

When Breath Becomes Air, Inhaled

I have just read Paul Kalanithi's When Breath Becomes Air. I read it with stops: to reread, to make notes, to copy passages, and to mentally and emotionally process the content. Paul's journey was cut short at age thirty-six—I am now eighty-eight. I like Paul's words. We both wanted to, “forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.” And I, too, “found myself too brittle, the fire too weak, to forge even my own conscience.”¹ But, we both have tried to put what we learned from our journey into words:

Paul's in, When Breath Becomes Air², and mine in, The Answer is a Question³.

I, too, am a scientist confronted with Kalanithi's paradox: “that scientific methodology is the product of human hands and thus cannot reach some permanent truth. We build scientific theories to organize and manipulate the world, to reduce phenomenon to some manageable units.”⁴ I use different terms for “the product of human hands” versus “permanent truth.” My words for Paul's “human world” is the *finite world* and Paul's “world of truth” to me is the uncontainable *infinite world*. My book, The Answer is a Question is what I call a guide to living at the interface between the finite and the infinite. Kalanithi's “most central aspects of human life: hope, fear, love, hate, beauty, envy, honor, weakness, striving, suffering, virtue,”⁵ are in the realm of “permanent truth” and as I point out are impossible to pin down because when they are captured like a butterfly and pinned to a display case, they no longer fly.

Kalanithi, a neurosurgeon, was interested in the interface between life and death. Hospitals are at that interface. Physicians, patients and their families in hospitals are confronted with life

¹ Kalanithi, Paul, When Breath Becomes Air, Thorndike Press Large Print. p. 163

² *ibid*

³ Ramsay, John, The Answer is a Question, www.shareinprint.com
<https://www.wix.com/website/builder?storyId=c71d2590-5ce6-457d-adf6-eb05e2b115b4&editorSessionId=94a33257-d5f0-4354-88a9-6350cc2f70e7&referralInfo=dashboard#!/builder/story/c71d2590-5ce6-457d-adf6-eb05e2b115b4:7bd3fd6c-edfb-4a52-a9b7-6b781837228b/edit/1.178//>

⁴ *ibid*. p. 183

⁵ Kalanithi, *ibid*, 184

or death issues and Kalanithi takes the reader through those issues in an incredibly personal way. It makes the book one which everyone should tackle because sooner and later each of us faces those confrontations between life and death.

I faced death when my second wife fought cancer and we lost that battle. Remarkably, losing that battle lifted the weight of the world from my shoulders⁶. Life is different when the battle between life and death reaches an armistice. I am so grateful to have had twenty-seven years of life at peace. Kalanithi was given only a few weeks. Let him take you through to your armistice.

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⁶ Ramsay, John *ibid*, Chapter 14