital a lot. Each one of them decided they wanted to do some sort of fundraiser to help me. They sat out on the corner of their streets for hours selling lemonade, flower clips they had spent hours making, and going door to door telling their neighbors that their cousin just got cancer and they want to help. When they came to the hospital to bring me the money they had made, they were so excited. I can't describe the joy they had on their faces as they presented to me their earnings. The joy they got from serving me meant more to me than any money they had earned. It was so humbling to see how much they loved me and how happy serving me had made them. My life hasn't only taught me lessons. It has helped those around me learn to be more compassionate too. It has helped me be my best self, while also helping others to be their best selves.

To be your best self you need to be disciplined. You need to decide what is important to you. I'm not sure how far you've made it in The Last Lecture, but Dr. Pausch talks about childhood dreams. He talks about how he achieved his and how his childhood dreams shaped who he was. You will make sacrifices for what is important to you, so choose to spend your time on meaningful activities.

(-Other stories that might be good

- How I made a list of the good and bad things....turned all the bad into a good)

To end, I would like to share with you a slideshow I have prepared. Music has always been a great way for me to feel connected to an emotion and I hope this song helps you remember the points I have tried to share with you today.

(Outline)

- It's okay to be sad, but make sure you learn from your trials
- What good has come from the bad?
- Learn to turn bad things into positives: hair cutting party, my blog post
- How you react to trials affects so many people: choose to be an influence for good
- Be yourself.....your best self
- Let other serve you. It makes them happy
- Be determined and disciplined: you will make sacrifices for what is important to you