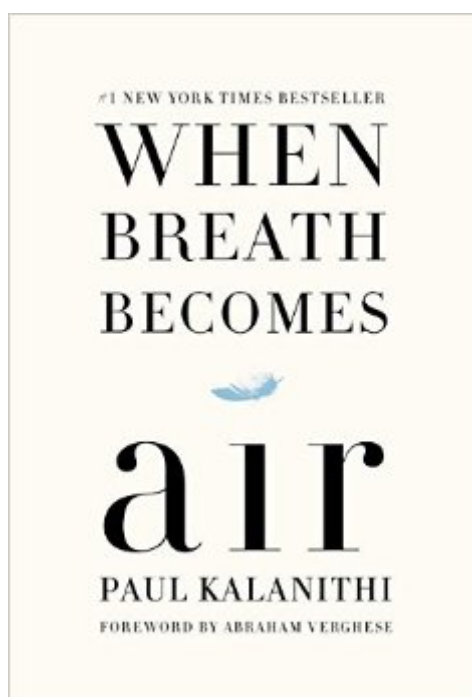


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# When Breath Becomes Air



## Synopsis

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

For readers of Atul Gawande, Andrew Solomon, and Anne Lamott, this inspiring, exquisitely observed memoir finds hope and beauty in the face of insurmountable odds as an idealistic young neurosurgeon attempts to answer the question What makes a life worth living? At the age of thirty-six, on the verge of completing a decade's worth of training as a neurosurgeon, Paul Kalanithi was diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer. One day he was a doctor treating the dying, and the next he was a patient struggling to live. And just like that, the future he and his wife had imagined evaporated. When *Breath Becomes Air* chronicles Kalanithi's transformation from a naïve medical student "possessed," as he wrote, "by the question of what, given that all organisms die, makes a virtuous and meaningful life" into a neurosurgeon at Stanford working in the brain, the most critical place for human identity, and finally into a patient and new father confronting his own mortality. What makes life worth living in the face of death? What do you do when the future, no longer a ladder toward your goals in life, flattens out into a perpetual present? What does it mean to have a child, to nurture a new life as another fades away? These are some of the questions Kalanithi wrestles with in this profoundly moving, exquisitely observed memoir. Paul Kalanithi died in March 2015, while working on this book, yet his words live on as a guide and a gift to us all. "I began to realize that coming face to face with my own mortality, in a sense, had changed nothing and everything," he wrote. "Seven words from Samuel Beckett began to repeat in my head: 'I can't go on. I'll go on.'" When *Breath Becomes Air* is an unforgettable, life-affirming reflection on the challenge of facing death and on the relationship between doctor and patient, from a brilliant writer who became both. Praise for *When Breath Becomes Air* "I guarantee that finishing this book and then forgetting about it is simply not an option. . . . Part of this book's tremendous impact comes from the obvious fact that its author was such a brilliant polymath. And part comes from the way he conveys what happened to him—'passionately working and striving, deferring gratification, waiting to live, learning to die'—so well. None of it is maudlin. Nothing is exaggerated. As he wrote to a friend: 'It's just tragic enough and just imaginable enough.' And just important enough to be unmissable." —Janet Maslin, *The New York Times* "An emotional investment well worth making: a moving and thoughtful memoir of family, medicine and literature. It is, despite its grim undertone, accidentally inspiring." —*The Washington Post* "Possesses the gravity and wisdom of an ancient Greek tragedy . . . [Kalanithi] delivers his chronicle in austere, beautiful prose. The book brims with insightful reflections on mortality that are especially poignant coming from a trained physician familiar with what lies ahead." —*The Boston Globe* "Devastating and spectacular . . . [Kalanithi]

is so likeable, so relatable, and so humble, that you become immersed in his world and forget where it's all heading. "USA Today" [Kalanithi's] unsentimental approach that makes *When Breath Becomes Air* so original and so devastating. . . . Its only fault is that the book, like his life, ends much too early. "Entertainment Weekly" Split my head open with its beauty. "Cheryl Strayed

