Book Recommendation (2022-23)

When Breath Becomes Air

March 2023

Have you ever wondered what the meaning of lives is? In this book, 'When Breath Becomes Air' which is a personal memoir by an American neurosurgeon Paul Kala Nithi, recounts his experiences as a doctor and a patient battling terminal lung cancer.

The book starts with Paul recounting his life as a resident doctor. He discovers that it gives him a merely superficial meaning of life. He remarks, "I observed a lot of suffering; … I became inured to it." Later, Paul explores another dimension of life: what can be done with it. Paul admits that medical training is 'relentlessly future-orientated, all about delayed gratification'. The message from it is clear: focus on long-term ambitions to realize a meaningful life.

However, that meaning changed drastically once Paul is diagnosed with terminal cancer. His life suddenly becomes devoid of meaning. As a physician, Paul is aware of his situation that only 5% of terminal cancer patients can live more than 2 years. Thus, he soon realizes that it is a fantasy to resume his original life plan which is operating a neuroscience laboratory with cancer looming, as it would take a long time. Hence, he is going to focus on what he cares about the most so Paul's meaning of life now is to be surrounded by his loving family.

The book has highlighted two opposite meanings of life, to live every day as if it is your last, or to delay gratification and plan for the distant future. Either extreme is objectionable. Evidently, the best way is to seek a middle ground.

Paul's memoir guides us to explore what means to us the most. While no one can be certain of their lifespan, we should think clearly about what matters to us the most and start leading a fruitful life with no regrets. That is the most prominent lesson Paul has left for us.

Presented By

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#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

WHEN BREATH BECOMES

air

PAUL KALANITHI

"Finishing this book and then forgetting about it is simply not an option." —The New York Times