

Remembering Sherwin Nuland, a Surgeon Who Healed With Words

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Sherwin B. Nuland, M.D., who [died](#) at his Hamden, Connecticut home last week, conducted his life in the same manner he wrote his acclaimed books on medicine, medical history, and the human condition. He was incapable of composing a sentence that wasn't clear, elegant, and true.

A brilliant surgeon, [Dr. Nuland](#) operated at the Yale-New Haven Hospital and was a clinical professor of surgery at the Yale University School of Medicine from 1962 to 1991. Dr. Nuland was more widely known, however, as an accomplished historian of medicine and the National Book Award-winning author of *How We Die* (1994), which stimulated an international dialogue on “life’s final chapter,” physician-assisted suicide, and the disconnect most people—and doctors—experience between living a good life and hoping for the elusive “good death.” “The dignity we seek in dying,” he wrote, “must be found in the dignity with which we have lived our lives.” *How We Die* was also a finalist for the 1995 Pulitzer Prize in nonfiction and sold more than 500,000 copies.

Among his other books were *Doctors* (1988), which documented the history of Western medicine through the lives of some of the greatest physicians over the past two millennia, *The Wisdom of the Body* (1997), *The Mysteries Within* (2000), *The Art of Aging* (2007), *The Uncertain Art* (2008), and a series of delightful biographies on Maimonides (2005), Leonardo da Vinci (2000), and Ignaz Semmelweis, the nineteenth-century obstetrician who taught doctors the importance of washing their hands in between examining patients (2003). Nuland’s rich, philosophical reflections on life and medicine also appeared in such publications as *Time*, *The New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, and the *New England Journal of Medicine*—not to mention the *New Republic*, where he was a contributing editor.

Shep—he always insisted on being called by the shortened version of his Yiddish given name, Shepsel—was, first and foremost, a physician. He cared deeply about the welfare of his patients and their families, a concern that extended to his students, colleagues, and, after he became a world-famous author, his readers. As a long distance swimmer in the choppy waters of American medicine, I have yet to meet a kinder, more generous, or more emotionally secure practitioner.

During the animated conversations we enjoyed over more than two decades, we often discussed the positive impact a series of horrible personal events had on our medical lives. We both believed these travails made us better doctors and more compassionate men. For Shep, it was surviving a harrowing childhood shadowed by the death of his mother when he was eleven, the unpredictability of an immigrant father he later diagnosed as suffering from syphilis, and, as an adult, a battle with clinical depression. For me, it was becoming a widower at age 28 and the emotional maelstroms my first wife’s death etched into my brain despite being granted numerous second chances in the form of remarriage, two wonderful children, and a gratifying career. I could never claim to transform my life events into life lessons as nobly as Shep did. But he always made me want to try.

In *Lost in America* (2003), a haunting and brilliant memoir of his father Meyer Nudelman, Shep begins the book with an aphorism attributed to the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria: “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.” He more than merely quoted Philo’s words; he lived by them and inspired us all to want to be and feel better. Like the great doctors he admired and wrote so well about, Dr. Nuland was the consummate healer.

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