

Death and Dying: The Revelatory Experience of Paul Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air* and Nina Riggs' *the Bright Hour*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the transformative experiences of confronting mortality in Paul Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air* and Nina Riggs' *the Bright Hour*—two memoirs of their lives in light of terminal cancer diagnoses. Drawing on the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger—particularly his concept of “being-toward-death”—and L.A. Paul's theory of transformative experience, this paper examines how Kalanithi and Riggs confronted crises of identity, meaning, and authenticity in the face of imminent death. Memoirs afford a rare prism through which proximity to death compels individuals to reassess values, priorities, and sense of self in profound personal and philosophic changes. The gap in the literature that this paper attempts to fill is the limited examination of self-reconstruction and authenticity within an existential perspective from nonfictional cancer memoirs. Both memoirs are far from being mere documentation of the dying process but are acts of self-reconstruction that show how writing can help someone reframe their understanding of life and death. These findings expose the recuperative and disclosive potential for life-writing during terminal diagnosis and how life-writing advances an understanding of the human condition and its authenticity. By applying this type of memoir using Heidegger's and Paul's frameworks, this paper adds to a better understanding of the existential importance of facing one's death and its potential to stir profound changes in worldview and identity.

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Introduction

Life-writing has emerged as an influential literary genre in recent years, providing readers with intimate insights into personal experiences that often reveal universal truths about the human condition. Memoirs, a prominent form of life-writing, have become especially popular, serving as vehicles for individuals to narrate their journeys with authenticity and self-reflection. In *Memoir: An Introduction*, Thomas Couser defines a memoir as “a nonfiction... [that] depicts the lives of real, not imagined, individuals” (2011, p. 15). Among the sub-genres of memoirs, cancer memoirs stand out due to their raw and unfiltered exploration of mortality. Through the lens of terminal illness, these memoirs delve into deeply personal reflections on life, death, and the human experience.

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This study focuses on two remarkable examples of cancer memoirs, *When Breath Becomes Air* (2016) by Paul Kalanithi and *The Bright Hour* (2017) by Nina Riggs. Both authors grapple with a terminal cancer diagnosis, a transformative event that prompts them to confront their mortality and seek authenticity in their final moments.

A key philosophical framework guiding this exploration of cancer memoirs is Martin Heidegger's existential philosophy, particularly his concept of "Dasein" (being-there) and his focus on "being-toward-death." According to Heidegger, an authentic life emerges when one embraces mortality rather than evades it. The proximity to death, he posits, enables individuals to transcend the mundane aspects of existence and make choices aligned with their true selves. This study examines Kalanithi and Riggs' memoirs to find how their terminal diagnoses evoke an authentic approach to life, exemplifying Heidegger's philosophy. The objective of this analysis is to demonstrate how these two individuals' encounters with mortality illuminate the meaning of existence, inspiring readers to reflect on life's transient nature and the choices they make within it.

Kalanithi and Riggs engage in a process of self-reconstruction through their writing, capturing the ways in which terminal illness compels individuals to reshape their identities. Susan Gubar, in *Reading & Writing Cancer: How Words Heal*, suggests that "the writing process enables a reconstitution of the self—probably not the same self that existed before diagnosis, but nevertheless another authentic self and a voice" (2016, p.11). This transformative nature of writing underscores how, for Kalanithi and Riggs, the act of documenting their journeys serves not only as a testimony to their experiences but also as a means to find new purpose in the face of imminent death. Their narratives underscore the power of writing as a therapeutic act that allows constructing a renewed, authentic self that emerges through confronting one's mortality.

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of death as a central theme in literature. By examining cancer memoirs, the study highlights how literary works inspire readers to confront the fragility and finitude of human existence. Literature, with its unique capacity to represent varied human experiences, offers a space where individuals can grapple with life and death. This study emphasizes that the experience of dying is transformative, shaping one's perspective on life in ways that are incomprehensible until directly encountered. Such a literary exploration contributes to a deeper understanding of human existence and the transformative power of engaging with mortality.

