

THE THUNDERER

A.K.A. THE INMATES' GAZETTE

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Number 19 St Pancras Almshouses

Randy Pausch: Famous last words

Last September Professor Randy Pausch gave his last college lecture: dying of cancer, he taught his audience how to live. The lecture has become an internet phenomenon. In his new book he tells his life story and sets out his legacy for his young children

By Randy Pausch

I have an engineering problem. While for the most part I'm in terrific physical shape, I have ten tumours in my liver and only a few months left to live. I am a father of three young children, and married to the woman of my dreams.

So, how to spend my very limited time? The obvious part is being with, and taking care of, my family. The less obvious part is how to teach my children what I would have taught them over the next 20 years. My desire to do that led me to give a "last lecture".

A lot of professors give talks titled "The Last Lecture". It has become a common exercise on American college campuses. Professors are asked to ruminate on what matters most to them. And while they speak, audiences can't help but mull over the same question: if we had to vanish tomorrow, what would we want as our legacy?

Last year, at Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh, where I am Professor of Computer Science, I was given the September slot. I already had pancreatic cancer diagnosed, but I was optimistic. Maybe I'd be among the lucky ones who'd survive.

In mid-August, however, I got the news: my most recent treatment hadn't worked. I had just months to live.

I knew I could cancel. Everyone would understand. And yet, despite everything, I couldn't shake the idea of giving the talk.

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

Jai had always been my cheerleader. But we had just moved from Pittsburgh to southeast Virginia so that after my death, she and the kids could be near her family.

"Call me selfish," Jai told me. "But I want all of you. Any time you'll spend working on this lecture is lost time, because it's time away from the kids and from me." There was another matter upsetting Jai: to give the talk, I would have to fly to Pittsburgh on her 41st birthday. "This is my last birthday we'll celebrate together," she told me. "You're actually going to leave me on my birthday?"

Given Jai's reticence, I had to look honestly at my motivations. Was this talk a limelight lover's urge to show off one last time? The answer was yes. But there was something else. I reminded Jai of the kids' ages: 5, 2 and 1. "Look," I said. "At 5, I suppose that Dylan will grow up to have a few memories of me. But how much will he really remember? And how about Logan and Chloe? They may have no memories at all. Nothing.

“Especially Chloe. And I can tell you this: When they are older, they're going to need achingly to know: ‘Who was my dad?’ This lecture could help to give them an answer to that.” Jai smiled at me, her dying showman, and finally relented.

And so, with Jai's green light, I had a challenge before me. I didn't want the lecture to focus on my cancer. Cancer didn't make me unique. My uniqueness, I realised, came in the dreams - from incredibly meaningful to decidedly quirky - that defined my 46 years of life. I had managed to fulfil almost all of them because of things I was taught by extraordinary people along the way.

My mother was a tough, old-school English teacher with nerves of titanium. Her high expectations became my good fortune. My dad was a Second World War medic who later ran a small car insurance business in inner-city Baltimore. For a million reasons, he was my hero.

Money was never an issue in our house, mostly because my parents never saw a need to spend much. We rarely went out to dinner. We'd see a movie maybe once or twice a year. “Watch TV,” my parents would say. “It's free. Or better yet, go to the library. Get a book.” It sounds oppressive by today's standards, but it was a magical childhood. Growing up, I thought there were two types of families:

1. Those who need a dictionary to get through dinner.
2. Those who don't.

We were No 1. “If you have a question,” my folks would say, “then find the answer.” Open the encyclopedia. Open the dictionary. Open your mind.

My dad seemed to know everything. My mother, meanwhile, knew plenty, too. All my life, she saw it as part of her mission to keep my cockiness in check.

When I was studying for my PhD, I took something called “the theory qualifier”, which I can now definitively say was the second worst thing in my life after chemotherapy. When I complained about how awful the test was,

she leant over, patted me on the arm and said, “We know just how you feel, honey. And remember, when your father was your age, he was fighting the Germans.” In 1969, when I was 8, my family went on a cross-country trip to Disneyland. As I stood in line with all the other kids, all I could think was “I can't wait to make stuff like this!” Two decades later, when I got my PhD, I dashed off my letters of application. And Walt Disney Imagineering sent me some of the nicest go-to-hell letters I'd ever received. That was a setback. But I believe brick walls are there for a reason. They're not there to keep us out. They are there to give us a chance to show how badly we want something.

