

When Breath Becomes Air

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Friday morning July 16th I stared out the window of our fertility doctor's office. Dr. Maria Costantini was looking over our files. These visits had already become routine. Chaim and I met Dr. Costantini in 2015. Infertility could not have come at a worse time in our lives. Dr. Costantini's care was marked by sensitivity, compassion, and a drive to be by our side throughout the process that we began shortly thereafter. Following an early second trimester miscarriage, an ectopic pregnancy, and two failed rounds of IVF we were once again sitting in her office Friday morning talking about the possible next steps.

That same morning the world heard about the terrible attack in Nice, France. Dr. Costantini and I reflected on the news together, somberly acknowledging the tragedy. In a moment of humble self-reflection, Dr. Costantini looked at me and remarked that sometimes she feels a dissonance in her job. She has devoted her life to helping bring children into the world, and yet sometimes when she looks at the state of the world, she wonders whether she is doing right.

I told Dr. Costantini about Moses' parents, who were separated after hearing that male newborn children would be murdered by the Egyptians. According to the Midrash it was their young daughter Miriam who motivated them to reunite, leading to the birth of Moses. We talked about the face of a child which radiates with innocence and hope, and we talked about our shared belief that a broken world can be fixed.

That afternoon I picked up When Breath Becomes Air by Paul Kalanithi, and began to read it for the third time. I needed an infusion of Paul's thirst for life.

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. When Breath Becomes Air is Paul's profound memoir, which he wrote and nearly completed during the final months of his life.

The first time I read the book I was deeply moved by how bravely Paul faced his death; how methodically he thought about and planned how to spend his time. Upon reading the book a second time, what struck me was how mindfully Paul faced his life – equally if not more so than how he faced his death.

Paul's life was filled with purpose driven thinking and decision making. Consider for example how he chose his career. In the first half of the book Paul walks us through his

dilemma over whether to pursue a career in English Literature or Medicine. After completing undergraduate degrees in both English literature and Biology, Paul reflected. *I was driven less by achievement than by trying to understand, in earnest: What makes human life meaningful? I felt that literature provided the best account of the life of the mind, while neuroscience laid down the most elegant rules of the brain.*” Paul chose to pursue an MA in English literature but after its completion he found himself facing the same vexing quandary- the arts or medicine? He writes: *“Where did biology, morality, literature, and philosophy intersect? Walking home from a football game one afternoon, the autumn breeze blowing, I let my mind wander. Augustine’s voice in the garden commanded, “take up and read,” but the voice I heard commanded the opposite: “Set aside the books and practice medicine.” Suddenly, it all seemed obvious. Hadn’t Whitman himself written that only the physician could truly understand “the Physiological-Spiritual Man”?”*

The next day I consulted a premed advisor to figure out the logistics. Getting ready for medical school would take about a year of intense coursework, plus the application time, which added up to another eighteen months. It would mean letting my friends go to New York, to continue deepening those relationships, without me. It would mean setting aside literature. But it would allow me a chance to find answers that are not in books, to find a different sort of sublime, to forge relationships with the suffering, and to keep following the question of what makes human life meaningful, even in the face of death and decay.

It became clear to me after reading the book another two times that Paul didn’t have a sudden transformation once he knew he was going to die; rather his approach to death was consistent with his approach to life. In one entry Paul writes: *I began to realize that coming in such close contact with my own mortality had changed both nothing and everything. Before my cancer was diagnosed, I knew that someday I would die, but I didn’t know when. After the diagnosis, I knew that someday I would die, but didn’t know when. But now I knew it acutely.*

Paul’s quest to live a life of deep meaning and purpose is also reflected in his decision to become a neurosurgeon –a unique choice among his medical school peers. Reflecting on his decision, Paul writes: *In the fourth year of medical school, I watched, as one by one, many of my classmates elected to specialize in less demanding areas (radiology or dermatology, for example). Puzzled by this, I gathered data from several elite medical schools and saw that the trends were the same: by the end of medical school, most students tended to focus on “lifestyle” specialties-those with more humane hours, higher*

salaries, and lower pressures-the idealism of their med school application essays tempered or lost. Indeed this is how 99 percent of people select their jobs: pay, work environment, hours. But that's the point. Putting lifestyle first is how you find a job-not a calling.

Paul's calling to neurosurgery was not swayed by its harsh demands for perfection nor its grueling hours. Paul felt drawn to the complexities facing a neurosurgeon. He writes: *While all doctors treat diseases, neurosurgeons work in the crucible of identity: every operation on the brain is, by necessity, a manipulation of the substance of ourselves, and every conversation with a patient undergoing brain surgery cannot help but confront this fact. At those critical junctures, the question is not simply whether to live or die but what kind of life is worth living. Would you trade yours, or your mother's, ability to talk, for a few extra months of mute life? How much neurological suffering would you let your child endure before saying that death is preferable? Because the brain mediates our experience of the world, any neurosurgical problem forces a patient and family, ideally with a doctor as a guide, to answer this question: What makes life meaningful enough to go on living?*

Contrary to most of us myself included, Paul was drawn to the challenge of facing the hardest questions life throws at us. He was drawn to grappling with issues of life and death as well as with quality of life dilemmas. He didn't shy away knowing how much responsibility he carried. This is how Paul Kalanithi lived – and it is therefore no wonder that this same poised search for meaning is also how he faced his death.

Paul's wife Lucy, who finished the last few pages of the book after Paul's death, captured Paul's essence poignantly: *Even while terminally ill, Paul was fully alive; despite physical collapse, he remained vigorous, open, full of hope - not for an unlikely cure but for days that were full of purpose and meaning.*

May we all be blessed this coming year with the courage to live by God's values, bringing meaning and purpose into our own lives, our community, and the world at large.