The theoretical framework of this study combines Heidegger's existential philosophy and L.A. Paul's concept of transformative experience to analyze the memoirs of Kalanithi and Riggs. Heidegger's notion of "being-toward-death" suggests that confronting mortality is essential for an authentic existence, urging individuals to reevaluate their lives and make meaningful choices. As Heidegger asserts, "Being-towards-death is the anticipation of a potentiality-for-Being of that entity whose kind of Being is anticipation itself" (1962, p. 307). This statement underscores how an awareness of death compels individuals to live authentically. Through this framework, the study explores how Kalanithi and Riggs' confrontation with their diagnoses serves as a catalyst for existential awakening, prompting them to question societal expectations and make decisions rooted in their authentic selves. Their reflections mirror Heidegger's philosophy, underscoring the transformative impact of acknowledging death as an inevitable part of life.

In addition to Heidegger, L.A. Paul's theory of transformative experience offers valuable insights. Paul argues that transformative experiences, such as terminal illness, fundamentally alter an individual's worldview, reshaping preferences and perceptions. For Kalanithi and Riggs, their diagnoses present a choice: either to embrace the insights brought by their new perspectives or to resist them. This choice underscores how individuals derive meaning from altered circumstances, shaping the authenticity of their remaining lives. Paul's theory supports the notion that encounters with mortality lead to profound changes in self-understanding, a transformation that Kalanithi and Riggs convey in their writing.

To explore these themes, this study employs a qualitative methodology, specifically a thematic analysis of Kalanithi and Riggs' memoirs. Through this approach, the study identifies recurring themes and patterns that align with existential and transformational ideas. The focus on cancer memoirs reveals how these narratives offer a unique perspective on the dying process, one often overlooked in medical literature. This analysis examines how Kalanithi and Riggs' journeys toward death enable readers to better understand the human condition and the search for meaning in life, particularly in the face of mortality.

Review of Literature

The growing body of literature surrounding cancer memoirs and the existential impact of terminal illness provides a rich context for examining the works of Paul Kalanithi and Nina Riggs. These studies illustrate how facing mortality can result in deep self-reflection, the reconstruction of one's identity, and a quest for authenticity in the face of death.

The analysis by de Muijnck (2019), titled "When Breath Becomes Air: Constructing Stable Narrative Identity during Terminal Illness," explores the construction and stabilization of narrative identity during terminal illness, focusing on Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air*. This work emphasizes how cancer challenges or strengthens one's sense of self through narratives of past, present, and possible future selves. De Muijnck notes, "By looking back on our lives we become aware of our standards and ideals. We create a landscape of our lives and position ourselves within this frame" (2019, p. 48). This process of self-reflection and meaning-making aligns closely with the Heideggerian approach to authenticity in the face of mortality explored in this paper.

In his study titled "An Auto-Thanatographical Approach to Paul Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air*," Mahmoud Ibrahim Radwan (2019) sheds light on the profound transformation of the self in the face of terminal illness. He explores how Kalanithi's narrative redefines the fear-based understanding of death, transitioning from the initial shock of diagnosis to the experience of living with cancer. Radwan argues that "By narrating the personal experience of dying, the self tries to give a full insight of disease as an ultimately psychic, internal, unanalyzable, and unknowable event" (2019, p. 10). This perspective complements our exploration of how cancer memoirs reflect on mortality, leading to more authentic decisions and a deeper understanding of existence.

Highlighting the significance of Nina Riggs' memoir, *The Bright Hour* within the sphere of cancer literature, Nora Krug's (2017) essay in *The Washington Post*, "A dying mother's memoir is this year's 'When Breath Becomes Air,'" brings to light Riggs' hope that her book would help readers understand "how death and life are entwined" (Krug, 2017). This sentiment resonates

deeply with the central theme of authenticity and existential introspection in this paper. Riggs' memoir stands as a noteworthy contribution to the ever-expanding genre of cancer memoirs, offering profound insights into the complex interplay between life and death.

The exploration of existential uncertainty in online narratives by cancer patients is the focus of the study "Beyond my Control: Dealing with the Existential Uncertainty of Cancer in Online Texts" by Kvaale et al. (2022). The findings of this research echo the central theme of this study, examining the influence of terminal illness on authenticity and the creation of meaning. The memoirs of Kalanithi and Riggs share experiences that are reflected in the writings of cancer patients, which highlight themes of loss of control, life's fragility, and fear of recurrence. A profound shift in worldview that often follows a cancer diagnosis is encapsulated in the words of one study participant: "There was something before, and it's something completely different after" (Kvaale et al., 2022, p. 6).

