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Breath of Life, Breath of God

Perhaps you've considered what a great pleasure and blessing it is to breathe—and to breathe easily. We live in northern Michigan, we enjoy four seasons, and every day our breathing automatically adjusts to our activities. We can also intentionally take a deep breath or hold our breath temporarily, or maybe synchronize our breathing with that of another human being. Breath is life and the beginning of our human life on earth: “the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (*NRSV*, Gen. 2.7). Our creator gave us this great gift, the breath of life.

If you don't think of praising God for this gift, probably it is precisely because breathing is so automatic. We do know the stakes: We are mortal and will breathe our last, and we can't forget what so many suffered during the worst of Covid-19. If we have no problem catching our own breath, though, we might not think about the many people who have breathing problems ranging from apnea and asthma to COPD, lung cancer, pulmonary fibrosis, and pneumonia—not to mention the real but less apparent health effects of air pollution. Maybe it sometimes takes the desperate plea of someone who gasps, “I can't breathe,” to remind us that breath is life.

A book that powerfully connects breath and life is Paul Kalanithi's memoir, *When Breath Becomes Air*. The book's title is an allusion to the Elizabethan poet, Baron Brooke Fulke Greville: “You that

seek what life is in death, / Now find it air that once was breath.” Kalanithi was a neurosurgeon who died at 39 of lung cancer in 2015. He had prepared for a very different future and had wanted to understand death through active confrontation with it as a physician (“seek what life is in death”). Surprisingly, what he found was meaning and even something positive and hopeful in his own devastating experience. He could share his story and help doctors, patients, and really, anyone; in this way, perhaps, the “breath” of his life could continue. Knowing how brief his opportunity would probably be, Paul Kalanithi also discovered the joy of parenthood when his infant daughter was born. Further, Kalanithi and his wife, Lucy, had had some problems in their marriage, but they grew closer and developed a stronger marriage because of his diagnosis. According to Lucy’s epilogue, Paul expressed his love for her on one of his last days, when she asked if he could still breathe all right with her head on his chest, and he said, “It’s the only way I know how to breathe” (218).

Inevitably, Kalanithi’s pursuit of meaning led him to reconsider spirituality. He grew up in a devout Christian household, although his mother was Hindu by background. He acknowledges the atheism of his young adulthood but also says, “Had I been more religious in my youth, I might have become a pastor, for it was the pastoral role I’d sought” in becoming a neurosurgeon (88). He ultimately gravitated back to Christianity and its central values of “sacrifice, redemption, forgiveness” (171). Materialism seemed inadequate, or suggested an absence of meaning—just air, rather than the breath of a living person.

For me, thoughts about life and breath were prompted not only by my recent reading of the Kalanithi memoir, but also by hearing the hymn “Breathe on Me, Breath of God” several weeks ago during our worship service. The hymn replayed in my mind for an entire week. Looking up the lyrics, I found that the words were written by nineteenth-century theologian and scholar Edwin Hatch, who intended the poem as a prayer and kept it private for several years before it was published in 1886 (hymncharts). Luckily for everyone I encountered that week after our church service, I wasn’t attempting to sing the hymn, although it was really the music and the first lines that kept repeating in my head. I looked up the hymn to remind myself of the simple prayer:

Breathe on me, Breath of God,
Fill me with life anew,
That I may love what Thou dost love,
And do what Thou wouldst do.
Breathe on me, Breath of God,

Until my heart is pure,
Until with Thee I will one will,
To do and to endure.
Breathe on me, Breath of God,
Till I am wholly Thine,
Until this earthly part of me
Glow with Thy fire divine.
Breathe on me, Breath of God,
So shall I never die,
But live with Thee the perfect life
Of Thine eternity.

According to our hymnal's note below "Breathe on Me, Breath of God" (286), the word for *spirit* in both Hebrew and Greek can reasonably be translated into English as either *wind* or *breath*. Edwin Hatch prays, then, that God will fill him with the Holy Spirit, so that he will be one with God and his will indistinguishable from God's will. He trusts that with God's help, he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, he will act on earth in accordance with God's will, and he will have eternal life with God.

Each week, we share with each other the peace of Christ, reminiscent of when Jesus said to the disciples, "Peace be with you." As John records, "When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (NRSV, John 20.22). Faith does matter, and the breath of God, the Holy Spirit, brings the gift of eternal life.

**Brantley, Taylor. "The Story Behind Breathe on Me Breath of God." *Hymncharts*. 30 July 2024.
<https://www.hymncharts.com/2022/05/11/breathe-on-me-breath-of-god/>.**

Kalanithi, Paul. *When Breath Becomes Air*. New York: Random House, 2016.

~Written by Maurine Slaughter

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