

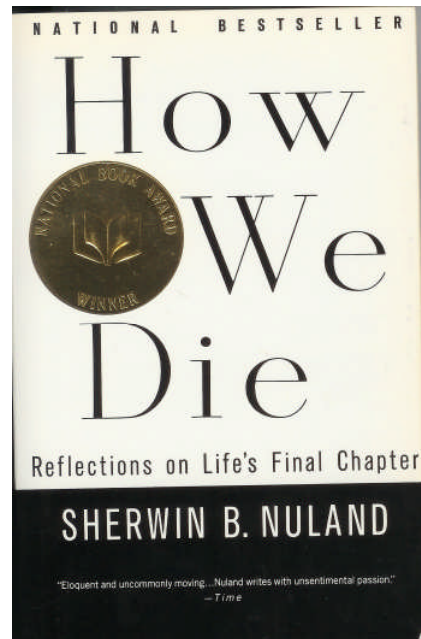
A Review of

How We Die, Reflections on Life's Final Chapter

Author: Sherwin B. Nuland, MD

Reviewed by Jim Gleason, heart recipient

1. Surgeons view of death from personal, physical and emotional views
2. Even if you don't read all of the various death descriptions, be sure to read the final two chapters, *The Lessons Learned* and *Epilogue* to see what he summarizes from all the details provided in the earlier chapters
3. Lot said about extending life beyond what is reasonable, due to drs wanting to solve the Riddle
4. Interesting seeing his views and contrasting them with his actions when it came to his own brother dying of cancer – admits a mistake, very human
5. eloquent writing, well read and quoted
6. 1994 National Book Award nonfiction winner, Yale physician Nuland's study of the clinical, biological and emotional details of dying was a 14-week PW bestseller.



In the same year as my own heart transplant, an amazing book was published titled: **How We Die**. I only coincidentally “discovered “ this book twelve years later and was fascinated in its reading, especially from the perspective of one who was still alive due to the gift of a donated heart and at 62 years of age, am now again looking to the future where my own mortality gets more interesting with each passing year of living this very fulfilled life post transplant. Let me say up front that nowhere in this book is the organ transplant subject or words mentioned.

By the time you finish reading this amazing book, you will change the way you view your own mortality and how you expect to die and face that final moment.

details of deaths resulting from heart disease, stroke, cancer, AIDS, Alzheimer's disease, old age, accidents, suicide, euthanasia and murder or violent physical assault. Crammed with intriguing scientific findings and useful facts, as well as case histories of dying patients whom Nuland (*Doctors: The Biography of Medicine*) has treated, his report is imbued with wisdom rooted in a belief that the dignity we seek in dying must be found in the art of living life to the fullest.

what death means to the doctor, patient, nurse, administrator, and family. Thought provoking and humane, his is not the usual syrup-and-generality approach to this well-worn topic. Fundamental to it are Nuland's experiences with the deaths of his aunt, his older brother, and a longtime patient. With each of these deaths, he made what he now sees as mistakes of denial, false hope, and refusal to abide by a patient's wishes. Disease, not death, is the real enemy, he reminds us, despite the facts that most deaths are unpleasant, painful, or agonized, and to argue otherwise is to plaster over the truth. The doctor, Nuland stresses, should instill in dying patients the hope not for a miraculous cure but for the dignity and high quality of the remainder of their lives as well as of what they have meant--and will continue to mean--to family, friends, and colleagues.

Humans are probably the only animals capable of understanding their mortality and envisioning the day of their death. Sherwin B. Nuland shows, however, that while we conceptualize our eventual demise, most people have unrealistic expectations of their death. Misconceptions abound. The expectation of a noble death with loved ones gathered, final farewells, and then eternal slumber forms a common though inaccurate mental image of what many people look forward to in their final moments.

There are several themes that permeate Nuland's books. One theme is that death, like birth, is a messy process. Though we may wish for the noble death, more likely we will die slowly from a lack of oxygen in the brain. This, in turn, will result from a failing heart, lungs, or blood vessels. Death does not come easy, and although the final moment is sometime serene and tranquil, months or weeks of painful physical degeneration often precedes it.

The second theme in Nuland's book is that death is not only inevitable, it is necessary. While life should be fought for as long as possible, we should all realize that ultimately the battle will be lost. We will die. Nuland takes a dim view of heroic attempts to extend life beyond the point where the body has simply failed and death becomes not only inevitable, but also the proper way for nature to renew herself. Nature uses death to clear the way for new generations, and just as we cannot experience the green buds of spring unless the leaves from last season fall to the ground, the very nature of life demands that when death becomes inevitable we exit the stage for the next generation.

Nuland's third point is that the measure of a life is not found so much in how we die, but in how we live and how we are remembered. Few of us can control the way in which we die. For some of us it will be quick, for others death will linger and the process will be slow and painful. Some will find humiliation in the loss of bodily functions or mental facilities. However it comes to anyone of us, death is just a part of our lives and the real meaning in death is in the life remembered.

The part that struck me the most came from that final "Lessons Learned" chapter when Dr. Nuland writes:

"All of this makes more precious each hour of those we have been given; it demands that life must be useful and rewarding. If by our work and pleasure, our triumphs and our failures, each of us is contributing to an evolving process of continuity not only of our species but of the entire balance of nature, the dignity we create in the time allotted to us becomes a continuum with the dignity we achieve by the altruism of accepting the necessity of death."

Note: For further information about **How We Die** and purchase options, click on [Amazon.com](#) or [Barnes & Noble](#)

Brief bio:

Jim Gleason, received his heart transplant Oct. '94. Jim volunteers with NKF, UNOS and the Gift of Life Donor Program in Philadelphia as well as being a nationally recognized speaker and author. His book, [A Gift from the Heart](#), is offered both for downloading or on a CD free as thanks to his donor family and can be obtained by clicking of the title here or contacting him via e-mail at GLEASONJIM@AOL.COM.

FROM THE PUBLISHER

Attempting to demythologize the process of dying, Nuland explores how we shall die, each of us in a way that will be unique. Through particular stories of dying—of patients, and of his own family—he examines the seven most common roads to death: old age, cancer, AIDS, Alzheimer's, accidents, heart disease, and strokes, revealing the facets of death's multiplicity.

"It's impossible to read *How We Die* without realizing how earnestly we have avoided this most unavoidable of subjects, how we have protected ourselves by building a cultural wall of myths and lies. I don't know of any writer or scientist who has shown us the face of death as clearly, honestly and compassionately as Sherwin Nuland does here."—James Gleick