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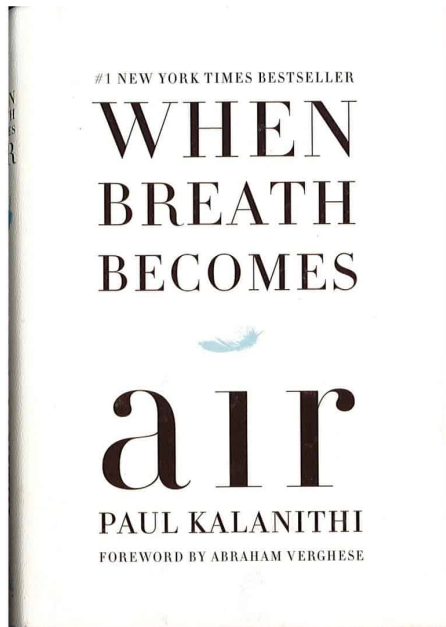
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"When Breath Becomes Air" – by Paul Kalanithi



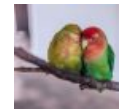
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"When Breath Becomes Air" – by Paul Kalanithi

Book review by Mona Rassi

"*When Breath Becomes Air*" is a book written by a 36 years old neurosurgeon who was diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. Before going to medical school, *Paul Kalanithi* studied English literature. He loved reading and writing, and he took the opportunity to write a book that will influence the lives of many others, long after he is gone. He also wrote an article for the New York Times, "[How long have I got Left?](#)"

When Paul reached his final months of his residency, he wrote:

"At 36 I had reached the mountaintop... I could see myself finally becoming the husband I'd promised to be."

However, this feeling of achievement and relief lasted only for few weeks. Shortly after that, he developed chest pain, night sweats, cough, severe weight loss and back pain. He knew that it was cancer, and from this point on he became the patient wearing the hospital gown instead of the surgeon with his surgical gear. The first part of the book was about hope, planning for a future of saving lives; the second part was about being a patient and learning how to die.

Paul knew and was certain of his death sentence, yet when he was in remission, he went back to practicing medicine and became a caring physician.

"I had learned something not found in Hippocrates, Maimonides or Osler; the physician's duty is not to stave off death or return patients to



work until they can stand back up and face, and make sense of, their existence”.

He also planned with his wife to have a child, and she gave birth to a baby girl. He passed away when she was nine months old.

Paul's illness made him examine his faith. He was raised in a devout Christian family, yet he became an atheist believing in:

“There is no proof of God; therefore, it is unreasonable to believe in God.”

However, at this stage of his life, he came to recognize that

” to make science the arbiter of metaphysics is to banish not only God from the world but also, love, hate, meaning...Scientific methodology is the product of human hands and thus cannot reach some permanent truth.”

Paul died and left the book unfinished. His wife Lucy wrote a touching epilogue. She ended it very movingly by saying:

“ For much of his life, Paul wondered about death – and whether he could face it with integrity. In the end, the answer was yes. I was his wife and a witness”.

You can check Paul Kalanithi's [website](#). You can also check Lucy's heart touching interview where she describes her life journey with and without her husband.

Paul Kalanithi: a neurosurgeon's memoirs

