

# When Breath Becomes Air – A book review and discussion

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## Abstract

This review examines *When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi. The book is a memoir that recounts Kalanithi's compelling story of a neurosurgeon-turned-patient after a terminal lung cancer diagnosis in his mid-thirties. Herein is an analysis of the messages Kalanithi attempts to articulate. He explores concepts brought up amidst fatal contemplations and reflections, and also calls into question the underlying assumptions that gave rise to those thoughts. The review summarizes Kalanithi's life events, his choices, and uncovers why those choices may have come about. It also analyzes why the author elected to tell his story using styles drawing from fiction and poetry as opposed to academic writing. Finally, the review offers an interpretation of the final message Kalanithi and his wife, Lucy, hoped to convey to their readers.

*Keywords: memoir; Paul Kalanithi; When Breath Becomes Air*

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## Introduction

There exists a certain point at which a breath simply becomes a semantic component of air. However, this is far from the point of the late neurosurgeon Paul Kalanithi's memoir, *When Breath Becomes Air*. Rather, he uses this phrase to echo Baron Brooke's poetry as an analogy of life becoming death. What makes Kalanithi's memories so striking is not just the poetic and somewhat dividing prose in which they are written, but also their depth. He does not simply recall his past, but also dissects the pieces out of it for the reader to appreciate. A penetrating quality characterizes the story of a man, so used to crawling along a reciprocal relationship with the death of his patients, now facing his own mortality. All his training did not prepare him for the role inversion he faced. Kalanithi found himself in his own upside-down world confronted with the mortality he dedicated his life to defy. Nevertheless, the reader is acquainted with Kalanithi before and after his cancer diagnosis. He welcomes readers with open arms into his childhood, family life, marriage, and workplace. In many ways, Kalanithi's life exemplifies a great deal of what a legacy of love and pain may inspire.

## Summary & analysis

Throughout his book, Kalanithi guides us through his memories and contemplations with a rhythm that fellow author and physician, Abraham Verghese, describes in the foreword as "unforgettable" (p. 9).<sup>1</sup> Vergh-

ese foreshadows the memoir, saying, "see what courage sounds like" (p. 11),<sup>1</sup> which braces the reader for a rare glimpse of fragile valor. The reader observes much of Kalanithi's personality from the confidence he exudes from paragraph to paragraph. Kalanithi writes with an unadulterated fervor and passion for the subject matter. Yet, he also exposes a quiet, although ever-present, self-criticism. The grandeur of his personage in this setting begs the question: are his words reflective of his true nature or were they an enamored and edited account of a glorified diary? As with much good writing, hyperbole and metaphor are to be used to tug and pull at the tendinous cords of a reader's heart. The memoir of a passionate doctor and husband should not be held in contempt for the use of a poet's toolbox. Kalanithi's writing carries us from his days of certainty that he would never be a doctor to his medical rite of passage in the cadaver lab and beyond. The poetic flow he uses is anything but typical of the academic writing one would expect from the archetypical surgeon. Kalanithi elects to use the same style of writing he fell in love with as a child growing up in Arizona. This decision is likely more than simple reminiscence. In part, it demonstrates the fight against his diagnosis. Kalanithi loved literature and always wanted to write - not as a scientist, but as an author. Although he felt the calling of medicine, Kalanithi always looked forward to a time when he could write his own book. Given that he had so little time in medicine, it would be easy to say that he missed his chance. However, such reasoning is incongruent with Kalanithi's mindset. In this way, even

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the act of writing this memoir, in addition to its style, is a testament to Kalanithi's struggle with his cancer diagnosis.

Kalanithi hauls the reader back and forth through his own medical dichotomy. He describes the amazing feats of a neurosurgeon as well as the debilitating and humbling back spasms he experienced as a patient. His bravery in writing reflects his way of life. One cannot help but wonder about the nature of his zeal: directed first towards literature, followed by neurosurgery, and, finally, his family. It is reasonable to inquire whether this trinity was demonstrative of priority or instead demonstrated simple subsequence. The question remains whether he was truly a "family man". Did life events reveal a dedication to his family that existed all along or was his commitment to family a decision of born of capacity rather than choice? If not for his diagnosis, would Kalanithi truly be as family-oriented as he depicted himself? These are questions the reader must answer for themselves.

Verghese's thoughts from the forward must be echoed when he confesses, "after reading the book... I felt inadequate". He perhaps admires the integrity with which Kalanithi writes. Dr. Kalanithi, the amazing neurosurgeon, family man, scientist, author, and scholar is awe-inspiring. This is because his memoir is real, Kalanithi himself becomes relatable to the reader, and the reader vicariously experiences his accomplished and bountiful life. He offers an intimidating truth to the reader: *Dr. Paul Kalanithi* is possible for anyone. The fact that he exists implies that any person can be a neurosurgeon, a "family man", a scientist, an author, and a scholar. It means that one cannot defer to the archetype of a surgeon that is too busy to write, conduct research, or be there for their child's soccer game. Kalanithi is awe-inspiring because this memoir proves that such an existence is possible. However, for that reason, this author takes the biased and perhaps self-preserving perspective that Kalanithi's memoir may not be entirely authentic.

