

BOOK REVIEW

The Inadequacy of a Nursing Black Bag. Book Review: “*A Knapsack Full of Dreams: A Memoir of a Street Nurse.*”

Cathy Crowe, *A Knapsack Full of Dreams: A Memoir of a Street Nurse*, Friesen Press, 2019; 302 pages; available in eBook, paperback, and hardcover; \$12.99-\$42.99; ASIN: B07TJLVG7P

A nationally-known social justice advocate outlines the necessity of structural change in this engaging memoir.

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Cathy Crowe’s (2019) “*A Knapsack Full of Dreams – Memoirs of a Street Nurse*”, published by Friesen Press, chronicles the persistence and resilience of a passionate social justice advocate and Street Nurse fighting for health equity over the course of decades of political turmoil. By sharing inspiring tales of battles won by collective action against poor public policy, Ms. Crowe powerfully articulates the connection between health and governmental (in)action with real accounts of what happens when vital programs are cut. Cathy’s energy and spirit is felt throughout the pages of this book as she invites the reader to join her, vicariously, on her remarkable lifelong journey. She takes the reader on an emotional journey and generously shares key learnings with fascinating insights and anecdotes along the way. For example, “... *As homelessness worsened, I was more precisely connecting the health outcomes of a man-made*

disaster (high death rate, disease outbreaks including epidemics) to natural disasters and drawing comparisons to global events. It’s also clear that, more and more, the contents of my nursing black bag were inadequate” (p.154).

Crowe’s memoir is a powerful reminder to all nurses to use their knowledge, competence, and most importantly, their voice, to speak out as expert witnesses to the injustice that individuals, communities and populations face. Cathy chronicles her advocacy and legacy of standing up for the rights and well-being of people on both micro and macro levels. Most notable is Crowe’s description of the cancellation of the National Housing Program, unbeknownst to her at the time. The absence of this program on a federal level sent aftershocks to frontline communities across the country that are still felt to this day and which have led to a drastic rise in homelessness.

This change created a need for Street Nurses to organize through political action. Crowe's examples demonstrate how policy from all levels of government directly affects the health of individuals. Crowe suggests that there is an urgent need for nurses to pay close attention to the political climate and to be keenly aware of the impact of any cuts or changes. This sage advice underscores the importance of aligning oneself with other nurses and advocacy groups. Examples of such groups today include the Harm Reduction Nurses Association, Street Nurses Network Toronto, Registered Nurses Association of Ontario and Canadian Nurses' Association, among others. Joining forces with likeminded nursing groups helps to form powerful coalitions and collaborations in solidarity and in opposition to austerity regimes that threaten public health as well as personal dignity, health and safety.

Crowe continues to be an advocate not only for the communities she serves, but also for new nurses who are hungry for mentorship to learn how to navigate social justice nursing. She paves the way by showing how a nurse activist can create real change and, in doing so, inspires others to follow suit in what she refers to as building "movement muscle". Her book encourages nurses to reclaim their role in social justice work (p.58), to be loud and to be heard. She stresses that being a nurse is inherently political and that, as nurses, we all need to work together for the betterment of our communities.

This book is a must read for anyone interested in a lifetime of "political nursing" (p. 15, 74) and powerful social justice activism. We were both captivated by its content yet lamented the absence of an index so we could easily reference some of Cathy's most poignant examples. While for some, this may be an interesting personal and professional chronical of a life of service to vulnerable people and communities. Yet for nurses, this book should read as a persistent appeal, a careful summons, an urgent invitation to collectively raise our arms in the air, stethoscope in one hand and clenched fist in the other.

There is a responsibility in reading this book for nurses to abandon the historical refrain "*I see and I am silent*" that Street Nurse, Cathy Crowe cites, and to rise up collectively as a powerful collective voice to effect change.