Fast-forward to 1995. I'd become a professor at the University of Virginia, and I'd helped to build a system called “Virtual Reality on Five Dollars a Day”. I learnt that Disney Imagineering was working on a virtual reality project. It was a top secret Aladdin attraction that would allow people to ride a magic carpet. I called Disney, was ridiculously persistent, and eventually was connected to a guy named Jon Snoddy. He happened to be the brilliant Imagineer running the team. After we chatted a while, I told Jon I'd be coming to California. Could we get together? He told me OK. We could have lunch.

At the end of the lunch, I made “the ask”. It was almost unheard of for Imagineering to invite an academic inside its secretive operation, but he thought it would be a fine idea if I took a sabbatical to work with them.

It was a fantasy come true. In fact, I have a confession. This is how geeky I am: soon after I arrived in California, I drove over to Imagineering headquarters with the soundtrack to Disney's The Lion King blasting on my stereo. Tears actually began streaming down my face as I drove past the building.

Here I was, the grown-up version of that wide-eyed eight-year-old at Disneyland. I had finally arrived.

The most formidable brick wall I ever came upon was just 5ft 6in tall, and absolutely beautiful. But it reduced me to tears. That brick wall was Jai. We met in the autumn of 1998, when I gave a lecture at the University of North Carolina. I was a 37-year-old bachelor who had spent a lot of time having great fun, and then losing girlfriends who wanted to get more serious. Jai was a 31-year-old comparative literature student working part-time in the computer science department.

Her job was to host visitors and on that day, her job was to host me. I was completely taken with her. I had to go to a formal faculty dinner that night, but I asked if she'd meet me for a drink afterwards. She agreed.

During dinner I wished all those professors would just chew faster. I convinced everyone not to order dessert. And I got out of there at 8.30 and called Jai.

We went to a wine bar and ended up having a terrific time.

After I returned to Pittsburgh, I asked Jai to visit me. She was scared of my reputation and of the possibility that she was falling in love.

"I'm not coming," she wrote in an e-mail. "I've thought it through and I'm not looking for a long-distance relationship. I'm sorry." This was a brick wall I could manage. I sent her a dozen roses and a card that read: "Although it saddens me greatly, I respect your decision and wish you nothing but the best. Randy." She got on the plane.

We saw each other almost every weekend through the winter and, eventually, I asked her to move to Pittsburgh. I knew she was still scared but she did agree to moving up and getting her own apartment.

In April, however, Jai told me: "I'm sorry. This will never work. I just don't love you the way you want me to love you." And then again, for emphasis: "I don't love you." I was heartbroken. Could she really mean that?

I spent much of the rest of that day on the phone to my parents, telling them about the brick wall I'd just smashed into. Their advice was incredible. "Be supportive," my mom said. "If you love her, support her." And so I spent that week hanging out in an office up the hall from Jai.

I stopped by a couple of times, however, just to see if she was all right. "I just wanted to see how you are," I'd say. "If there's anything I can do, let me know." A few days later, Jai called. "Well, Randy, I'm sitting here missing you. That means something, doesn't it?" She was in love, after all.

Brick walls are there for a reason. They give us a chance to show how badly we want something.

There are so many things I want to tell my children, and right now, that they're too young to understand. Dylan just turned 6. Logan is 3. Chloe is 18 months old. It pains me to think that they won't have a father. When I cry in the shower, a percentage of my sadness is, "I won't, I won't, I won't..." But a bigger part of me grieves for them.

I keep thinking: "They won't... they won't... they won't." That's what chews me up inside, when I let it.

I know their memories of me may be fuzzy. That's why I'm trying to do things with them that they'll find unforgettable.

