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## Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

### **When Breath Becomes Air** by Paul Kalanithi

#### Summary

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. One day he was a doctor treating the dying, and the next he was a patient struggling to live. And just like that, the future he and his wife had imagined evaporated. *When Breath Becomes Air* chronicles Kalanithi's transformation from a naïve medical student "possessed," as he wrote, "by the question of what, given that all organisms die, makes a virtuous and meaningful life" into a neurosurgeon at Stanford working in the brain, the most critical place for human identity, and finally into a patient and new father confronting his own mortality.

What makes life worth living in the face of death? What do you do when the future, no longer a ladder toward your goals in life, flattens out into a perpetual present? What does it mean to have a child, to nurture a new life as another fades away? These are some of the questions Kalanithi wrestles with in this profoundly moving, exquisitely observed memoir.

Paul Kalanithi died in March 2015, while working on this book, yet his words live on as a guide and a gift to us all. "I began to realize that coming face to face with my own mortality, in a sense, had changed nothing and everything" he wrote. Seven words from Samuel Beckett began to repeat in my head: "I can't go on. I'll go on."

*When Breath Becomes Air* is an unforgettable, life-affirming reflection on the challenge of facing death and on the relationship between doctor and patient, from a brilliant writer who became both.

#### Discussion Questions

1. How did you come away feeling, after reading this book? Upset? Inspired? Anxious? Less afraid?
2. 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?

3. How do you think the years Paul spent, tending to patients and training to be a neurosurgeon, affected the outlook he had on his own illness? When Paul wrote that the question he asked himself was not “why me,” but “why not me,” how did that strike you? Could you relate to it?
4. Paul had a strong background in the humanities, and read widely throughout his life. Only after getting a Master’s in English Literature did he decide that medicine was the right path for him. Do you think this made him a better doctor? A different kind of doctor? If so, how? How has reading influenced your life?
5. What did you think of Paul and Lucy’s decision to have a child, in the face of his illness? When Lucy asked him if he worried that having a child would make his death more painful, and Paul responded, “Wouldn’t it be great if it did,” how did that strike you? Do you agree that life should not be about avoiding suffering, but about creating meaning?
6. Were there passages or sentences that struck you as particularly profound or moving?
7. Given that Paul died before the book was finished, what are some of the questions you would have wanted to ask him if he were still here today?
8. Paul was determined to face death with integrity, and through his book, demystify it for people. Do you think he succeeded?
9. In Lucy’s epilogue, she writes that “what happened to Paul was tragic, but he was not a tragedy.” Did you come away feeling the same way?
10. Lucy also writes that, in some ways, Paul’s illness brought them closer – that she FELL feel even more deeply in love with the “beautiful, focused man” he became in the last year of his life. Did you find yourself seeing how that could happen?
11. How did this book impact your thoughts about medical care? The patient-physician relationship? End of life care?
12. 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?

Summary and Discussion Questions from the publisher.