

The Transubstantiation of Life in death - On Reading *When Breath Becomes Air*

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Abstract:

Paul Kalanithi an English major turned neurosurgeon who brought science and literature together in a single point in the form of his memories packed in his life story. When *Breath Becomes Air* has become the epitome of human revelation on death and life not just as philosophy but the contemplation of reality by making people perceive the art of overcoming in the worst of times. Human lives start from birth to reach death which is a natural cycle of existence and the hindrances in between challenges every step we make. The paper identifies the pivotal place of death and whimsical property of illness that uncontrollably binds human life beyond senses. Language and literature pillars the emotional intricacies of humans helping them with comparable situations shared by the writers from the lesson of experience. The fancy of humans is questioned openly expressing chances for acceptance of actual realities and self-exploration before mortal life counts.

Keywords: *Breath, Death, Life, Medicine, Paul Kalanithi*

When life brings death to the forefront and dices it with our dreams what a man can do? When it is with Paul Kalanithi, a veteran neurosurgeon and writer who made a life full of ambition and passion of taking away pain to stand by the patients who fought with hope and courage to live again with a fuller and magnificent spirit. He was not just being a man in a white coat that moves around with facts stuffed in the brain but a human being that identified others' affliction with great concern. When he comes across every tormented eye that searches to shelter themselves in the safe hands that become god's sacred space he makes one in his heart and equips his hands to not make a mistake that can shatter their dreams. His vehemence towards literature further put his understanding about life and death more deep into the unromantic job he was involved in. The job practically is a hard try to hold

life against grotesque matters identified in the most complex part of the human body i.e., brain. Paul always stayed bright and, exposed a promising career which is a fruit of his hardwork and never looked back because stars were shining above him. Slowly, he found himself wearing a blue hospital gown in the place of white and facing his mortality in the same place that he worked for years fighting with medical facts. He writes:

I flipped through the CT scan images, the diagnosis obvious: the lungs were matted with innumerable tumours, the spine deformed, a full lobe of the liver obliterated. Cancer widely disseminated. . . I'd examined scores of such scans, on the off chance that some procedures might

benefit the patient. But this scan was different: it was my own. (Kalanithi 3)

He is the one who knows all the technicalities of what he is up to and how it will end up facing stage IV metastatic lung cancer; this is the point where a doctor who gets shifted to a patient identifies how hope plays the best role in life at times of agony. The skill that he showed in trivializing and letting go the shock of finding something lethal to his aspirations is the strength that he found in company with language that makes him take the other road dealing with tormented mortals in extreme need that adds a further understanding of a blessed life. The word 'hope' has become the whole substance of existence to humans when they run out of possibilities that favour them. He also found it most favourite among all the words that have ever learned. The medical jargon turned to beautiful words that took over his thoughts and filled his memoir *When Breath Becomes Air* narrating the story of finding life amidst death and living with extraordinary courage. "Death was too definite an object to be wished for or avoided" (Krauss 173). That is what Paul pondered over while silently enslaved by the torture that the alien inside his body gave. His body started to react along with rushing tumours but his mind began to decipher the thoughts into strong phrases that took the breath away. Paul leveraged death through literature and now his own life meticulously collecting all the memories and compiling it with an urge to estimate what he can leave behind, after all, this pain ceases into thin air.

"Words have a longevity I do not" (Kalanithi 199). The medical terms that he memorized all his life is now used only to identify what is happening to his own body, crumbling inside with sorrow and injustice that solidify his life that once started with acceleration and now broken down in the middle of the night lost in darkness. He first dabbled, then got inside and impatiently sought for what his soul thrives for. Writers created their own stories but he wrote his own life masked with letters that sometimes shivers and the next wickedly

funny. The countless books that he read on life and death flushed into the thoughts overwhelming his heart to pen down to let others know how the things turn around positively in dread. He finds himself in a different world, takes all the science away where humans pale fighting with the invisible power and accepting fate and reality working on a better vision at the things. He looked into the language as an agent that can move along with him and beyond and chose it to cope with the limited life as a blessing to pass on to his daughter Cady with love and wretchedness to leave so early.

