

QUESTIONS ABOUT
WHEN BREATH BECOMES AIR
Part 3

Paul Kalanithi examines his own losing fight against lung cancer, first describing his life before cancer, and then describing his fight for life after cancer. He wants to understand what gives life meaning.

The questions below cover the last part of the book, from page 140 to the end.

1. What are Paul's first two goals in physical therapy? Which one did he achieve?
2. What, according to Paul, forms "the bedrock of meaning" for humans? What could add "another layer" of meaning to his and Lucy's lives?
3. Paul is afraid that having a child will add a huge burden to Lucy's life and emotional pain to his own. But, he argues, both Darwin the scientist and Nietzsche the philosopher believed that "the defining characteristic of the organism is striving." What does this mean to Paul? How does he apply it to his own life?
4. The results of his sixth week CT scan show his cancer to be much reduced, and he says, "relief washed over me." However, this relief proves fleeting and confusing. What activity from his past does he return to in order to make sense of his life?
5. What "seven words" from Beckett's writings does he cling to in order to take control of himself? What decision does he make as a result? How successful is he?
6. Paul returns to performing surgery and is soon almost back to his old level of performance. However, something is different. On pages 156 and 157 he discusses the difference. What does he discover? What kind of projects does he want to do that he now realizes he never can?
7. In 1969 the Swiss psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross published *On Death and Dying* in which she postulated that terminally ill patients live through five stages of grief before dying. Paul discusses his own progression through these stages. What are the stages? How does his experience differ from what Kübler-Ross postulated?
8. Paul concludes he has misunderstood the role of a physician in a patient's life. What does he now believe the duty of the physician to be? Do you agree?
9. On page 167 Paul begins a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of his Christian faith with a quotation from the Bible: the Book of John: Chapter 4, verses 13 to 15 and 31 to 33 where Jesus speaks of living water that, if you drink it, you'll never thirst again. What do you think this water is?

10. Paul believes that science can describe the mechanism of life, but that it can offer no insight into the meaning to life. He says (page 170), “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.” Paul sees an immense gap between science and religion. Does he resolve this dilemma? How?
11. Seven months after he returns to practicing surgery, he has a new CT scan. What does this new scan show? What final decision do the results cause him to make?
12. Paul begins chemotherapy, and over its course, he finds it harder and harder to maintain control of his treatment, which as a physician, he has always tried to do. What agreement does he finally make with his oncologist Emma?
13. Where is Paul when Lucy gives birth? What does he ask for before holding his new daughter?
14. How far into the future does Paul now plan?
15. When, at some future date, his new daughter must give an accounting of herself, what does Paul want this accounting to include?

EPILOGUE

16. How is Lucy told to track the deterioration of her husband’s health?
17. On page 208, Paul and Lucy discuss whether he should be intubated. What is intubation? What does “Do not resuscitate” mean? What is “comfort care”? Some people believe everything possible should be done to keep a patient alive. Do you agree?
18. When Paul finally dies, most of his family is in the room with him including his new daughter Cady. Is having his family close by a comfort to him or is it mostly a comfort to his family? Many animals go off by themselves to die. Would you prefer to die in the company of your loved ones or by yourself?
19. Paul dies after many years of training but before his potential is realized. Is his life therefore a waste?