Dylan and I went to swim with dolphins. When a kid swims with dolphins, he doesn't easily forget it. I'm going to bring Logan to Disney World, a place that I know he'll love as much as I do.

I'm aware that Chloe may have no memory of me at all. But I want her to grow up knowing that I was the first man ever to fall in love with her. I'd always thought the father/daughter thing was overstated. But I can tell you, sometimes, she looks at me and I just become a puddle.

When they're older. Jai might talk to them about my optimism, the way I embraced having fun, the high standards I tried to set in my life. She may

diplomatically tell them some of the things that made me exasperating; like my insistence (too often) that I know best.

But she's modest, and she might not tell the kids this: that in our marriage, she had a guy who deeply, truly loved her. "Lucky" is a strange word to describe my situation, but a part of me does feel fortunate. Cancer has given me the time to have vital conversations with Jai that wouldn't be possible if my fate were a heart attack or a car accident.

What are we talking about? We both try to remember that some of the best advice we have ever heard comes from flight attendants: "Put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others." Jai knows that she will have to give herself permission to make herself a priority. I've also reminded her that she's going to make mistakes. If I were to live, we would be making them together and she shouldn't attribute them all to the fact that she'll be raising the kids herself.

It's possible that she will find the children's teenage years the most challenging. Having been around students all my life, I'd like to think that I would come into my own as a father. So I'm sorry I won't be there.

The good news, though, is that other people - friends and family - will want to help, and Jai plans to let them.

As for the obvious question, well, here's my answer: most of all, I want Jai to be happy. If she finds happiness through remarriage, that will be great. If she finds happiness without remarrying, that also will be great.

As I prepared to give my last lecture, I wanted some way to show how much I love and appreciate Jai. Near the end, I arranged to have a large birthday cake with a single candle wheeled on to the stage. I explained that I hadn't given Jai a proper birthday, and thought it might be nice if I could get 400 people to sing to her. They applauded and began singing Happy Birthday.

I had no idea what I would do or say after that. But as Jai came towards me on the stage, impulse took over. We embraced and kissed. The crowd kept applauding.

We heard them, but it was like they were miles away. As we held each other, Jai whispered something in my ear. "Please don't die." It sounds like Hollywood dialogue. But that's what she said. I just hugged her more tightly.

I know he'll love as much as I do.

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THREE BRAZILLIAN SOLDIERS

(confidential)

Donald Rumsfeld briefed the President this morning. He told Bush that three Brazilian soldiers were killed in Iraq. To

everyone's amazement all of the colour ran from Bush's face, then he collapsed onto his desk, his head in hands, visibly shaken, almost whimpering. Finally he composed himself and asked Rumsfeld, "Just exactly how many is a brazillion?"

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A friend living in Chile wrote the following two poems.

OLD AGE

(Written at age 39)

I am going to be a dreadful old woman.

I am. I mean, look,
The choice is so narrow.
Either I'll cut my hair short
and stride
or I'll die it pale sky
and weave wafer hands
around gracious opinions.
I'll remember and remember gauze summers
and everlasting teas on sunlit lawns
in Hampshire.
I can gather artistic flow
and heave a long bosom swathed in natural calico
over the cobalt of the new brush
emerged triumphant from his one man show,

his first, held in
the foyer of Upminster Public Library.
Then I can go for politics, local
or good works, parochial
and wear a hat.
I can mount a camel
and beneath the banner of my liberation rampant
on leatherred skin
scythe through reluctant harems in Arabia.
I'm told they still abound.
Or there's chronic hypochondria
and merry rounds round Harley Street
and my appointment at the hospital
department of bunions
but such an interesting case, he said,
I feel quite proud.
I can cook spiced delicacies
and let my thighs grow
and my supplement smile.
Or I can grow my mind
rooting in musty manuscripts and learned papers
and publish.
Or I can prey on my children
and pray to them.
I brought them up, they owe me
so please won't you let me baby sit
and let me be grateful but make sure
that you are, too.
Or maybe I'll just die.
It's dramatic but it's quick.