Maybe, Kalanithi was just an archetypal surgeon. When confronted with death, he may very well have been forced to revisit his life choices. Perhaps he was simply fortunate to be married to a wife that was willing to overlook his former blinding passion for neurosurgery.

Maybe, one cannot be at once a surgeon, "family man", scientist, author, scholar, and cancer survivor.

Maybe, it is enough to just try to be an amazing surgeon, family man, scientist, author, and scholar.

Maybe, Kalanithi was not actually amazing at all those things, but just tried to be.

Surely, that is enough.

There is a tragic irony that a man so dedicated to protecting the lives of others suddenly lost his own.

He believed himself to be David facing off against his personal cancerous Goliath. Kalanithi's deep convictions and unrelenting hope are what allowed him to fight with such vigor. It was not the fight itself that proved valuable though, but rather the awakening and awareness that it gave him. The memoir describes it much like an epiphany that one could see slowly blossoming. However, the flower that emerged seemed to have been the product of his growth through dying. Kalanithi longed not for "the sensationalism of dying, and not exhortations to gather rosebuds, but: Here's what lies up ahead on the road." (p. 215).<sup>1</sup> This phrase alone sums up a fatally avoidant approach that our culture takes to the nonexistent conversations regarding our mortality. Such ephemeral thoughts rarely reach the mouth. When they do, they only slip out to be once again slipped underneath another barely separate pile of tedium and small talk. It was thus by writing a memoir that Kalanithi was able to state his position on death and dying with his own mortality as testament. The choice to write a memoir gives a reflective instead of reportorial narrative to the story that allows for a deeper understanding of the human condition.

The vulnerability of Kalanithi's story includes the accounts of not only his friend's foreword, but also his wife Lucy's epilogue. Verghese does not claim to know Paul deeply, despite how strongly he may wish he did. Yet, Verghese does validate the strength of Paul's character. To speak so well of another man with so much as a single meeting and a couple of essays only substantiates the biography of Lucy's "paladin" recounted (p. 212-213).<sup>1</sup> This is to say that his soul was not one you had to spend time getting to know. Rather, he is presented as the type of person who you can have a conversation with and leave feeling like you have known them your whole life. Kalanithi wore his heart on his sleeve through the pages of his memoir, and Lucy Kalanithi gladly continued his legacy. Her account of Kalanithi's journey is reassuring in a way. By choosing to continue living within the glass walls of her husband's journal she affords the reader a sense of intimacy. She lets us so much further into his life than otherwise imaginable. It allows for a conversation of sorts with someone we have heard so much about, but until now have never had the pleasure to meet. In this estranged but now reconciled manner, Lucy's words were the richest of all. She ends the story recounting more than the beautiful meaning of a breath made with love. Lucy speaks to the sorrow and pain she felt as well as her ongoing love for Kalanithi. These are feelings that all float in the air of his death and in the breath of his daughter, Cady.

## Conclusion

In essence, *When Breath Becomes Air* narrates the heartfelt chronicle of a doctor, friend, patient, husband, and father who dedicated himself to fight against the death of others and, eventually, his own. Kalanithi's words float across the pages of his memoir thanks to his familial love for literature and his own life experi-

ences from such a young age. This eventually fostered a curiosity that drove him towards medicine in search of the life-and-death experiences he felt were needed to substantiate his own morals. Only when he neared the end of his medical training was his curiosity fully rewarded by an all too personal encounter with that vital dichotomy. However, his words do not stand alone in this account. Rather, they are surrounded by the love of his peers and family that he valued so dearly. Being forced to realize your own mortality for Kalanithi “in a sense, had changed nothing and everything” (p. 131).<sup>1</sup> The hope is that readers can appreciate this change without the lived experience that Kalanithi needed to realize it.

In dissecting the fibers that connect the pages of Paul Kalanithi’s memoir, I believe I have described the underlying reasons that compelled him to share his experiences. As medical students, we are forevermore driven towards our studies, our future careers, our goals, and soon-to-be patients. As passionate as we may be to that end, we cannot allow that passion to blind us to how we may be acting outside of our role as soon-to-be physicians. There is always another patient, there is always more research, there is always a conference to attend. However, there is not always time. Kalanithi’s story is indeed tragic, but he was far from a tragedy. In Lucy’s words “he was in the final hours of his life but who he had always been. For much of his life, Paul wondered about death - and whether he could face it with integrity. In the end, the answer was yes” (p. 225).<sup>1</sup>

## References

- [1] Kalanithi P. *When Breath Becomes Air*. New York: Random House; 2016.