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THE ART OF AGING: A Doctor's Prescription for Well-Being

By Sherwin B. Nuland

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In a 1983 workshop, a woman, vibrant and lovely, read aloud to us an appreciation she'd written to her body for serving her well for 85 years. Her closing words: "I am ready to be ashes in somebody's rose garden." Not eager but ready, she had mastered life's final stage: the art of aging.

Most who've long walked hand in hand with time deem the art of aging very hard to master. They will find Dr. Sherwin B. Nuland's *The Art of Aging* a valuable guide.

Professor of surgery at Yale, Nuland, 76, blends medical expertise, eclectic interests and erudition into a graceful and gracious primer rich in humanity.

As in his National Book Award-winning *How We Die*, Nuland steers readers away from harmful diets of pie in the sky while prescribing how to keep tarnish off our golden years.

The first step is to adapt the way we think of ourselves. We should "desire to maintain good health, not the delusion of being young." Then, aging can become "the gift that establishes the boundaries of our lives." Rather than kill or waste time, Nuland urges us to use it: "It is never too late to find new tributaries that add vibrancy to our lives."

We live longer than our forebears. Last century saw a 33-year gain in life expectancy. When Queen Elizabeth II ascended in 1952, she sent telegrams to her 255 subjects who reached 100th birthdays that year; now she sends over 5000. The average man reaching 65 in 2007 can expect to live another 17 years; the average woman, 20.

To live them well, Nuland advises maintenance of the machines that are our bodies. While "aging is not a disease," it is a risk factor for many diseases and a time of decline in hormonal systems, muscle mass, vision, bladder elasticity, gastrointestinal efficiency. We must keep hearts and immune systems strong with vigorous exercise and weight training. Aerobic fitness not only strengthens the heart but the brain, reducing loss of cerebral tissue, improving brain functioning, and reducing psychological depression.

As he had in *How We Die*, Nuland makes superb use of real life examples of laudable aging: 98-year-old cardiovascular surgeon Michael DeBakey; resilient 80-year-old Miriam Gabler, whose experience surviving ovarian cancer "played a big part in teaching [her] that time is so precious, and so are people"; Hurey Coleman, who overcame a massive early-middle-age stroke and typifies the attitude Nuland finds among those who've remained undefeated because they have gone on trying: "The crisis was an event in their past, now behind them and perhaps necessitating certain changes in their lives, not something that marks them as sick people."

Particularly absorbing are actress Patricia Neal and her former husband, writer Roald Dahl. After Neal's devastating stroke at age 39 it was the irascible Dahl--whom even Neal said "looked down on the world with deft authority"--whose bullying tough love pushed her to recover and thrive.

Nuland observes that, "Fear of aging is more than fear of decrepitude. Ultimately it is fear of death." So he urges caution as desperate people turn to the promises of scientists whom Nuland believes wildly optimistic: molecular biologist Cynthia Kenyon who has found a "master gene" which she suspects we can manipulate to forestall aging; Aubrey deGrey, certain he has identified the molecular basis for aging, who believes that we can live for thousands of years. Nuland insists "that there is at present no medicine or pill of any value to combat aging, nor is there likely to be one soon, if ever."

Nor should we wish to emulate Tennyson's deathless Tithonus and "pass beyond the goal of ordinance/Where all should pause, as is most meet for all." Says Nuland, "Both individual fulfillment and the ecological balance of life on this planet are best served by dying when our inherent biology decrees that we do," approximately 120 years maximum. Instead, we should be "decreasing the morbidity and disabilities now attendant on extreme old age."

Nuland fears well-intentioned efforts to prolong life or choose the genetic makeup of children could "breed out variety (and) may alter factors necessary for the survival of our species and its relationship to every form of life on earth."

At his warmest addressing aging and our relation to others, Nuland counsels, "It is when we practice virtue in regard to its value to individual human beings other than ourselves that it rewards us the most. The reward is a happiness that sustains the self-image we need—at any age—for the peace of mind that nurtures the spirit.... It is the purest form of enlightened self-interest. It helps us feel good about being 'the kind of human being we are.'" The greatest aids to joyful aging, then, are connectedness ("No one can live a solitary or a lonely old age when feeling understood by those who matter in his or her life") and forgiveness, for "Every retained grudge is a clue to immaturity."

Chiefly, as we approach the end, our prize is wisdom: "the management of knowledge...knowledge put to use by judgment." If we retain our "receptiveness to change," if we continue to grow, Nuland feels we acquire a wisdom that leads to love for our fellow humans and an understanding of how to die, which Montaigne pointed out is also understanding of how to live. Fittingly then, it is Montaigne whom Nuland quotes toward the close: "I want Death to find me planting my cabbages, neither worrying about it nor about the unfinished gardening."