OLD WOMEN

(Written at age 68)

So here we are,
Two old women,
Dreadful perhaps each in her way.
We knew the choice would be narrow
But we edged through
Day by day by night.
The hair is gray.
Hers more, mine less.
The waist is not an isthmus
Any more,
A solid land mass
Between boob and hip.
Hers less, mine more.
We neither jump as high
Nor run as long
But yet we glide, a little slow,
Evading sunlit lawns,
Those one man shows,
Proud bunions, harems,
Politics, local. Good works, parochial
And musty manuscripts.
We neither pray nor prey
On sons full grown
With children of their own.
We knit them little sweaters,
Teach them their letters
And spin them stories

About old magic days
When webs were spun
Not clicked.
We've time to stand and stare
At star and cloud,
To air rigid opinions
At any wedding guest
Who comes our way.

If old's a destination
Then we are here.
Dreaded, not dreadful yet.
Give it another year.

Monika, Pirque, Chile.

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VOLUNTEERS FOR 150TH BIRTHDAY BASH

Volunteers are needed to form a Gardens Committee for the Almshouses. The expectation is that the Committee will be made up of 2 or 3 representatives of the Residents, plus a Trustee and someone from GreenMantle Gardens (the garden maintenance company). The role will be to ensure that the development of the garden meets the requirements of the residents and also that the garden is shown to best advantage in summer next year when we have our 150th Anniversary celebrations".

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AN INVITATION. We are invited to the Annual General Meeting of The Almhouse Association on 11th June 2008 for the election of the Executive Committee **AND** a talk on Social Justice by Iain Duncan Smith M.P. Tea will be served at 4 pm after the meeting (last year everything was delicious).
If you would like to come, please tell Julia 8C by May 29th.

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THE EDNA BROWN CINEMA CLUB

May 3rd. **THE GREAT DEBATERS.** December 2007

This film was produced by Oprah Winfrey and directed by Denzil Washington who also acted in it and received the Best Actor Award. His co-star Jurnee Smollett received Best Actress Award and the film was nominated for Best Film in the Golden Globe Awards. It tells the story of the first Inter Racial debate between two racially segregated Universities in the USA which took place in 1930. Wiley University in Texas with an all Black student body won the debate and went on to win against Harvard University. The film shows the

terrible discrimination and repression of Black Americans in Texas at that time.

May 10th. **JUNO**. 2007

A comedy in which the title role of Juno MacGuff is played by Ellen Page. The New York Times review said that she 'owns' her character the way Audrey Hepburn 'owned' Holly Golightly in the film 'Breakfast at Tiffany's'.

May 17th. **ELIZABETH – THE GOLDEN AGE**. 2007

Starring Cate Blanchett who was nominated for an Academy Award. Some critics call this a 'Popcorn Movie' and we shall have to watch it to find out what that actually means.

It is set during the reign of Elizabeth the First before the Spanish Armada and had many plots and sub plots. Elizabeth was fond of Sir Walter Raleigh but her Lady in Waiting started an affair with him. There was also alleged to have been a Jesuit Plot to assassinate Queen Elizabeth and place Mary Queen of Scots on the throne.

May 24th. **HAIRSPRAY**. 2007

This is set in 1962 in Baltimore and people were mad about dancing competitions (just like today!). Tracy Turnblad, a girl with big hair and big dreams wants to dance on 'The Corny Collins Show'. The scheming Stage manager (Michelle Pfeiffer) is against her and

she needs the help of her Mother (John Travolta ?) and Queen Latifah to make her dream come true. If you like 'Strictly come Dancing' or 'Dirty Dancing' this film is for you.

May 31st. **AMAZING GRACE**. 2006

'Amazing Grace' is the incredible true story of William Wilberforce, who tirelessly led the campaign to abolish slavery in Britain. At a time when the slave trade was not only perceived as acceptable but as a necessity for the economy, Wilberforce and his fellow abolitionists dared to speak out against a massive injustice, fighting long and hard for the freedom of others. Today we view it as a shameful period in British history when we shipped black Africans to America and the West Indies in atrocious conditions to live the rest of their lives as slaves for the profit of British ship owners.