Thompson and Walsh (2010), in their journal "The Existential Basis of Trauma," provide an insightful examination of trauma as an existential wound. This concept is particularly relevant when considering the experiences of terminal cancer patients. The authors delve into the notions of ontological security and the "abyss experience" (qtd. in Thompson & Walsh 2010, p. 381), which deeply resonate with those who are wrestling with their mortality due to cancer. They propose that trauma can profoundly shake our sense of identity and our understanding of our place in the world. This perspective can be applied to the personal experiences of Kalanithi and Riggs, suggesting that whether one is confronting death through trauma or a terminal illness, such a confrontation can instigate a deep reassessment of one's existence and authenticity.

Collectively, these works provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how cancer memoirs like those of Kalanithi and Riggs contribute to our understanding of mortality, authenticity, and the human experience. They highlight the transformative power of confronting death and the potential for profound self-discovery and meaning-making in the face of terminal illness.

Discussion

Confronting Mortality: Transformative Experiences in Memoirs

Despite their differing life trajectories and contexts, these memoirs intersect with the stark truth of a cancer diagnosis, shattering the serene lives of two ambitious individuals immersed in the routines of ordinary existence. Amidst such upheaval, a profound realization dawns regarding the delicate nature and constraints of life, where the once undisturbed cadence of everyday existence yields to chaos and doubt. Whether death arrives abruptly or accompanies a terminal illness, it frequently ushers in an existential reckoning, compelling individuals to confront their own mortality. At its core, this crisis stems from the realization that life is inherently fleeting, and that our time on this earth is limited. As the eminent German philosopher Martin Heidegger noted, one can easily fall into a state of heedlessness, becoming so immersed in the everydayness of life that they forget about their own mortality and take their existence for granted. Only when confronted with death does the true significance of life become apparent, and individuals are forced to acknowledge their own temporary nature. The sudden realization brought on by a dire diagnosis, such as cancer, often causes profound alterations in one's perspective on life. This shift prompts

individuals to adopt a new outlook and grapple with critical existential questions, such as: What is the purpose of my existence if I am destined to die? As terrifying as it can be, different people take various views toward this question and attempt to find a proper answer to that in their own way.

Ernest Becker, the renowned author of *The Denial of Death*, contends that the notion of death and its actuality are often beyond the grasp of many individuals, leading to a common tendency to neglect their own mortality. In this respect, he believes,

... in normal times we move about actually without ever believing in our own death, as if we fully believed in our own corporeal immortality. We are intent on mastering death ... A man will say, of course, that he knows he will die someday, but he does not really care. He is having a good time with living, and he does not think about death and does not care to bother about it — but this is a purely intellectual, verbal admission. The affect of fear is repressed. (1973, p. 17)

As both Heidegger and Becker suggest, the awareness of death and its existential significance is often relegated to the periphery of conscious thought, only to be forcefully brought to the forefront when death itself looms imminently on the horizon. It is in these moments of confrontation that the full weight of mortality is felt, triggering a jarring and often terrifying realization of one's own finitude. Paradoxically, this encounter with mortality can engender a sense of equipoise, for the mere concept of death can inspire a fresh awareness of the value of life and the criticality of seizing each moment to its fullest potential.

In the autobiographical works of Paul Kalanithi and Nina Riggs, the theme of death permeates their stories, revealing the profound impact of a terminal diagnosis. Both authors explore the fragility of life and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. The metaphor of breath as a symbol of life is evident in Kalanithi's book title, *When Breath Becomes Air*, drawing from the poem "Caelia 83" by Baron Brooke Fulke Greville. This transition from breath to air signifies the end of life, prompting contemplation on the meaning of one's existence. While on the other side, the name appropriated for the title of Nina's memoir is derived from Emerson's journal, where he writes of feeling:

cheered with the moist, warm, glittering, budding and melodious hour that takes down the narrow walls of my soul and extends its pulsation and life to the very horizon. That is morning; to cease for a bright hour to be a prisoner of this sickly body, and to become as large as the World. (Riggs, 2017, p. 208)

Morning as her favorite time of the day might also refer to the 'bright hour' that she attempts to reenact before her demise comes. She seeks a respite from all the tension and bitterness of her sickness and it is through this memoir that she endeavors to do her best.

