

If I Die before I Wake: A Caregiver's Journey

Eli Shaw

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If I Die Before I Wake is a philosophical and somber memoir by a caregiver who learned how to take care of himself and who wants others to do the same.

Eli Shaw's emotionally intelligent and humble memoir *If I Die Before I Wake* is about caring for individuals dying of cancer and AIDS.

Shaw, now in his seventies, has been a caregiver for most of his life. He started his career as a photographer and a shop window display designer, but he fell into caregiving when his roommate, Mark, was diagnosed with HIV in the 1980s. Shaw assisted him through his illness until his death in 1992.

Since then, Shaw's cared for individuals with a variety of maladies and worked with organizations to support people with cancer, disabilities, and other conditions. In his compassionate memoir he relates the manifold emotions that come with being a caregiver and shares how he remained sane in the face of death and gleaned life meaning through caring for those who were dying.

Shaw is an unrestrained, soft spoken, and empathetic narrator who fully maps his own emotional landscape. Affecting and sensitive subjects are approached in a perceptive manner, and Mark's personality is captured well. Emotions, including grief, run deep throughout. Approachable suggestions for dealing with difficult ongoing situations are made, and poignant insights like "judgments will be around as long as there are two different people standing on this earth" strengthen their credibility.

Though it is redundant at times, the text's repetition draws attention to its most important points. These include Mark's outlook on life as his health declines; the experiences that changed Shaw's perspective the most; and a call for others to be less judgmental and more compassionate. Events are sometimes discussed more than once, but each chapter centers on a different theme.

Analogies are overexplained, but the book's concepts are clear, even when their language is esoteric or vague, or when it takes several pages to make a point. Possessive apostrophes are missing throughout, and the poems near the book's end, meant to encourage other caregivers to write as a therapeutic method, are superfluous in their content.

The book skips around in time, and its chronology is confusing. Chapters' titles hint at their content, and salient examples buoy these concepts, provoking emotion, though when they are layered together, they muddle the text. The book becomes more cluttered as it progresses. Some concepts are introduced with the promise of "more later," but they are not always returned to.

If I Die Before I Wake is a philosophical and somber memoir about a caregiver who learned how to take care of himself, with suggestions for how others can do the same.

AIMEE JODOIN (July 11, 2019)

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