YOURFILMSUGGESTIONSPLEASE!

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LOO ROLLS

Little bits of paper,
Millions every day,
Are the star performer
In what we throw away.
Are they more important,
Tinted blue or peach,
Than pollution in the colours

And poison in the bleach?

We flush them through the system
Which doesn't touch the dye
That's dinner to the algae
Who grow and multiply
Shutting out the oxygen
From tiny life that swims
That leads to stagnant smelly pools
Instead of healthy streams.

Bleach is a powerful poison
To bug or child or pet,
So recycled, natural-coloured
Is the best loo paper yet!
Value-added people
With an attitude that saves
Will make a mighty difference
To all our children's lives.

Submitted by Doreen 9C

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Dear Editor,

Congratulations on producing a highly informative and amusing journal. The editing is of the highest standard. The stories witty and touching.

I particularly enjoyed the the punch line of 'The New Greeter' being over the page – the suspense was perfect. The words of wisdom of T Maker were so profound.

For your information, there is another word beginning with DW. Dwezil e.g. – he's a bit of a dwezil.

Have you thought about creating a website for historical purposes where you can archive the back copies? My current copy was rescued from the outside toilet. It is now getting dogeared with overuse.

Yours sincerely,

Anne Other
(the name has been changed)

Pentonville prison.

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AN OCCASIONAL RELIGIOUS COMMENT

If someone asks "Do you believe you have a soul?"
The answer is "No – I AM a soul and I have a body".
That is why you are not identical with your corpse.

Father Andrew

(submitted by Chris 12A)

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One day a 12 year old boy was walking down the street when a car pulled up beside him and the window was wound down.

“I’ll give you a bag of lollies if you get in the car”, said the male driver.

“No way, get stuffed”, replied the boy.

“How about a bag of lollies and £10?” asked the driver.

“No way” replied the irritated youngster.

“What about a bag of lollies and FIFTY QUID, eh?” quizzed the driver , still rolling slowly to keep up with the walking boy.

“No, I’m not getting in the fricken car!” answered the boy.

“OK, I know what you want. I’ll give you £100 pounds and a bag of lollies”, the driver offered.

“NO,” screamed the boy.

What will it take to get you into the car?” asked the driver with a long sigh.

The boy replied, “Listen Dad, you bought the Skoda, you live with it!”

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The court room was filled with the noise of women’s voices, steadily increasing in volume!

They had all witnessed a local Bank robbery, from a distance – a very safe distance. But now each one was eager to be at the forefront to relate what had taken place.

The elderly Judge, with more than a touch of Solomon, but lacking the patience of Job, raised a hand and shrieked “Silence please. Let the oldest one among you be the first to speak”.

Not another word was heard, silence reigned supreme.

Submitted by Mary 10A

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A PUB, A SCHOOL AND A STATUE OF A GOOD MAN.

The Cobden Arms, at the south end of Camden High Street is well worth a visit.

The food is ‘Home Cooked’, a choice of meat dishes, fish, salad, vegetables – typical cost is £6.50 – a decent bitter to wash it down and hot apple pie with ice cream are extras.

The staff are homely and friendly – two of them are young, attractive and French – it’s all too much, I emerge walking on air.

They serve meals Monday to Friday, with a good roast on Sundays.

Richard Cobden himself is nearby in the shape of his statue, close to Mornington Crescent.

Cobden was responsible for abolishing the hated Corn Laws, introduced in Britain in 1804 to protect domestic farmers against foreign competition by imposing a duty on foreign grown corn(wheat) which was grown more cheaply abroad. Cobden believed that the Corn laws, by driving up the price of corn, increased the profits of the land owning (and thus corn growing class) while simultaneously driving up the price of bread which was the staple food of the poor workers.

He became MP for Stockport, founded the Anti Corn Law League and led the campaign that finally resulted in the repeal of duties in 1846. He was hailed as the saviour of the poor and regarded as a hero in France, Italy and Russia.

