

When Breath Becomes Air by Paul Kalanithi

This book was emotional and written with true heart from the perspective of a dying man. He was not only a man, but a physician. I cannot fathom understanding terminal illness as the doctor and then experiencing it as the patient. What a difficult understanding of death this man must have gone through. He says: "Death, so familiar to me in my work, was now paying a personal visit (page 121)." I don't know if I would have been as noble and brave knowing exactly what was happening to my body. "I hadn't ever considered that I could release myself from the responsibility of my own medical care. I'd just assumed all patients became experts at their own diseases (page 182)."

I loved Paul Kalanithi's insight as to how he dealt with giving bad news and dealing with losing a patient. I also liked that he was honest about his cockiness and showed a boundless desire to be the best. I feel like it gave me a better understanding of the doctor's bedside manner because they aren't trying to be rude but they are trying to be the best at getting you the care needed to treat your disease. However, I did feel like he was treating the diseases over the patients.

His ability to convey what it's like to be in medicine and to be on the receiving end of medicine is insightful and educational. I really learned so much about the process of determining who needs chemo and why and at what stage in their individual process. It's not just chemo across the board. His vulnerability at becoming terminally ill is sudden and it seems to hit the reader quickly, just as it hit the narrator. He muses that "...without the duty to care for the ill pushing me forward, I became an invalid (page 125)."

Enlightened is how I feel after reading this book. Paul states that "We would carry on living, instead of dying (page 144)," when he and his wife decide to have a child during his illness. They had released the pause button on their life and decided to continue to live instead of dwelling on his impending death. This moment where he chooses life over dying is paramount to what we need to do in our own lives, whether we are ill or not.

I was enlightened by a physician's work. "Doctors, it turns out, need hope, too (page 194)." I was enlightened by the acknowledgement of death. I was enlightened by Paul's story of life. I was enlightened by what this story taught me. In his hour of uncertainty, Paul states that he has stopped dwelling on his illness and embraced the fact that he had time left "...to return to neurosurgery, to return to life (page 150)."

Although this story ends with his death, I felt like his life had a beginning, middle and end. I feel like he lived the time he had to the best of his ability and he was surrounded by his loving friends and family. Nothing was left unsaid or undone. After all, he did have his novel published just as he wished. I love that his wife wrote the Epilogue to his story. She was good at filling in some of the gaps and telling us what happens to the people we leave behind.

Was this story enlightening to you? In what way did it give knowledge or understanding to death?

How did the perspective of the author affect your understanding of healthcare/death?

Was it more/less emotional because of the technical jargon used by Paul?

After diagnosis, he drastically declines in health but is because he knows he is sick or that he finally has nothing else to distract him?

Did you feel that Paul spent his remaining time doing what he loved?

What would you do if you knew you had a terminal illness?