



The Art of Aging: A Doctor's Prescription for Well-Being

Sherwin B. Nuland

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In his landmark book *How We Die*, Sherwin B. Nuland profoundly altered our perception of the end of life. Now in *The Art of Aging*, Dr. Nuland steps back to explore the impact of aging on our minds and bodies, strivings and relationships. Melding a scientist's passion for truth with a humanist's understanding of the heart and soul, Nuland has created a wise, frank, and inspiring book about the ultimate stage of life's journey.

The onset of aging can be so gradual that we are often surprised to find that one day it is fully upon us. The changes to the senses, appearance, reflexes, physical endurance, and sexual appetites are undeniable—and rarely welcome—and yet, as Nuland shows, getting older has its surprising blessings. Age concentrates not only the mind, but the body's energies, leading many to new sources of creativity, perception, and spiritual intensity. Growing old, Nuland teaches us, is not a disease but an art—and for those who practice it well, it can bring extraordinary rewards.

"I'm taking the journey even while I describe it," writes Nuland, now in his mid-seventies and a veteran of nearly four decades of medical practice. Drawing on his own life and work, as well as the lives of friends both famous and not, Nuland portrays the astonishing variability of the aging experience. Faith and inner strength, the deepening of personal relationships, the realization that career does not define identity, the acceptance that some goals will remain unaccomplished—these are among the secrets of those who age well.

Will scientists one day fulfill the dream of eternal youth? Nuland examines the latest research into extending life and the scientists who are pursuing it. But ultimately, what compels him most is what happens to the mind and spirit as life reaches its culminating decades. Reflecting the wisdom of a long lifetime, *The Art of Aging* is a work of luminous insight, unflinching candor, and profound compassion.

From the Hardcover edition.

The Art of Aging: A Doctor's Prescription for Well-Being Details

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From Reader Review *The Art of Aging: A Doctor's Prescription for Well-Being* for online ebook

Larry Bassett says

Seems like I read this book almost four years ago, didn't write a review and gave it a "meh" three stars. Now I read it again looking for a counterpoint to Nuland's earlier (and I thought pessimistic) *How We Die*. But it turns out I like the book even less! So let me just copy and paste my current review and move on to some other reading:

I first read this book in 2010 when I thought I had better get some ideas about this aging business since I seemed to be doing it! But I evidently was not very impressed with it since I did not even write a review and gave it a so-so three stars – not a glowing recommendation. But I just read Nuland's 1993 book *How We Die* and thought I better come back to this one. Basically Nuland wrote in 1993 that, in his experience of thirty years as a surgeon, death with dignity rarely happened because the process of a body wearing out was almost always a bad experience.

The Art of Aging was published in 2007. I thought maybe in the fourteen or so years since 1993, Nuland had found more hope for death with dignity. It seems that maybe his conclusion those years later was that dignity is found in a life well lived and not likely in a dignified death. Oh, well!

Sherwin Nuland is a bit of a preacher and his good news for mankind is that to lead our best lives, we must take care of our body and mind. Not too astounding to be sure, but he does dress it up in some fancy and flowery words. And then to prove his point, he dwells at length on the long life of Michael DeBakey who was in his mid nineties and a very active man when author Nuland talked with him in 2005. DeBakey was Chancellor of the Baylor College of Medicine until he was 97 and died just short of his 100th birthday in 2008.

Mr. Nuland is a fascinating character to say the least. You can tune in to some of his TED talks online to get some of his story from his own mouth. The twenty-two minute 2001 TED talk I watched is him talking about electroshock therapy and his personal experience receiving this therapy in the 1960s. You can find that talk here: http://www.ted.com/talks/sherwin_nula...

Nuland writes at length – dare I say pontificates? – about the ability of people to do good things for other people. He could not be speaking of himself in this paragraph from the book, could he?