Cobden’s statue by W.J. & T. Wills was unveiled in 1868(three years after his death) by the M.P.s for Marylebone, at a cost of £320, the cheapest post 18th century statue in London and still on its original site.

An inscription states that the Emperor Napoleon the Third was a ‘principal contributor’, although there is no evidence for this – however a sum of £5 was donated by the Trustees of the St Pancras Almshouses.

The Richard Cobden School is located on Camden Street, no doubt the children know all about him – he was a great and good man.

Chris 12A

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Seated next to George Bernard Shaw at a banquet was a woman much spoken of in Society for her exceptional beauty.

She turned to him as she sipped her wine and said “You and I should get married” (and it wasn’t even Leap Year). Bernard Shaw finished his drink and then grunted “Why?” “Well” she explained “With my beauty and your intelligence, just imagine what a ‘marvel’ our children would turn out to be.”

“Oh Yes” he replied, “but what if instead, they inherited my beauty and your intelligence, what a disaster instead they would be.”

Submitted by Mary 10A

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COUNTERKNOWLEDGE:

How we Surrendered to Conspiracy Theories, Quack medicine, Bogus Science and False History.

By Damien Thompson

Damian Thompson, who is a Leader writer for the Daily Telegraph and Editor-in-chief of the Catholic Herald, has

written a compact and thorough account of Conspiracy Theories from Holocaust denial to 9/11.

He is particularly good on the absurdities, which can occur when Creationism is substituted for the overwhelming scientific evidence showing that life does not work through random processes of selection and mutation.

One of the greatest legacies of the European Enlightenment, he writes, is a scientific methodology that allows us to make increasingly accurate observations about the world around us.

This methodology is based that we need in order to comprehend nature is a solid understanding of the laws and processes of the natural world. The supernatural does not enter the equation, because it does not provide us with any explanations that can be tested empirically.

“The sleep of Reason brings forth monsters” warns the title of Francisco Goya’s famous etching of 1799. This sleep of reason is applied later in this little book to irresponsible publishing, to the Da Vinci Code, and to a book entitled 1421, The Year China Discovered the World—a book described in Waterstone as recommended history, and of which Thompson writes: “Is not history at all....a work of the most bogus scholarship”.

As to the Da Vinci Code, its writer Brown, insisted it was not history but proven historical fact.

Thompson is scathing about the hoax filled predecessor, the Holy Blood and the Holy Grail, whose writers admitted they have completely been taken for a ride.

We hear more in the chapter on the return of pseudo history, of Van Daniken’s Chariot of the Gods, and the history of Africa by Molefi Kete Asante, who claims that both Hannibal and St Augustine were black Africans. No question about it, yet Hannibal was a Phoenician of Semitic ancestry and Augustine was a Berber.

Thompson’s treatment of pseudo history ends with a surprisingly apt and contemporary quotation from Thucydides.

To sum up, I read a review in the Spectator of this book, by Mathew Parris. He was highly complimentary, but his reservations differ from mine. He wanted to dispute the entire thesis on which this little book rests, and yet said it is one of the best contributions to an important argument he had read – to have had, as it were, his cake and to have eaten it, to have his knowledge and counterknowledge together.

One chapter in this book deals with Alternative Medicine, and at the end is a severe pointer to the limitations and delusions of the Internet. With the possible exception of the harm and hurt to those suffering from Autism, I think Mr. Thompson’s dismissal of alternative medicine is vain baying at the moon.

He himself in the case of his friend, Ardit and his cranial treatment, does not apportion blame, and his other remedies like aroma therapy and placebos seem likewise harmless.

We are left then with the Internet. Attempts to control the flow of information on the internet are doomed to failure: its infrastructure is simply too complex. In the long term the real menace of the Internet is its ability is its ability to carry the virus of counterknowledge to societies that are not protected by evidence-based methology.

Thompson concludes “We must hold to account the greedy, lazy, and politically correct guardians of intellectual orthodoxies, who have turned their backs on the methodology that has enabled us to distinguish fact from fantasy.

It will be their fault if the Sleep of Reason brings forth monsters.

William 4B

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