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BookNotes on How We Die by Sherwin B. Nuland

If hospice-volunteer-training were a for-credit course, one of the required texts would be Dr. Sherwin B. Nuland’s 1994 National Book Award winner for non-fiction, How We Die. For the past sixteen years this book has informed the lay-reader about the disease-and-aging processes that result in the death of the physical human body. The author has also promoted his concept of mortality as central to the working of the natural world, since Dr. Nuland sees the death of every life form as necessary to make way for a subsequent generation. The book is layered throughout with illustrative patient-histories and is particularly vivid when Dr. Nuland uses his own personal family history to focus his most important points.

Born in 1930, Dr. Nuland began with a distinguished career in medicine and later established a parallel career as a writer. A surgeon, Dr. Nuland teaches bioethics and medicine at Yale University School of Medicine. The author of twelve books—How We Die was his third—he has also contributed to numerous periodicals, including The New Yorker, The New Republic, and Time.

The core of How We Die is a physiology primer describing how the disease processes that account for the majority of deaths work on the human body and how the body succumbs. Examined are the various forms of heart disease, cancer, and Alzheimer’s disease. Also discussed are deaths by common forms of trauma. At the time of the book’s writing, AIDS was a disease at the height of its destructive power with relatively little being offered in resistance by professional medicine; Dr. Nuland writes with both compassion for the victims and horror of this particular disease. Readers who are not medical professionals can read this clear and direct prose and be greatly informed.

An inspired subtext runs through the book, and this is the function and very meaning of ‘hope’ in the processing of terminal illness and the approach of end-of-life. Dr. Nuland discusses ‘hope’ from the standpoint of the terminal patient and the patient’s family as well as from the standpoint of the medical professionals who treat the patient. He makes clear the possible conflicts that arise among various parties participating in the approaching death of an individual. Nuland builds the case for ‘hope’ meaning a desire for the best outcome when all the realistic alternatives are considered, not the unrealistic betting against stark probabilities and undesired possibilities.

Nuland’s voice and writing style are idiosyncratic and poetic, making his book a pleasure to read for its information and insight but also for the enjoyment of the elegance of his expression. He is also quick to quote other writers to support his point of view. For example, Dr. Nuland ends his chapter on death as the natural end to a long life with this paragraph, citing the sixteenth-century French essayist Michel de Montaigne: “Montaigne believed, in that uncertain and violent era, that death is easiest for those who during their lives have given it most thought, as though always to be prepared for its imminence. Only in this way, he wrote, is it possible to die resigned and reconciled ‘patiently and tranquilly,’ having experienced life more fully because of the constant awareness that it may soon come to an end. Out of this philosophy grew his admonition, ‘The utility of living consists not in the length of days, but in the use of time; a man may have lived long, and yet lived but a little.’”

(Thanks to UNC Hospice for the use of this review written by Steve Kohn UNC Hospice Volunteer.)