

SASH Bookworms Twitter Transcript

July 2021 – Book: When Breath Becomes Air by Paul Kalanithi

Question 1 – How did you come away feeling after reading the book? Upset? Inspired? Anxious? Less afraid?

‘The transition from doctor to patient was the most striking part for me. It was upsetting that the book was almost left unfinished, but inspiring that he was able to do so much after his diagnosis.’

‘I agree, I admired his wife Lucy’s courage in writing the end to the book, and her determination to get it published.’

‘I felt humbled by his experience and was struck as I was reading that he is no longer alive for us to share his journey.’

‘I felt both inspired and humbled by his humanity and courage.’

Question 2 – 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?

‘Paul chose the most difficult medical speciality, one where life/death decisions could be made within millimetres. His encounters with patients at the end of their lives would have aided him in developing his own mental fortitude.’

‘I think as per a lot of doctors, he didn’t take his illness seriously and wanted to remain in the ‘doctor’ role rather than the ‘patient’ role which would have made him more vulnerable.’

‘Yes Paul did seem to want to be in the ‘doctor’ space, although he did seem to mentally move more into the patient space as his illness progressed.’

‘He was quite reflective, comparing how he was as a clinician and his own experience as a patient. He was surprised that some information he expected would be discussed with him but wasn’t.’

Question 3 – Paul had a strong background in the humanities, and read widely throughout his life. Do you think that this made him a better doctor? A different kind of doctor? If so, how? How has reading influenced your life?

‘I think this potentially made him more broad minded and inquisitive about issues. He was interested in stories and people’s stories which make you more empathetic. Reading is a form of escapism to transform into another world. I’m enjoying the time to do more of it!’

‘I found this to be the most interesting part that he came from a humanities background into medicine. It was really interesting to read how what he studied in English lit influenced his

medical interests. He was driven by Q of what makes life meaningful.'

'From my perspective as a non-clinician I think this did affect him as a clinician, he came across as considered and reflective. His Christian faith also came through in the book, including how he approached death.'

**Question 4 – How did the book impact your thoughts about medical care?
The patient-doctor relationship? End of life care?**

'It became clear that medicine is not just a job. Textbook knowledge is important, but experience is equally important. Paul sees the patient-doctor relationship as an explanation of life, death, and morality coming together.'

'It gave me an insight into the patient's perspective, and made me think about how I deliver bad news and how I support patients at the end of their life.'

'It gave me the opposite experience of seeing it more from the doctor's perspective. I agree that developing the kind of knowledge and insight that Paul had comes from experience not from textbooks.'

'Yes that's a very interesting comment. Didn't think about reading it as a non-medic and opening eyes to thoughts as medics.'