Most of us know these kind of things, though they have been robbed of a great deal of meaning because they have become the stuff of too much ponderous pap delivered from pulpits, the pages of maxim-filled hortatory literature, and the self-satisfied lips of an occasional latter-day Polonius. But in spite of the windy pontifications in which these ideas are sometimes expressed, mindfulness of them is inherent in human perception, though they are often ignored, forgotten, buried, or simply dismissed as the staggeringly banal pronouncements of would-be sages.

It might be fair to acknowledge “the beam that is in thine own eye”!

This is a book of stories about people whom Nuland considers to be “aging successfully” and often with the

help of a higher power. God is not a magnet for me so I find the inclusion of Him to be a negative for me in this book. Clearly God is a player for Nuland and most of the people to whom he introduces us. There is also an aspect in most of these folks that I can only describe as a determination to live to be an old age. In describing the goal of an elderly shot putter to hold the record for hundred year olds, Nuland says, "I am just as determined to be there as he is." I try to reconcile this man with the one who wrote in 1985 that death with dignity is most elusive and should not be anticipated. Could he have been born again in some sense, I wonder? But, just to confuse me, he drops in the humanist point of view.

Somewhere in the middle of it, I play the devil's advocate by posing the well-worn question of motivation when there is no God looking down with favor. Why does Pete Barker live a moral existence, why does he pay scrupulous attention to playing the game of life fairly and with regard for others, if there is no reward? Indeed, why should any of us? "Because it's the right thing to do," he says straightforwardly, as if the answer should be self-evident.

So just when I think I have him in an airtight God-box, he squirms a bit and I have to relax my grip. What do you believe, Mr. Nuland? And when I ask that, he slips easily into his verbiage:

Human nature is far too complex for such simplistic explanations, and there are far too many shades of Eros and Thanatos in each of us – shades, respectively, of the life and death principles, of the optimistic and the morbid, of the need for guilt and self-punishment and the need for joy and the self-expression that leads to fulfilling happiness. As with the amorphous coagulum of influences that form one's character, there is within us a disordered amalgam of impulses and instincts that are harmful and impulses and instincts that lead only to the good. It is not written in our stars or ourselves that we are compelled without option to respond to either good or bad in any fixed, predetermined, or "inherent" way. We have free will, whether we believe it to have been granted by God or granted by the very nature of the human mind. We are, in fact, capable of choosing how we respond to the circumstances of our lives, and in this way we are capable of changing them for the better – even when our initial impulse is counterproductive.

Just saying, Nuland goes for the compound complex!

The Art of Aging strangely reminded me of watching *Queen for a Day* or *This Is Your Life* in the 1950s; it is a bit syrupy sweet and cloyingly saccharine, definitively glass-half-fullish with the glory overcoming any gloom. If you can't tell, that is not really my cup of tea! While I am free associating, let me not forget "a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down." We are told that while we do not look forward to aging, here are some amazing stories that will give us hope.

As Hurey Coleman exhorts us,

But once that [stroke] has happened, you just have to go on. Have faith in God and take whatever medications the doctor puts you on. A lot of people don't want to abide by rules, but you have to.

To quote Anonymous, "Makes me want to puke!"

I am sorry Dr. Nuland, I just seem to have a bad attitude about your book. Can you give a book two stars

grudgingly? I want to say irreverently that I did not like this book and go the one star route. But it has enough saving grace and interest for me to say that I am going to pass it on to my 93 year old father with whom I am having a regular conversation about aging. He may find this book inspiring - but that feeling eludes me at the moment. But I want to grant that for some it may have that impact.

Heather says

I was disappointed in this book. Compared to other science/medical books I've read recently, this was pretty dry. There isn't a lot of anecdotes, and it seems overly philosophical. A lot of fancy language and vocabulary, but largely just wordiness. I didn't even get through the whole book, but so far, he's talked a lot about two people he interviewed who, in his opinion, aged amazingly well. One is a Catholic who tells him that her faith plays a huge role in how she's accepted the challenges of getting older/health problems. The second is an atheist. The author explicitly says that, despite the woman's claim that her relationship with God has helped her age gracefully, she really owes everything to her ability to make good choices. As a woman of faith myself, I can't help but think that one's relationship with God and understanding of what truly matters in life is what really makes the difference as we grow older. The author is quick to point out that relationships and serving others is important, but again, denies that real source of that.

