



# Colorado Book Club Resource

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR *WHEN BREATH BECOMES AIR* BY PAUL KALANITHI

1. How would you describe Dr. Paul Kalanithi? What kind of a person was he?
2. One of the most profound questions addressed in this book is what makes life worth living in the face of death. We all face death, but Paul Kalanithi knew his was imminent. What answers, or at least consolations, does he find?
3. Kalanithi quotes Samuel Beckett's seven words: "I can't go on. I'll go on." Talk about what that means, not just for Paul Kalanithi but for all of us. In the face of dying, especially prolonged, how does one "go on" or, in popular parlance, "keep on keeping on"?
4. 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. What are the ways in which he learned to live...and learned to face his death? Would you be as brave and thoughtful as Kalanithi was?
5. Describe Kalanithi's love-hate relationship with medicine. He saw it as a job that kept his cardiologist father away from home. But how else did he see it?
6. What kind of a doctor was Kalanithi? Why was he, even at a young age, able to understand the needs of his patients more than so many other young doctors?
7. Kalanithi said 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 does he mean?
8. Once Kalanithi and his wife learned that he had terminal cancer, why did they decide to have a child? Even Kalanithi wonders if having a child wouldn't make it harder to die. What would you do?
9. How would you (or will you) go about dying? How do you think of death—as something distant, something frightening or horrible, as part of the normal spectrum of life, as a closing of this chapter of your life and the opening of another? What comes to mind when you think of your own demise?
10. Do you find *When Breath Becomes Air* enlightening, insightful, spiritual, maudlin? Would you describe it as an important book or merely interesting?

***Questions by LitLovers.***



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