

## **The Merit of English Section**

### **Senior Division**

**Name of Winner : Shu Ki Feng**

**Name of School : Queen's College**

**Book Title : *When Breath Becomes Air***

**Author : Paul Kalanithi**

**Publisher : Random House Publishing Group**

‘When Breath Becomes Air’ is a personal memoir by American neurosurgeon Paul Kalanithi. It recounts his experiences as a doctor and later as a patient battling terminal lung cancer. It narrates neither a descent into crushing despair, nor an unduly optimistic world viewed through rose-coloured spectacles, but a down-to-earth, sanguine outlook of Paul’s own life that delivers a message we can learn from: We should find meaning and persevere against all odds in our finite lives.

Paul is a successful person by all means: he had a lovely wife, completed multiple degrees at prestigious universities, improved the lives of myriad patients, and contributed profoundly to the field of neuroscience. But he struggles to find meaning in his life, both when he is healthy and when facing his imminent passing. In fact, akin to Paul, I have also given thought to the meaning of life. I believe that as there is no intrinsic value to life, we are free to control our narrative. Nonetheless, it still does not answer the question of what to do with our lives. This book offers novel perspectives on this topic.

The book unfolds with Paul in vigour. The message is clear: focus on long term ambitions to realise a meaningful life. In this section, Paul recounts his life as a medical student, then as a resident doctor. He deems guiding patients through their recovery or death a way to understand life. However, he soon discovers that being a doctor gives him a merely superficial meaning of life. He

remarks, “I observed a lot of suffering; ... I became inured to it.” After all, in the medical world, life is when your heart delivers oxygenated blood throughout your body, and vice versa. Subsequently, Paul explores another dimension of life: what can be accomplished with it. Paul admits that medical training is “relentlessly future-orientated, all about delayed gratification” . Nevertheless, he persists to reap those rewards years away, running a neuroscience laboratory, being a compassionate doctor, earning a decent salary, etc. I agree with Paul’s view on the meaning of life. We go through decades of preparation, seeking to become the leaders of tomorrow, the pillars of society. That is why we put our noses on the grindstone and abstain from divertissements like video games and karaoke, to build up potential and someday venture out into society and change the lives of others and us for the better.

However, that meaning changed drastically once Paul

is diagnosed with terminal cancer. His hope for an ideal future is now extinguished, and we can also feel Paul's despair through his poignant words, "One chapter of my life seemed to have ended; perhaps the whole book was closing." For Paul, his life suddenly becomes devoid of meaning. What is hope now? Statistically, 95% of terminal cancer patients don't make it past 2 years. Is 'hope' to be that other 5%? Or is it self-deception? As a physician, Paul is well aware of his situation. Initially, Paul attempts to grapple with his original life plan; he attends a job interview, and the department provides an attractive offer to operate a neuroscience laboratory. Paul soon realises that it is a fantasy to resume his original life with cancer looming, as running a laboratory would take around 20 years. In his words, "My carefully planned and hard-won future no longer existed." Unbeknownst to how much time he has left, Paul decides that his old identity no longer mattered. He is going to focus on what he cares about the most. Paul's meaning of life now is to

be surrounded by his loving family and father a child, as well as contributing to literature by writing.

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. I think either extreme is objectionable. The notion of 'carpe diem' is idealistic yet myopic; if we lead hedonistic lives and not sow seeds of diligence, our futures are doomed to be miserable. However, if we focus excessively on future goals, we may become ignorant of the joys of the present. Does the donkey ever get the carrot on the stick? Evidently, the best way is to seek a middle ground. We should indeed exercise prudence in our actions; for students like me, that may mean focusing on our studies and equipping ourselves for an ensuing career. But instead of waiting like a caterpillar to emerge from the chrysalis, and show its true colours to the world, we can start doing good from day one, which means different

things to different people. For me, it will mainly be spreading benevolence. I can also see this virtue in Paul's daily work.

Paul mentioned that doctors are constantly snowed under by heaps of work. Thus many view patients as problems to solve, rather than humans to support, in order that consultation time can be minimised. Notwithstanding Paul's laborious work, he has shown compassion and empathy to his patients. For instance, one time Paul encounters a female patient who had a seizure when out shopping, due to a highly treatable brain tumour. But the patient is petrified of brain surgery. Instead of documenting her refusal and consider his duty done, Paul empathises with her fears, which is since she is suddenly swept out of familiar daily life and whisked into a lonesome and alien hospital ward. He then gathers the patient's family and calmly explores the treatment options with them. With their family and Paul's support,

the patient eventually overcomes her fearfulness. She opts for surgery and recovers fully.

Our societies are divided in so many ways. While we grumble about our differences, we forget that we are on this Earth together. To spread solicitude, we should treat people in our immediate surroundings with empathy, compassion and respect. In our daily lives, we should be benevolent to others, simply through small acts of kindness such as offering our seats to those in need on public transport and holding the door open for the person behind us. Despite still receiving secondary school education, I ought not to be confined by it; I may participate in volunteering activities such as flag-selling to contribute to the community or raise awareness to environmental issues by writing articles in the school newspaper, as a show of benevolence to the environment.

For Paul, life is sometimes breathing and sometimes

gasping for air. Medical school is breathing for Paul as the focus was on academic knowledge and there is a certain distance between him and the patients but breathing soon transforms into a struggle of air when he becomes a resident, and he must confront languishing patients and their families face-to-face. His breath eases gradually when he gained more experience and can accept full responsibility for his patient's wellbeing. After the cancer diagnosis he struggles for air, not because of his malady, but his scuffling for his old identity as a neurosurgeon. Ultimately, he breaths comfortably through his last moments, satisfied that all he cares for is with him, especially his baby daughter.

Everyone's lives also alternate between breathing in and gasping for air. For me, the first hurdle of life is probably trying to get admitted to my ideal secondary school. That obstacle is well behind. Now with me on the cusp of adulthood, when only myself can truly dictate my



meaning of life, I am ready to scale the lofty mountains and dive the abyssal seas in front of me. Whenever I am huffing and puffing for air, I will remember this inspiration from Irish writer Samuel Beckett that has also supported Paul through his trepidation: 'I can't go on, I'll go on.'

Although Paul's memoir ultimately does not answer the question of what exactly to do with our lives to make it meaningful, it guides me to explore what means to me the most. Health is never guaranteed, American philosopher Susan Sontag has said, "Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. ... Sooner or later each of us is obliged, ... to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place [the kingdom of the sick]." While no one can be certain of their lifespan, we should certainly ponder over 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.