While considering the routes both individuals have undertaken, it becomes clear that Paul, as a neurosurgeon, has come very close to death as he routinely bade his patients farewell. However, in his own case, the circumstances were different. Of his own circumstances, he claims: "And with that, the future I had imagined, the one just about to be realized, the culmination of decades of striving, evaporated" (Kalanithi 2016, p. 16). This just exemplifies how unique the sense of death can become in the case of one's realization of his own mortality compared to being a witness in someone else's case. He then comes to this understanding 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 I didn't know when. But now I knew it acutely. The problem wasn't really a scientific one. The fact of death is unsettling. Yet there is no other way to live.

As Heidegger and other philosophers have emphasized, the epiphany of mortality is what humans are geared toward and how close we are to death and dying. It is in this regard that Heidegger calls upon the existence of humankind as being-towards-death, or in other words, being temporarily finite. We must reconsider our conception of ourselves as we wrestle with the issue of our own transience. (Heidegger, 1962, p. 332)

According to Allan Kellehear, the "most fundamental observation" about the dying experience is that "one leaves one's former self to become a new self or to integrate a new sense of self" (2014, p. 205). During a period of transition, individuals often undergo a reorientation of their beliefs, attitudes, and predilections, resulting in the adoption of novel values and preferences, as well as the reorganization of existing ones. Such changes become more prevalent as death approaches, and people begin to anticipate them:

[M]any dying people are themselves amazed at the how the world around them seems so different and how their inner life seems so in the throes of transformation that ever newer, more novel, ever strange, and foreign experiences seem not only to be possible but even very likely to them. Many dying people at the center of these new perceptions and changes come to expect more alterations to their inner realities and experiences (p.194).

In the final stages of dying and the approach of death, these changes become more pronounced. Prolonged discomfort and distress often give way to a sense of calm, serenity, and even euphoria, as individuals approach the end of their lives with a measure of acceptance and contentment.

In some ways, Nina's epiphany is similar, albeit with slight deviations, particularly when it comes to the future that awaits her and the striking picture that is presented to her after finding out that she has a terminal disease. She shows an insight into how much clearer the road ahead of her now appears than it did before. The image is like:

that living with a terminal disease is like walking on a tightrope over an insanely scary abyss. But that living without disease is also like walking on a tightrope over an insanely scary abyss, only with some fog or cloud cover obscuring the depths a bit more sometimes the wind blowing it off a little, sometimes a nice dense cover. (Riggs, 2017, p. 243)

One difference that cuts the line between the two different worlds is the vividness with which Nina goes through the same life after her diagnosis while holding an entirely different set of tastes in everything.

From his early days as a student of English and philosophy to his later triumphs as a prominent neurosurgeon, Paul Kalanithi's overarching preoccupation remained centered around unraveling the essential elements that render life meaningful and fulfilling. Formerly in his early stages, he had opted for a phenomenological and philosophical approach by obtaining degrees in

philosophy, history, and English. to quench his hunger for knowledge. But later and upon majoring in medicine that he “realized that the questions intersecting life, death, and meaning, questions that all people face at some point, usually arise in a medical context” (Kalanithi, 2016, p. 70). As a result, his choice to specialize in neurosurgery essentially allowed him to respond to the question: “What makes life meaningful enough to go on living?” (p.71). The brain serves as the pivotal point in neurosurgery, allowing for an intricate understanding of an individual’s sense of identity through the lens of their unique experiences. Despite his deep concern about the nature of life and death, Paul’s search for profound significance takes an ironic turn. It is only after receiving his cancer diagnosis that he comes close to experiencing an unfathomable revelation and finding answers to his existential queries. He did this despite poring over literary works, and philosophical writings, and even engaging in that fierce wrestle with death in a medical environment.

Terry Eagleton raises the idea that there may be a genuine possibility of discovering the true meaning of life stating that “there is indeed an answer to the meaning-of-life question, but that we shall never know what it is. If this is so, then we are in something like the situation of the narrator of Henry James’s story ‘The Figure in the Carpet’” (2008, pp. 8-9). Later, he asserts that the lack of comprehension regarding the meaning of life is an inherent component of the process, as the pursuit of such knowledge has no ultimate culmination.

