



## **Questions for #CancerBookClub**

### **This Month's Book: When Breath Becomes Air**

**Author: Dr. Paul Kalanithi**

1. How did you come away feeling, after reading this book? What emotions did you experience while reading it? Upset? Inspired? Anxious?
2. How did you respond to the author's "voice"?
3. Would cancer survivors read this book through a different lens than non-survivors? Why or why not?
4. Although this book addressed lung cancer, many of the thoughts and feelings were common to the cancer experience in general, with such themes as coping with fatigue, loss of identity, and managing responsibilities while ill. Were there elements of his story that you responded to as a survivor, or a caregiver?
5. Paul quotes Samuel Beckett's seven words: "I can't go on. I'll go on." Talk about what that means, not just for Paul, but for all of us.
6. In the face of dying, especially prolonged, how does one makes life worth living? We all face death, but Paul Kalanithi knew his was imminent. What answers, or at least consolations, does he find? What were yours, when you faced cancer?
7. Paul chose to keep working in the face of death. What would you choose? What did you choose, when you moved into survivorship?
8. A question from an online resource about this book: "One of the ironies of Kalanithi's life is that he postponed learning how to live in order to learn how to be a doctor. But once he knew he had lung cancer, he had to learn how to die." How do you, as a survivor, see this question? Do you agree that Paul's life was "ironic"?
9. Were there passages or sentences in WBBA that struck you as particularly profound or moving?

What did you find to be the most compelling events in this book? What surprised you the most?

10. Paul wrote that he acted in caring for his patients as "death's ambassador." "Those burdens, he wrote, "are what makes medicine holy and wholly impossible." What did he mean?
11. Would you recommend this book to someone who seeks to understand the cancer experience? What does Paul have in common with other patients you have known? How did he differ?
12. What would you have wanted to ask Paul, if he were still here today?
13. Some critics have said that this book "demystifies death." Do you agree?
14. One of the most touching aspects of Paul's life was his decision to have a child before his death. What was your response to his dilemma? How did you manage your own children, or your wish for future children, when you were diagnosed?
15. What did you think of Paul's exploration of the relationship between science and faith? As Paul wrote, "Science may provide the most useful way to organize empirical, reproducible data, but its power to do so is predicated on its inability to grasp the most central aspects of human life: hope, fear, love, hate, beauty, envy, honor, weakness, striving, suffering, virtue. Between these core passions and scientific theory, there will always be a gap. No system of thought can contain the fullness of human experience." Do you agree?
16. How did this book impact your thoughts about medical care? The patient-physician relationship? End of life care?
17. How has this book influenced thoughts about preparing for your own death? What preparations – financial, spiritual, relational – would you make?
18. Is this a book you will continue thinking about, now that you are done? Do you find it having an impact on the way you go about your days?