Afton Rorvik says

The author, a former professor of surgery at Yale University, write with clarity and candor about growing old and the eventual process of death. One of the most moving parts of the book is his series of letters with an aging woman who thought she should take her own life. He reminds her that her life is of great value, especially to those she loves.

Dr Nuland writes about aging intentionally. He explains: "Why not also prepare ourselves [for aging] emotionally by putting away spiritual and intellectual capital? Why not prepare ourselves physically, by becoming accustomed to regular vigorous exercise and proper diet long before they become crucial to avoiding frailty? Why not prepare ourselves with a cultivation of the caritas that can ring untold rewards to every stage of our lives? Like a well-run pension fund, what we put in is proportional to what we get out, and the interest keeps growing."

I wish the book had contained a bit more research although I did really love the stories and the interviews he includes.

Jo says

very good book on aging from the author of 'How we die'

Dr. Nuland steps back to explore the impact of aging on our minds and bodies, strivings and relationships. Melding a scientist's passion for truth with a humanist's understanding of the heart and soul, Nuland has created a wise, frank, and inspiring book about the ultimate stage of life's journey.

The onset of aging can be so gradual that we are often surprised to find that one day it is fully upon us. The changes to the senses, appearance, reflexes, physical endurance, and sexual appetites are undeniable—and rarely welcome—and yet, as Nuland shows, getting older has its surprising blessings.

Debbie says

To use the author's words, this book is not about "eating granola and emulating Okinawans ... this book is about mind and spirit" as we mature. It's about how to age with grace and find joy and contentment in our last decades by establishing a sense of mutual caring and connectedness with others, intelligently caring for our physical bodies, and incorporating creative outlets to keep the mind challenged. Aging is not a disease, but rather an art to be honed and nurtured, ideally starting well before most of us are ready to admit our years. Every stage of life is preparation for the one ahead.

I especially enjoyed the stories he shared of several people he felt were aging successfully. In each in depth interview he asked the important question (to me) about how/if faith played a role in their lives. He lost me in the chapter on adding centuries to our years through the search for the "master aging gene". I skimmed the topic because I simply have no interest there.

The writing is good and I have another of his bestsellers on my shelf, *How We Die: Reflections on Life's Final Chapter*.

Judy says

I originally picked this book up hoping it would help me get over my dismay at the appalling number of wrinkles beginning to populate my neck and face. While Sherwin Nuland, surgeon and Yale professor, seems sympathetic to the physical perils of aging, he teaches us that "growing old is not a disease but an art - and for those who practice it well, it can bring extraordinary rewards."

Nuland has straightforward advice for keeping an aging body from deteriorating: exercise, don't smoke, eat in moderation, keep active doing things you enjoy. He emphasizes the importance of maintaining social/family relationships. Don't think of setbacks as endings succumbing to despair; rather find pleasure in small things. "In tragedy the unwise see only loss; the wise find meaning." Find something to be enthusiastic about. Continue to make contributions.

His chapter on wisdom was especially engaging to me. His style is somewhat professorial, but still easy to follow.

Gale Jake says

Disappointing. After reading Nuland's superb *How We Die* I had high expectations. After a pondering preface, there were excellent sections on the aging of the brain, heart, skeleton, hormones, skin and hazards of smoking. All very good, related to his *How We Die* chapters on these subjects, but not repetitive of them.

The book made several references to "use it or lose it" ie keeping mind and body exercised, and positive attitude as the very best solutions to health, very good points.. It could have ended and I would have given the book 4 stars at that point.

However, it degraded into self help psychology for nearly all the rest of the chapters. It rambled on and on, quoting Bible and Talmud precepts, relaying comments of famous people, went on way too long on meetings with a couple famous people. The book did not do justice to the title. Mostly his philosophy of life, substantiated by his selection of quotes, actions and philosophies of people from the past. Im about age of the author when he wrote the book and was looking to connect with his ideas. I have his *How We Live* on my bookshelf and hope it is as good as his *How We Die*. If not, then he is a one book author.

