

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS'S *MORTALITY*: A SAGA OF CALAMITY, COURAGE, AND DIGNITY

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Abstract

Christopher Hitchens's *Mortality* explores the taboo topic of death, and the feared disease of cancer in great detail. An exceptional journalist, an extraordinary orator, bestselling writer, and a famed cultural icon of our times; who had a massive fan-following, amongst people of all age groups, Hitchens had everything going, absolutely fabulous and fantastic for him, until tragedy struck. This paper explores Hitchens's thoughts on, and his analysis of, his experiences, and ordeals, during this terrible trial, and his philosophy of life in vivid detail, during this most heart-breaking, and difficult time of his life.

Christopher Hitchens's life has been the most inspiring, and fascinating, for millions of his readers, and admirers across the world. He was born on April 13, 1949, in England, and graduated from Balliol College, at Oxford University. He was the author of more than twenty books, and pamphlets, as well as a famous columnist, literary critic, and contributing editor at *Vanity Fair*, the *Atlantic*, *Slate*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Nation*, the *New Statesman*, *World Affairs*, *Free Inquiry*, and so on.

In 2010 during the American book tour, to promote his autobiography *Hitch22*, he fell and collapsed in his hotel room, with massive chest pain. On further investigation, it was revealed, that he was suffering from, stage four metastasized oesophageal cancer.

An extremely busy, successful and charming, Christopher Hitchens was astonished and distressed, by this upsetting upheaval in his otherwise happy, satisfactory and successful life.

He writes:

“ ... I am badly oppressed by the gnawing sense of waste. I had real plans for my next decade and felt I'd worked hard enough to earn it...? To the dumb question “Why me?” the cosmos barely bothers to return the reply: Why not?” (5-6)

It is rather uncomfortable, and scary, for ordinary mortals to be diagnosed with such a monstrous disease, but Hitchens bravely braced himself to face it, and also describe his feelings, during this difficult time, he never expected that his life would take a turn like this. Nonetheless like a brave general, he marches on to face the worst.

Hitchens says:

“ The absorbing fact about being mortally sick is that you spend a good deal of time preparing yourself to die with some modicum of stoicism (and provision for loved ones), while being simultaneously and highly interested in the business of survival. This is a distinctly bizarre way of “living”---lawyers in the morning and doctors in the afternoon---and means that one has to exist even more than usual in a double frame of mind.” (14)

There are episodes of despair as well, along with an iron-will, to face all that comes along. This book is an exposition of the torturous and tumultuous undercurrents, that are deeply embedded with this dangerous disease, which inadvertently bring melancholy, and destruction in its wake.

Hitchens writes:

“ Still and all, this is both an exhilarating and a melancholy time to have a cancer like mine. Exhilarating, because my calm and scholarly oncologist, Dr. Frederick Smith, can design a chemo-cocktail that has already shrunk some of my secondary tumours, and can “tweak” said cocktail to minimize certain nasty side effects...new peaks of medicine are rising and new treatments beginning to be glimpsed, and they have probably come too late for me.” (30-31)

Hitchens has a unique way of expressing his grief, his exhilaration, his agonies and his ecstasies, in his book, his art and the way of expressing, his feelings are simply extraordinary, and excellent.

This book is filled with his take on philosophy, religion, intellectual thoughts, personal memoirs, and wisdom. His beautiful and witty musings are spectacular and mesmerizing. His honest and extremely personal account of illness, and its management is unparalleled.

He writes:

“LIKE SO MANY OF LIFE’S VARIETIES OF EXPERIENCE, the novelty of a diagnosis of malignant cancer has a tendency to wear off. The thing begins to pall, even to become banal. One can become quite used to the spectre of the eternal Footman, like some lethal old bore lurking in the hallway at the end of the evening, hoping for the chance to have a word. And I don’t so much object to his holding my coat in that marked manner, as if mutely reminding me that it’s time to be on my way. No, it’s the *snickering* that gets me down.