The Bright Hour by Nina Rigg, on the other side, also investigates the meaning of life on every page and shows readers how to live each day to the fullest even when facing a fatal diagnosis. She also addresses the difficult topic of death, openly discussing her views on life after death. But what makes her stand out from the rest is how she works to maintain an interest in the small but significant aspects of her life that help her cope with the excruciating anguish she is carrying within. Her plan is to embrace death as it is instead of running away from it as this thought is endorsed by the readings she had of her literary idol. She writes of Montaigne that,

despite roving bands of thieves and constant political upheaval, he reportedly never kept his castle guarded. He left all his doors unlocked. He acknowledged the terror that could come. But by considering it and allowing it in, he resolved to live with its presence: ‘I want death to find me planting my cabbages, not concerned about it or—still less—my unfinished garden.’ (Riggs, 2017, p. 26)

Her strategy, as manifested here, is to stay on her plan without hesitating to worry about what could happen next, even if death is waiting for her at the end.

The time comes when both characters eventually realize that death is not just a possibility but also an actual event that awaits them far sooner than they would have anticipated. In their situation, dying turns out to be the “ultimate transformative experience” (Paul, 2016, p. 111); yet the act of dying itself not only marks a turning point in a person’s life, but also the overall procedure of dying, which results in death, has the same flaw (Morison, 1971). Cultural perspectives on logic and authenticity are challenged by the nature of dying, which highlights the complexities of transformational experiences. A transformational event affects your interests, inclinations, and perception of yourself while teaching you something you couldn’t have learned without going through that sort of experience.

An important issue here is the significance of the terms: ‘authentic’ and ‘authenticity,’ which translates to the German word *Eigentlichkeit*, which can be more accurately rendered as something akin to “ownedness,” in the sense of having what one actually owns or belongs to. According to Martin Heidegger’s philosophy, the concept of Dasein’s authenticity lies in one’s ability to truly own what belongs to him or her, and this ownership is not in the form of any external possessions, but rather, it is the ownership of one’s own self. Heidegger believes that an individual is authentic when they have the power to reclaim their own being. This understanding enables them to transcend the superficiality of societal norms and expectations. As Heidegger puts it, “only in so far as [Dasein] is essentially something which can be authentic—that is, something of its own—can it have lost itself and not yet won itself” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 68). The possibility of Dasein trying to compensate the self, which can be forgotten needs to be retrieved for Dasein to be authentic. “[P]ossibility as an existiale [that is, as a constitutive element of Dasein’s ontological constitution, as part of what Dasein is as long as it exists] is the primordial and ultimate positive way in which Dasein is characterized ontologically” (p.183). As Heidegger contends, the concept of authenticity is predicated on a notion of Dasein reclaiming its singular essence, or what he terms “*eigentlichkeit*,” which refers to an individual’s ownership of their existence and the ability to actualize their unique potentiality.

In this line, ‘authenticity’ is also explicated by L.A. Paul, as she claims that the struggle with rational authenticity occurs when you have to make a transforming option, such as whether to have a transformative experience. For a person's decision to be authentic, it must be rooted in their capacity to envision the distinctive encounter they seek and the significance they assign to it, thereby forging a true connection between the individual and the experience. According to the common understanding regarding what rationality implies, people make decisions based on their first-person and “subjective values,” and then foresee the potential outcomes of those decisions, including what their new adventures will entail in the future (Paul, 2016, p. 477) and that you make an informed decision. Moreover, you align your choice with your preferences (i.e., what you like to occur as a result of your choice, assuming your own beliefs). The issue is that it appears you are unable to correctly anticipate the experience before you go through it and cannot assess the significance of the event for you because it might change your priorities and, therefore, your values. Therefore, the entire dying process, including death, appears to present the same kind of difficulty which is finding a proper response to the question of how someone is expected to visualize death before having it done.

In *When Breath Becomes Air*, Paul encounters this circumstance in order to get to know death much more intimately so that the events that would follow would enable him to transcend life’s insignificancies and the blatantly overwhelming comforts that would smother him in the mundane. This is why he opines that,

I had thought that a life spent in the space between the two would grant me not merely a stage for compassionate action but an elevation of my own being: getting as far away from petty materialism, from self-important trivia, getting right there, to the heart of the matter, to truly life-and-death decisions and struggles...surely a kind of transcendence would be found there? (Kalanithi, 2016, p.81).

According to Heidegger, the quest for authenticity serves as a means of transcending the banality of everyday life and discovering one's true place within the world, as well as accessing what he calls 'das Wesentliche' or 'the essential,' which constitutes the very core of human existence.

