Introduction

The common literature experience gives incoming students, faculty, staff, and community members a common piece of literature to read and discuss at the same time. The selection for 2017-18 is *When Breath Becomes Air* by Paul Kalanithi. Lucy Kalanithi, wife of the author, will be addressing Connections students at the literature convocation on Thursday, August 24 at 9 a.m.

Paul Kalanithi’s *When Breath Becomes Air*, is an emotionally gripping memoir about a neurosurgeon who discovers that he is dying from cancer. While Paul’s diagnosis is a central character to the book, Paul should not be defined by his death. As a young man, he learned to define himself through the pursuit of a diverse education and the rich experiences it brings. Paul tells a beautiful story that reflects his own pursuit of meaning, beauty, and knowledge. His path took him from growing up in Kingman, AZ to Cambridge, Stanford, and Yale where he received degrees in English Literature, Philosophy, and Medicine.

Paul was a respected doctor and researcher, but he was also a beautiful writer who understood the importance of words. The book, at its core, is about what it means to be human and how one defines one’s self while facing imminent demise. This book is an engrossing story of particular importance to incoming students, who are joining a community of learners and will spend the next several years defining their own improvement and personal growth.

Paul’s story while heartbreaking is also an uplifting message about how to accomplish great things.

*When Breath Becomes Air* was selected as this year’s USU Common Literature book because it aligns with the Connections course objectives—the “Big Questions” of how we define our purpose, how we best learn, and how we engage with our communities.

In the end, *When Breath Becomes Air* is a discussion about finding what is important in life, and realizing that whatever time each of us may have is a precious commodity that can stretch to its full potential only through living and learning intentionally.

Connections Assignment

The common literature assignment is designed to introduce you to college-level expectations with respect to reading comprehension, critical thinking, and writing. You will also discuss the book with your Connections class.

*Before you read the book:*

**Read the discussion questions first.** This will help you think more broadly and critically about the themes in the book and mark quotations that will help you when writing your response. Finish the whole book before making your posts in Canvas.

**Take notes in your book.** Highlight, annotate, and mark passages as you read. This will help you not only as you compose your posts, but also as you participate in class discussions.

**Follow directions.** Many college students miss points simply because they do not read and follow directions listed on the assignment.
Instructions

Choose two of the following prompts and write a discussion post for each on the discussion board in Canvas (a total of 2 posts). Please make sure you:

- clearly identify which prompt you are answering,
- provide a substantial and meaningful example from the book or additional resources that illustrate your position,
- write 200-250 of your own words (in addition to the quoted examples from the book) of reflection in response to the prompt, and then return to the discussion board and make a minimum of two substantive comments in response to the posts of your classmates.*

You must make a total of four posts on the discussion boards, your two original posts and then two substantive* responses to the posts of your classmates.

*A substantive comment is a post that demonstrates substance and contributes to the understanding and application of ideas by doing one or more of the following:

- Reflect about meaning of the topic.
- Describe thoughtfully new insights about the topic.
- Raise a question as a seed for clarification or further discussion.

A substantive comment is NOT the following:

- Merely a statement of agreement or disagreement or an expression of your feelings.
- Bullying or attacking the person who made the initial post.
- A comment that lacks purpose (such as, “I have nothing more to add.”)
- A long series of quotations from the book. 200-250 words must be YOUR words and not a quotation.

Below are four prompts. You are to select two of the following prompts for your discussion posts:

1. In When Breath Becomes Air, as Paul Kalanithi reflects at various points in his life about what his future path holds. Using the book as an example reflect on your decision to attend USU or the decision to pursue the field of study you see in your future. What are the underlying values that you attribute to this choice?

2. Lucy Kalanithi in her Epilogue mentioned journaling to Cady: “When someone dies, people tend to say great things about him. Please know that all the wonderful things people are saying now about your dad are true. He really was that good and that brave.” She says also, “Paul wondered about death—and whether he could face it with integrity. In the end, the answer was yes.” Given that the natural extension of facing death with integrity is living with integrity, how will you spend the next years of your life between Connections and Commencement to live with integrity. What would you like us to say about you when you have passed on from the educational experience you are currently undertaking?

3. In the book Paul wrestles with the meaning of life and his place in it. Provide examples from the reading and using your examples, describe how they relate to your understanding of the academic community that exists at a university. What do you think the overall purpose of education is?

4. At one point in the book, Paul says of his cancer diagnosis: “I realized that cancer had changed the calculus.” By this he meant that his entire life changed, and how he addressed the decisions he would make changed with it. If you were faced with this change of the calculus and were asked to distill your own life into the things that you find most important, what would they be, and how would you pursue making them meaningful for as long as you had left?
**Discussion in Canvas**

Good discussion posts:

- Are clear and to the point (no ambiguity or digression).
- Answer all of the questions in the prompt. Make sure you re-read the prompt after you have drafted your responses to make sure you answered every part of the question.
- Use specific examples from the reading.
- Have good mechanics and grammar.

Discussions are public; all members in the course can view all responses.

To open/read/respond to a discussion:

1. Go to the course page
2. Click Discussions on the left hand side
3. To respond, open the discussion and click Reply. (Depending on the course settings enabled by your instructor, you may be able to reply, add an attachment, edit your replies, etc.)

For further instruction on participating in a discussion via Canvas go to [https://community.canvaslms.com/videos/1128](https://community.canvaslms.com/videos/1128).

Fully participate in the discussion via Canvas by **9 a.m. on Wednesday, August 23**. Make sure you complete your two original posts, and at least two substantive comments in reply to the posts of your classmates. Canvas sections will open on August 16 at [http://canvas.usu.edu](http://canvas.usu.edu).

**Academic Integrity and the Student Code**

Utah State University expects students to conduct themselves with the foremost level of academic integrity. Examples of academic dishonesty include, but are not limited to, representing the published or unpublished work of another person as one’s own (including paraphrasing or direct quotation), using materials prepared by another person or agency, and failing to appropriately cite sources. **USU utilizes a global plagiarism prevention software to ensure students are submitting original work. This software compares assignment submissions to a large database of papers found online or submitted both locally at USU and throughout the world.** For more information, see [https://studentconduct.usu.edu/studentcode/](https://studentconduct.usu.edu/studentcode/).

**Works Cited**