

More Than a Walk-on

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Like everyone who knew Randy Pausch, I looked forward to seeing the new *Star Trek* movie, for the sheer coolness of seeing Randy's walk-on appearance. I thought it was a deeply touching gesture for director J.J. Abrams to give Randy the chance to live a childhood dream. Five minutes into the movie, I realized that even though he was on screen for only a few seconds, Randy was central to the story.

The opening scene shows an intense captain on the shadowy bridge of a star ship. On the right side of the screen, a crewman briskly steps past the captain's chair and says "Captain, we have visual." I knew that was Randy's line, and thought "That was it? In the first two minutes? I barely saw him." A few minutes later, the story leads to captain George Kirk sitting in that chair, realizing he must continue to pilot his damaged and failing ship while the crew evacuates. That crew includes his wife in the final stages of labor. Shortly after his wife departs the ship, he hears the newborn cry over the communicator, and decides with his wife to name the baby Jim Kirk. Knowing his family is safe, the captain tells his wife he loves her, and calmly accepts his fate as the ship crashes.

Then I understood why Randy was in that scene: it was his story. When Abrams first invited Randy to be in the movie, he joked that he couldn't offer Randy the role of captain. Instead, Abrams used the character of captain George Kirk to portray Randy: a protecting father forced to say goodbye to his young family while facing unavoidable death. Randy said there wouldn't be a movie version of his story, but Abrams has managed to make a movie that tells part of that story, and even got Randy to appear in it.

Abrams could have easily done something upbeat, putting Randy later in the movie, on the brightly lit bridge of the Enterprise filled with familiar Star Trek characters. Instead, he used Randy's presence to underscore the tragedy preceding that optimistic future. More than a walk-on, Randy's brief moment on screen emphasized the resonance between the story and the Last Lecture, that tragedy can lead to hope.