The account of Nina in *The Bright Hour* likewise details this process of approaching a truly authentic stage in one's life. Her experience with death that occurred when her mother passed away and became much more dramatically apparent once she was given a cancer diagnosis left her with some fundamental doubts about life, prompting an effort on her part to determine the meaning of existence for herself. She expressly acknowledged that this had caused a lot of changes in how she viewed the world, saying that "[h]ere we are closer to something I am trying to understand: that openness to fear. We are hearts and stingers. We ride the tide. We believe in resistance; we are made both of fight and float"(Riggs, 2017, p.181). These changes are effects of death and its approaching nature, and she has little hope of returning to the "normal life" she had been leading before.

In terms of death, although it is an option, the majority of individuals do not choose to terminate their own lives. When someone goes through any other transformational event, they concentrate on how they will change as a result of it, but considering death, the challenge is how to embrace it given the scant information they have about it. It is particularly difficult to comprehend from within because of its inevitableness, finality, and associated disintegration. Compared to other transforming experiences, death imposes an obstacle to the imagination that is on a completely different scale of difficulty. The affective reaction and the instant emotional involvement that the thought of death, whether actual or imagined, generates are unlike those evoked by the anticipation of any other transforming event.

Therefore, taking into account the expectancy of death, it was a sudden set of events for Nina and her family, making it challenging for them to cope with it appropriately given that they were aware that their lives would no longer be the same as they had been in the past. In response to her husband's dismay when he once exclaimed, "I just can't wait for things to get back to normal," Nina reacts: "Thinking that way kind of invalidates my whole life right now. I have to love these days in the same way I love any other. There might not be a 'normal' from here on out" (p.73). Realizing her transformed life, she embraces the shift, recognizing its inevitability and validating her new existence. Then Paul, on the other side, also found the same situation to be too overwhelming to control and handle since he was trying to make the idea of death and its approaching reality understandable. He views his terminal illness and being diagnosed with cancer as a blessing that may open the door to a deeper understanding of life and death. Nevertheless, he acknowledges the gravity of such an understanding and a transformation and notes: "I'd had no idea how hard it would be, how much terrain I would have to explore, map, settle" (Kalanithi, 2016, p. 81).

In life, there are circumstances beyond our control that can bring exhilaration, thrill, or a sense of freedom. However, the true source of pain lies in longing for control, the relentless pursuit of it, and the inevitable failure to grasp it, which ultimately leads to distress. An example of this is trauma, which has significant linkages to the sensation of mortality and dying In her illuminating book, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, Susan Brison, who has personally

experienced sexual assault and came dangerously close to being killed, writes: “One of the most serious harms of trauma is that of loss of control” (Brison, 2002, p. 73). According to her, a traumatic experience is “one in which a person feels utterly helpless in the face of a force that is perceived to be life-threatening” (p.39). She explains that the initial response to a traumatic event involves extreme terror, a sense of helplessness, and an intense fear of being annihilated. She emphasizes that the long-term impacts can be severe, manifesting as physiological reactions like constant alertness, an exaggerated startle response, and sleep disturbances. Moreover, the psychological effects can be significant, including feelings of depression, trouble focusing, loss of interest in activities that once brought joy, and a perception of a shortened lifespan.

A trauma survivor suffers a loss of control not only over herself, but also over her environment, and this, in turn, can lead to a constriction of the boundaries of her will... Some reactions that were under the will's command become involuntary and some desires that were once motivating can no longer be felt, let alone acted upon (p. 60).

The experience of losing control over one's own being, as a result of traumatic events, represents a significant alteration to an individual's sense of self, serving to elucidate the often-cited phrase among survivors of trauma, “I am no longer myself” (p. 60). Trauma results from an unintentional and unwanted loss of control, which is one of the factors that make it a personally transformational event.

The profound trauma experienced by individuals like Paul and Nina has a lasting effect, fundamentally reshaping their psyche and highlighting the transformative nature of such experiences. In Paul's case, this transformation is evident in his approach to treatment, as he shifts from being a proactive neurosurgeon accustomed to leading patient conversations and taking control, to becoming a passive observer, relying on his doctor to navigate the unknown territory ahead. Reflecting on the discrepancy between his roles as a physician and patient, Kalanithi notes that while he was accustomed to serving as an active agent in the lives of others, in the face of his own illness he was reduced to a passive subject upon whom things simply happened. “As a doctor, I was an agent, a cause; as a patient, I was merely something to which things happened. But in Emma's office, Lucy and I could joke, trade doctor lingo, talk freely about our hopes and dreams, try to assemble a plan to move forward” (Kalanithi, 2016, p. 166). However, in the context of his relationship with Emma, he finds a safe space where he can exchange medical jargon, share intimate thoughts, and jointly work toward a plan for the future. Ultimately, he recognizes that while Emma may not have returned him to his former self, she has enabled him to construct a new identity, one that is more authentic and reflective of his newfound experiences.