Margaret Bucklin says

A great book for people in their 40's and 50's

I have always felt that we talk too much about how horrible it is to be old and make jokes about it. This provides a great map for a meaningful life span.

Sandy says

I liked some chapters and not others. Especially, I liked "A Friendship in Letters." I enjoyed the author Sherwin Nuland's candor as he described an unlikely friendship's unfolding. The particular premise regarding the value of living which he shares with his pen pal was to me profound and something I had never really heard described in writing before. It touched me.

I purposely skipped "How We Age: Body and Mind." I don't want my consciousness to absorb medical descriptions of how my body will decline as I age. I'll deal with each reality as it comes.

In "Drinking from the Fountain of Youth," I learned about the concept of "compression of morbidity" in which our bodies stay strong and healthy longer with a sharp decline only near our death. It is hopeful hearing how studies show that seniors can and are staying healthy longer via body and mind exercises.

A few of Dr. Nuland's other chapters share stories from inspirational elders. These I mainly skimmed; they didn't hold my interest. "Adding Centuries to Our Years" argues against spending resources on scientific research solely to extend the life span. I agree with the author but found the information just annoying. His final chapters address wisdom, creativity, introspection, and other values to be cultivated for the golden years. Much of this writing was ho-hum, but I appreciate the author's overall advice to prepare ourselves spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, and physically, and his specific suggestions on how to do so.

Pat says

This book is VERY motivating. Written by a physician in his 70s it challenges the reader to take charge of

making the best of the last part of life. I highly recommend it.

Ana says

Two threads I followed, as I saw it, in this wonderfully written book: The first, free yourself of morbid preoccupation when it comes to your health. The second, a quote from page 114: ""The difficulties lessen with each small triumph after the first few. Every hesitant trip to the gym, every tempting calorie reluctantly pushed away, every difficult refusal to allow rancor and self-righteousness their insistent demands, every small contribution to another's needs, every hour spent nurturing a relationship -- all of these are building blocks to the gradually rising edifice of a changing, and in time changed, image of what we are."" There is so much more to this book, pick it up and see. You will not find miracle cures, or the next vitamin fad to rush out and buy. It's much more simple than that. Happy reading.

John Thorndike says

Nuland's *How We Die* was an incisive and graphic book. I loved it, and looked forward to *The Art of Aging*—but what a deception. A better title for this book would be *The Art of Pontificating*.

Nuland's mantras are *You must, You should, You have to, You'd better*. It's life-coaching at its worst, lumbering and clichéd. There are a few chapters in which Dr. Nuland discusses the physical process of aging, and they are a great relief. There are also several portraits of older men and women who might inspire us—which is why I give the book two stars rather than none.

If Nuland could boil off the fluff, he might have written a decent magazine article. But no, he has to tell us a thousand times about what makes a good and inspiring older person, all in the most abstract prose. I wanted to escort him into a beginner's writing class where they would explain to him, as repetitively as he writes, how he should show more and tell less.

The next-to-last chapter begins: "In a book on aging, it would seem a worthy undertaking to reflect on wisdom. And so, as a man of now considerable years and therefore some prerogative, I will not hesitate to do just that, accompanied by the hope that I can avoid the great temptation of waxing ponderous."

Dear reader, he can't.

Okay, you need an example. Here's a paragraph from that same chapter:

"Wisdom has a purpose; that purpose is action. This means that action must sometimes be taken with the full understanding that decisions may possibly result in less than perfect consequences. Because taking action in the face of incomplete information is the usual condition in which wisdom needs to be applied, each choice, no matter how wise and with what good outcome, is a choice likely to have some drawbacks of its own, just as even wonder drugs have side effects of which account must be taken in their use. It is in weighing what might be called the cost-benefit ratio of each decision that wisdom faces one of its most difficult tests. Knowing that unwelcome imperfections are the inevitable accompaniments of even the wisest decisions should never paralyze decision-making, or cause hesitancy in a decision's implementation. The wise take action in the face of imperfect knowledge, and even given the probability of imperfect solutions."

