



Influencing Death: Reframing Dying for Better Living

Penny Hawkins Smith

GFB

(226pp)

978-1-959411-96-3

A moving account of how a hospice nurse arrived at TikTok fame, Influencing Death covers end-of-life care with nuance.

Infused with compassion, Penny Hawkins Smith's memoir *Influencing Death* explores the troubled experiences that led her to pursue her vocation as a hospice nurse and social media influencer.

Intrigued by TikTok, Smith was inspired to create her own videos regarding end-of-life care. Drawing from decades of nursing experience, she hoped to challenge fearful attitudes toward the "dark, heavy subject" of death and dying. Posted under the handle @HospiceNursePenny, Smith's unconventional "death education" TikToks have attracted legions of followers. She was a "performance geek" when she began and aware that her "old face ... wasn't necessarily welcome on the popular app." Still, she tackled anonymous virtual queries from her followers regarding patient suffering, the afterlife, and euthanasia with care, even as her "signature" 1980s-influenced pink-streaked hair attracted both praise and contempt.

In this account of how Smith arrived at TikTok fame, the chapters alternate between moving stories of treating patients and tales related to Smith's turbulent adolescence and early adulthood. The descriptions of hospice cases cover the psychological and spiritual situations of dying patients (including pain, disorientation, and the struggling of friends and family members to process their impending losses), as well as challenges like the increasing inability to swallow and manage basic physical functions. Smith also recalls providing grilled cheese sandwiches and frozen treats to satisfy patients' cravings; she notes that while hospice nurses are often called "angels," their job more requires fortitude, resilience, and even a dark sense of humor.

On the personal side, the book recalls how Smith and her family moved often to fulfill her father's military obligations and describes her typical boomer upbringing centered on school, siblings, and summer vacations. Youthful shoplifting sprees and other rebellions led to a later "unraveling," which involved alcoholism, drug use, and failed marriages. She recounts teenage angst and rages, fights with domestic partners, and fierce resistance to a "drunk and disorderly" arrest. At times, these recollections are weighed down by voluble details, as of partying and drinking companions, an unfaithful "abusive loser" boyfriend, and toxic roommates. Still, the prose is forthright, conveying Smith's former dependence on alcohol and cocaine with clarity, as well as her post-recovery desire for pragmatic redemption. Opting to study nursing, she redirected her self-destructive yet intense energies into a meaningful career.

An engaging memoir, *Influencing Death* is about personal transformation and working to demystify the inevitability of death.

MEG NOLA (October 14, 2024)

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