"I'm dying, until I actually die, I am still living" (150). Even if he knows that ghostly harbinger encircles his existence he never fails to live and immortalize him through the words that make him stay alive to write more and experience his life better with his family. Knowledge never fades, it gets transmitted from one medium to another through relationships that interconnect the world as a whole and language that makes it well documented engrossed with emotions one embeds in it. He created his life as something that is in his control but unexpectedly death became more obvious and transparent challenging his profession that he put his heart and soul into. There no defeat for mind unless it gives up, here was another chance for him to create own story that makes everything worth before his turn arrives. Writing something is forever, and it goes on lingering in the mind of readers beyond life and ages. Death has not only put his profession at stake but also made him prioritize everything in his life whether to go back to the operating table or to write a book as he wished. Before, death was a definite friend that will join someday but now it is there in his flesh and blood making a monument out of him. Death teaches us how to make life immortal by action even with its magical ability to make people vanish forever. There is nothing that prevails in eternity only the soul retains, every book holds the soul and breath of the writer that witness them tearing down. It is an infinity that covers him that he never wanted to end or to start but it cannot be avoided.

You that seek what life is in death,

Now find it air that once was breath.

New names unknown, old names gone:

Till time end bodies, but souls
none.(Greville148)

Paul got significantly moved by the poems that teach the art of death and how 'breath becomes air' which ultimately helped him to adapt and create the most suitable title of the book. For him, words became the voice through which he opened up himself in front of the world telling what he wished to do with his life than just to die like this. Infusing knowledge with concentrated literature he created new formulas to solve the mystery of illness as a dedicated medical person touching the lives of patients. Death was omnipresent everywhere around him but he was too late to sense it his breath and that is when he realized how it takes over the things that we expect to control as a supreme being with extraordinary abilities, unlike everything that was ever created. "Your fear of death is but the trembling of the shepherd when he stands before the king whose hand is to be laid upon him in honour"(Gibran91). When we die it is believed that our soul is received into the lap of God and unshackled from the sins and burdens of life to spiritual bliss. Even if he knows that life tempts to argue with God, make him shout out for help with fear like a baby plant exposed and alone. Finally, like a timid lamb; he moved into silence accompanied by words that he always loved. He was afraid to die and it was not easy for him to accept that even death holds and provides honour of shifting into a different Paul who is not familiar to the world. Humanity is also a passion to live up to the time and love connecting with others, and he chose his heart to write to bind his life and death even if his body refused to cooperate. His body and mind wrestled to synchronize when medicines tired him. He succeeded in the effort and soothed his soul pouring out life into the paper that clearly read a man with the lesson of handling mortality but

completely breaking into parts, trying to stick it together unprepared to face death with grace. It was a second chance that he took, an option B to make his life fulfilled despite what was happening. Paul and his wife Lucy understood there is no backtracking but to follow the day embracing it with resilience. Literature that always accommodated his mind besides medicine now took full charge and he understood the delicate alchemy of it that can take him till the end. As in Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, death was a horror when walls became the only sight and bed, holder of a burden once had firm legs to stand but slowly, he swallowed it to explore every possible taste which can enhance his buds like small holes in a black sack that informs about the light on the other side that can provide enormous faith and wisdom to know life a bit more closely in touch with death where everyone truly belongs if once born. It is not about time but about the memories that were created during the time spent here on earth from human experience where some earn special tokens, those which we leave behind for next to follow. When greatest poets and storytellers wrote their imagination and realities intertwined into thoughtful and strikingly absorbing creations we deeply sink in it but never understood a bit about the complications they faced. Everything that they write is a piece of their identity and Paul sealed himself inside words narrating his own story with sincerity and openness inspiring people and making a big impact on their life by making them aware that science and literature always go hand in hand and facts get more appealing when it gets connected with language where heart communicates. Humanity should get the best of their life by grasping the beauty of facing mortality from the core and moving away in peace and satisfaction as the spiritual beings that always search for salvation. It is not to leave something you love in the middle of life but to scrape out bits of imperfect sizes for next perfect. Paul made his best words about life from worst experiences and pain inflicted upon his body while his route to death was obvious. He was thriving to fulfil his urge to write as

words clog in his heart for an opening, and he knew that art is supreme in his life even while leading to medicine that was an exceptional blend. Illness never took away his love for literature but made him know how fragile life can be and how therapeutic phrases can read. Even his humour seems out of bounds; it reveals how he connects soulfully with death that gradually became his patient friend. The privilege he enjoyed experiencing his academic work needs to be expressed in language to make others understand what it takes to be a doctor and he became greatly apologetic about not doing that and wrote to his friend: “The good news is I’ve outlived two Bronte’s, Keats and Stephen Crane. The bad news is that I haven’t written anything” (Kalanithi 221).