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I read this book in one sitting, long after the lights should have been turned off. I felt like not doing so would have been a disservice to Paul Kalanithi. After reading the book I felt stunned and hopeful in equal parts. Stunned because of the realization that someone as prodigiously talented and eloquent as Dr. Kalanithi was taken from the world at such an early age. Hopeful because even in his brief life of thirty-seven years he showcased what we as human beings are capable of in our best incarnations. His family can rest assured that he will live on through his book. *When Breath Becomes Air* details Dr. Kalanithi's life as a neurosurgeon and his fight against advanced lung cancer. Even in his short life he achieved noteworthy recognition as a scholar, a surgeon, a scientist and now - posthumously - as a writer. The book is a tale of tribulations and frank reflections. Ultimately there's not much triumph in it in the traditional sense but there is a dogged, quiet resilience and a frank earthiness that endures long after the last word appears. The tribulations occur in both Dr. Kalanithi's stellar career and his refusal to give in to the illness which ultimately consumed him. The first part of the book could almost stand separately as an outstanding account of

the coming of age of a neurosurgeon and writer. Dr. Kalanithi talks about his upbringing as the child of hardworking Indian immigrant parents and his tenacious and passionate espousal of medicine and literature. He speaks lovingly of his relationship with his remarkable wife - also a doctor - who he met in medical school and who played an outsized role in supporting him through everything he went through.

Sometimes you don't go out and find a book; the book finds you. Facing an impending loss without a foundation of faith to fall back on, I find myself asking, "What is the meaning of life if we're all just going to die?" Paul Kalanithi answers that question in the most meaningful way possible in his outstanding book. A 36-year-old neurosurgeon, Paul wrestled between medicine and literature as an eventual career. Medicine won out and he was just on the cusp of a stellar trajectory when he was diagnosed with metastatic lung cancer. Paul nurtured a passionate belief in the moral dimensions of his job. He also strongly believed that the relational aspect between people undergirded meaning and that life's meaning has everything to do with the depth of the relationships we form in our journey. He says this, "The secret is to know that the deck is stacked, that you will lose, that your hands or judgment will slip, and yet still struggle to win. You can't ever reach perfection, but you can believe in an asymptote toward which are ceaselessly striving. Just as his surgeon's scalpel eased disease of the brain and saved lives, his words give reasons for living. The grace with which he navigates his journey - from a top-rated surgical resident to writer to his most important role of all, husband and father of a young daughter - his book is ample testimony to how one life well-lived can continue to create such a great impact. In the foreword by fellow doctor and writer Abraham Verghese, that doctor writes, "He (Paul) wasn't writing about anything - he was writing about time and what it meant to him now, in the context of his illness." And in the afterword by his wife Lucy, the meaning of that time becomes even clearer. I felt the sense of having lost a personal friend.

When I saw that this book was suggested for readers who like Anne Lamott, I knew I had to read it because Lamott is my favorite author. Her writings have inspired me and helped me get through some very difficult times through the years. Little did I know, though, that when I picked up "When Breath Becomes Air" and began reading it, I wouldn't be able to put it down until I was finished. Yes, it's that good. "When Breath Becomes Air" is a memoir chronicling Paul Kalanithi's life as he studies at Stanford University, and then at Yale University's medical school. Kalanithi is close to finishing his training as a neurosurgeon when he is diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer. The realization that

everything he's been studying and working for is about to be taken away from him is incredibly sobering; not only for Kalanithi, but for his wife, too. What follows is a fascinating look into the mind of someone with a terminal illness. Someone who had dedicated their life to helping sick people was now suddenly thrown into the new role of patient. Kalanithi's writing is honest and insightful, with frequent references to the literature he enjoyed so much. He is a deep thinker, for sure, and much of the book focuses on relationality. "Human knowledge is never contained in one person," Kalanithi writes. "It grows from the relationships we create between each other and the world, and still, it is never complete." We also learn much about the doctor-patient relationship, from both sides. "Doctors, it turns out, need hope, too." "When Breath Becomes Air" is at once heartbreaking and inspirational, and really puts life in perspective. While reading it, I couldn't help but think how lucky I am.

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