Like Kalanithi, Riggs also confronts her mortality, overwhelmed by daily life amidst her terminal diagnosis. She considers relinquishing control and accepting the inevitable like a welcome release from her burdens. She observes: “I think maybe it wouldn't be so bad to fall into that, to loosen the grip at the waist, let gravity and fate take over—like a thought so good you can't stop having it” (Riggs, 2017, p. 238). Giving into the flow of life and caring as little as possible, similar to the idea of losing control, is so-appealing to Nina that she urges to feel it once.

The shock of an unexpected death can greatly alter our outlook on life, making it a major aspect of the life-altering experience of dying. A transforming experience can take many different forms, but the retrospective perspective is unique. The processes of introspection and nostalgia,

which may occur in either a spontaneous or a purposeful manner, are integral to the profound experience of dying. As Kellehear put it:

Any major life crisis can bring you to a point where you will interrogate the 'past selves' in search of a discovery or rediscovery of the meaning of self, but dying will often do this too for many people because dying is the final roundup of all meaning about their life. People review their lives for another reason, too. Sometimes, it is a simple reacquaintance with the contents of memory (Kellehear, 2014, p.159).

Through the lens of retrospective memory, individuals facing the prospect of their own mortality are able to reconstruct the significance of pivotal moments in their lives, gaining new insight into the choices they made and the experiences that ensued as a result. Such recollections serve as a means of re-evaluating past decisions and assessing their impact on one's present state of being. Having this, it is evident in both memoirs how Kalanithi and Riggs get consolation from looking back on the last few years, which has given them enough to not only reflect on and contemplate, but also to put pen to paper and start musing about the time that was filled with a handful of lifetime events and lessons.

Conclusion

In the compelling memoirs of Kalanithi and Riggs, we can glimpse the fleeting essence of human life and the profound wisdom that arises from facing mortality. Their poignant narratives invite us to explore the transformative power of revelation and its lasting impact on the human psyche. These memoirs follow the journeys of a renowned neurosurgeon and a poet mother, both confronted with the harrowing truth of their terminal illnesses. This idea of death being insightful, as conveyed in these works as well, is related to L.A. Paul's notion of "revelation," which she utilizes to approach the topic of transformational choice. Paul suggests that we can change how we approach transformative decisions by viewing them as opportunities to accept or reject, "revelation." You can either ignore the discovery and maintain your current way of life or embrace the novel experience to benefit from what it reveals such as newfound moral assessments and the development of a new perception of the self (Paul, 2015).

As a result of such an alteration, both figures in these autobiographies are driven to seek an answer to the question, 'What is the meaning of life?' Followingly, the next step in their lives is to make the most of it while they are still capable and strong enough to do it. Death, often accompanied by trauma, has a way of intruding at the most inopportune moments, just as one is poised to reach the height of their accomplishments. It is often seen as a distant event in the future, something far removed from present concerns. Yet, when the harsh reality of human existence sets in, acknowledging the inevitability of death can propel us from a superficial and purposeless existence to a deeper, more meaningful life filled with authenticity and significance.

All beings must confront their mortality and ephemerality in some way, according to Martin Heidegger, who explores the concepts of "being" and "being-toward-death." However, the method by which they do so, as depicted here, forces them out of their daily lives and gives them something worthwhile to explore and pursue as they learn about their finitude. Besides Heidegger's insights, L.A. Paul discusses authenticity and how the two authors' transforming experiences with death have helped them live lives full of major decisions, no matter how brief

and fleeting their lives may be. Through a close reading of these two autobiographical accounts, we are confronted with the fundamental existential realities of death and how it fundamentally alters the course of one's existence. From the transformative power of revelation to the potential for retrospective memory to shed light on past decisions, these authors offer a penetrating reflection on the nature of human experience in the face of mortality.

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