The paragraphs that come before and after that one are filled with the same mush.

Even so, let me repeat my admiration for Nuland's *How We Die*. That was a great book.

Jim Gleason says

July 28, 2018 - in rearranging my library of books donated to a local Gift of Life Donor Program's Transplant Family House, I couldn't help but be attracted to this book that I had read back in the 2007 original release days. "Borrowing" it from my own donated library, I put it ahead of the 30+ other 'to read' books in my queue as a book to reread. Interesting that recently I've chosen to reread two other favorite books when there are so many very interesting books in that waiting list to read. I feel it says something about how good I feel those books are (referring to "When Crickets Cry" and "Enjoy Every Sandwich: Living each day as if it were your last").

So, why the fascination with aging in these last two titles? Well I can trace it back to a recent doctor's visit when that specialist had finally given up on finding pancreatic cancer in this almost 25 year survivor of a life saving heart transplant after he had repeated several internal scoping tests without finding that dreaded condition. He then used words that set me back on my heels: "Mr. Gleason, you are an amazing patient, doing so very well now in your eighth decade...". "Eighth decade" !! I was only (only??) 75, not in my 80's! But realizing that living into your 70's is your eighth decade of life. Wow, what a thought as I sat there, glad that he had failed to find that issue after having faced and accepted our own mortality back in 1994 with that heart transplant and now so many years of a fulfilled, passionate and energetic life for almost a quarter of a century - mind blowing thoughts.

Having read all of Sherwin Nuland's award winning books, I am drawn into rereading this: *The Art of Aging: A doctor's prescription for well being* 11 years later in life from that first reading, seeing his words from the perspective of a decade of living later. And so I embark on this second voyage of his awesome prose and insights . . . (while reading in parallel two other very different 'just for pleasure' readings with the excuse that it's Summertime and we all deserve time away for 'just Summer readings' like those)

(this 2nd reading just completed...) Still in awe at Nuland's prose and deep medical insights communicated in easy to read layman language. So much deeper appreciation for the insights and real-life human end of life stories he uses to convey the messages of how to live life fully even as we age and have to adapt to our changing bodies with passing years. His messages are very uplifting and inspiring, using his own life by way of examples. Sherwin Nuland died in 2014 from prostate cancer at the age of 84 but left us a legacy of many excellent books that I highly recommend for readers of medical and self-help books. After this repeat read (which I so very seldom do given so many books yet to read in my 'to read' shelf), I wanted to see and hear him 'in person' and found several excellent YouTube videos of his presentations, all VERY enjoyable and adding another dimension to my reading of his works.

This rereading was an excellent example of how a book can be very different based on reading it at different stages of one's life. I am so glad I choose to pick this one up again.

As written here back in 2007 after that first read:

(Note: this author quickly became my all time favorite writer, leading me to buy all of his wonderful books, enjoying each and every one of them!)

The title says it all - a must read for anyone who is aging (and aren't we all?).

see this and more than a hundred other organ donation/transplant related books - many with my personal reviews - at <http://www.trioweb.org/resources/book...>

Karin says

This is pretty realistic for me. Aging is the hardest thing to adjust to if you are used to being self-reliant and independent. Having to admit that there are times you need help from others is very difficult and often depressing. Maybe Dr. Nuland oversimplifies some of the issues and what works for one person is not necessarily helpful for someone else. Yet the book is worth reading for a different perspective from our own. What was helpful to me is that he differentiates between aging and disease. One is not a result of the other necessarily, knowing the difference is half the battle. He also makes the point that prolonging life should not be priority over improving our natural lifespan as it is. Quality of life is key to our physical and emotional wellbeing, living longer and longer is hardly desirable as long as we cannot enjoy life as it is for us once we head toward old age.

Donna Craig says

This book has some interesting info but is a ponderous read. I expected mostly advice, but the book is mostly made up of the overly-detailed stories of people who've aged well. I wanted the advice. Oh, well.
