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Signs of Life:: A Memoir of Dying and Discovery

Tim Brookes

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"For a nation obsessed with the happy ending, we give remarkably little thought to our own," writes journalist Tim Brookes. "Our fictions are full of the desire to shape these final mythic moments -- the good dying peacefully, or tragically, the bad falling from a great height onto sharp objects, the death perfectly or ironically illustrating the quality and virtue of the life. Yet in real life we'll do anything to avoid even mentioning death, let alone anticipating it. The only encouragement we get to plan for our death is from life insurance companies who will go bankrupt if we don't."

Brookes initially intended to follow a methodical plan in order to gain insight into the mystery of our final days. He would volunteer at a local hospice to learn all he could about this growing movement -- one that promotes a new level of emotional and physical care for the dying and that has become a powerful alternative to the often dehumanizing experience of death in a hospital or nursing home. He would also interview patients and experts in hospice care in hopes of limning the difficult decisions imminent death brings to the surface.

But Brookes's plans changed shape dramatically when, shortly after he'd begun research for his book, his mother called to report her diagnosis of terminal pancreatic cancer. What began as an investigative report evolved to embrace the author's intimate account of meeting -- and accepting -- his mother's death on its own terms. Slowly Brookes began to fill in the outlines of what he'd learned about hospice with the subtle shadings of his mother's experiences. Abstractions about death with dignity, the role of hope, and the need for family became powerful and immediate realities. Yet amid the sorrows came unexpected and joyful signs of life: a reconnection with long-forgotten relatives, a new opportunity to get to know his mother more deeply than ever before, and even laughs as the whole family struggled through a journey we will all take one day.

Signs of Life blends insightful reportage of a revolutionary program for helping the dying and a son's frank account of coping with the fears, concern, and love he holds for his dying mother and his growing appreciation of mortality. Brookes discovered that the hospice experience imbued his mother's dying with profound meaning; her death and the process of grieving enabled his family to grow closer together even as they came to recognize the levels of distance among them.

With intimacy and eloquence, Tim Brookes has written a deeply personal travel guide for the road that lies ahead. While not shying away from the difficulties of such a time, **Signs of Life** shows us that some of the most important revelations and changes are possible only near the end of life, when not only the dying but the survivors are completing a journey towards the deepest intimacy they may ever have known, a journey of discovering and letting go, and of coming home.

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