It wasn’t just regretted but a meditation on what is important in his life and finding out what provides him with the power to move closer to his mortal responsibility. Everything was getting strained, love created pain and Lucy, his wife was becoming a part of what he was in is a burning reality that haunted him. The life that he promised was a foot away but now in the hospital room, as she holds his hands inches away and his mind wandering in thoughts, looking at her he decides to document everything that he can and told to himself: “I needed words to go forward” (149). He can tolerate the uninvited guest in his body by getting in terms with it by enslaving it to mend his brittle soul forging his fire and conscience to the other dimension. He fed himself with phrases that are gorgeous and gripped like: ‘invader in the fleshy peach convolutions of the brain’ (96), ‘Flush in the face of mortality’ (142), ‘a world that is more Greek tragedy than Shakespeare’ (180) that shows different conditions coated in the sweetness of words. All the books that he read and appreciated juxtaposed with the thoughts related to facing death and understanding the meaning of life. It was a bitter job to write in his wrenching pain and habitual anticipation of the day he ceases to breathe. Humans are fragile when illness hits hard on their life and fighting with it drains their enthusiasm and they

regain their strength when they connect themselves with similar people and read books related to that. This is the point where literature shares and cares the humanity with its glorious hands of unlimited Knowledge and power. The erudite modernist poets like T.S Eliot have elated the philosophy into rich poetry convincing the layman to pause and reflect on the naked truth of life and where they are heading to. When death overshadows our life we ponder:

“I had not thought death had undone so many/Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,” (Eliot, lines 63-64).

Paul identified himself through this where death transfigures him into a being that moved against the force of vanishing and losing the privileges once enjoyed but embalming the values into his soul and spreading it to the world. Human release of happiness or acceptance of harsh times ‘sigh’ has its psychological properties even though it’s involuntary likewise, literature created a massive healing effect on preachers. Paul always kept the quality amount in his mind for literature to come back lose himself self and dwell over time even though it has shown his way to medicine. Words do magic to the broken heart that search for infinite answers about life and death which comes and knocks in the door of human existence. Humans are not just bound to taste happiness and pleasure but also the bitterness of mortal life. Paul who while reaching the zenith of success glide into the most unprepared and disappointing stages of his life gained fortitude by the energy that literature gave him through the voices of writers which echoes all the times. He also wants to forge something that can hold reader’s hearts and lift them from the pit hole which pulls them from beneath like himself who got inspired by many writers who pass it on to the next and so on to drive human passion to celebrate death which is as important as life. When we read his book it remains not just a memoir but a reminder to equip ourselves with the actual reality that can come across anytime. When Paul and Lucy started their life they never look forward to the

situation that takes them through adverse times but it happened so there is no turning back but to string along with it and re-establish the things that can fall out of their hands. When there is a point of no return then it is important to face it with dignity and make it worth like walking in the rain before the flood. The book is not just a note of the combined emotions of a person but a frame in which various lives can fit in.

Napoleon Bonaparte said, “Death is nothing, but to live defeated and inglorious is to die daily” (Brainyquote). Paul was startled by the transparency of death in his life in the initial stages of the diagnosis but he soon realized that till here perseverance took him and now it is the ultimate test and he needs to show the colour of victory. He charged against it with the foresight of a yogi taking bit by bit of everything it can offer and left with a document of glory that can be passed down to ages. When we are dying we should not fear halting breath but, happy to be the air that nourishes dozens of others because of it. Paul enriched the air around the world and death itself by filling it with words of uncontained love for his life and loved ones. This memoir revitalized the approach to death collecting shattered glass pieces and joining them from the same ground which bled him. This book remains a series of life lessons that we voluntarily deny to accept which stays as solid support on major shifts in lifelike facing death.

Paul rejoices absolute mortality and consolidates into a message that makes him a global humanitarian reflecting on human illness and needs from his past and present. It is always good to feel a bit more closer, “When you come to one of the many moments in life where you must give an account of yourself, provide a ledger of what you have been, and done, and meant to the world, do not, I pray, discount that you filled a dying man’s days with a sated joy, a joy that does not hunger for more and more but rests, satisfied. In this time, right now, that is an enormous thing” (199). This is a gentle cue to be noted in the field of medical health and every human conscience to empathize with

patients who fight with illness. It is not just treatment that helps and medicine that cures but, emotional healing is vital for overall wellbeing and if the condition is fatal there should always be special attention to enhance psychological need and wellness of patient even if seems trivial it can bring joy into dying man’s heart. It is a part of help to prepare themselves with contentment to fight with pride against the power of death. Paul suffused variant shades of life in his book that he saw and analysed to make others to guide themselves for it or to help loved ones to move further without fear. There is a story for every man who surrenders their dream to death. Paul also had one but, it opened up another dream that was concealed within him. It was death and only that was waiting outside the room for him but he chanted “You must go on. I can’t go on. I’ll go on” (Beckett 418).

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