On a much too regular basis, the disease serves me up with the teasing special of the day, or a flavor of the month. It might be random sores and ulcers, on the tongue or in the mouth. Or why not a touch of peripheral neuropathy, involving numb and chilly feet? Daily existence becomes a babyish thing, measured out not in Prufrock’s coffee spoons but in tiny doses of nourishment, accompanied by heartening noises from onlookers, or solemn discussions of the operations of the digestive system, conducted with motherly strangers.” (45-46)

Hitchens is dignified and honest in this posthumously published book, it is at once heart-wrenching and powerful, his oratory and writings have touched many lives, with their earnest, straightforward thoughts, with no euphemisms or a desire to please anyone, but this book is the ultimate expression of wisdom, dignity, truth, sincerity, and wit. It is written in a wonderful way, and the readers feel as if they are having a heart-to-heart conversation with the author.

Hitchens writes:

“ Before I was diagnosed with esophageal cancer a year and a half ago, I rather jauntily told the readers of my memoirs that when faced with extinction I wanted to be fully conscious

and awake, in order to “do” death in the active and not the passive sense. And I do, still, try to nurture that little flame of curiosity and defiance: willing to play out the string to the end and wishing to be spared nothing that properly belongs to a life span.” (58-59)

The book is magnificent and spectacularly poignant. Hitchens's passion and zest for life and living, come across in every page, they are as spell -bounding as the great writer himself. His elegant writing, sometimes becomes melancholic, but mostly is stoic and keenly observant.

The finer nuances of, this apparently simple book are breathtakingly awesome, they are enthralling, in addition to being absolutely relevant, at all times and ages, and reminds one that vulnerability and precariousness, are the hallmarks of every human being's life, and that nothing lasts forever, whatever circumstance one faces in life, have to be faced with tremendous fortitude and courage, and not with despair or remorse.

Hitchens writes :

“REMEMBER, YOU TOO ARE MORTAL”---- HIT ME AT THE top of my form and just as things were beginning to plateau. My two assets my pen and my voice---- and it had to be the esophagus. All along, while burning the candle at both ends, I'd been “straying in to the arena of the unwell” and now “ a vulgar little tumor” was evident.” (85)

Many great philosophers, novelists, authors, poets, musicians and writers, like Friedrich Nietzsche, Plato, Socrates, Goethe, Professor Sidney Hook, C.S. Lewis, T.S. Eliot, Joseph Conrad, Saul Bellow, James Boswell, Henry James, W. H. Auden, Kingsley Amis, Wilfred Owen, Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, are mentioned and discussed in detail, by Hitchens in this awe-inspiring book.

At the end of the book, is the afterword by Hitchens's wife, Carol Blue, where she says:

“Christopher's charisma never left him, not in any realm: not in public, not in private, not even in the hospital. He made a party of it, transforming the sterile, chilly, neon-lighted, humming and beeping and blinking room into a study and a salon. His artful conversations never ceased.” (98)

She further writes:

“The end was unexpected. At home in Washington, I pull books off the shelves, out of the book towers on the floor, off the stacks of volumes on tables. Inside the back covers are notes written in his hand that he took for reviews and for himself....At any time I can peruse our library or his notes and rediscover and recover him. When I do, I hear him, and he has the last word. Time after time, Christopher has the last word.”(104)

The brilliance and relevance of Christopher Hitchens, will always shine through, his fascinating works and personality. The eloquent Hitchens, with his tremendous willpower, and unlimited knowledge and wisdom, demonstrates through his life and work, that it is definitely possible to stay sanguine, enthusiastic, and hopeful, in any circumstance, only if one is determined. Hitchens inspires us to live with dignity, courage and confidence, and to face any challenging, and adverse situation in life, head-on, with all knowledge, intelligence, wisdom and endurance.

Works Cited:

Hitchens, Christopher. *Mortality*: Great Britain: Atlantic Books, London, 2013. Print.