The Wisdom of Sherwin Nuland

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When *The New York Times* announced in March 5, 2014 the death of surgeon and man of letters Sherwin Nuland, I felt like I had lost a friend. Maybe not a close personal friend but a fellow journeyer in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century seeking to comprehend the complex and interdependent relationship among literature, science, and the practice and art of medicine. I had first met and spoken with Nuland when he came to give Grand Rounds in the Department of Psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical College in the late 1990s. It turned out we had a mutual friend at Yale where Nuland had taught and practiced medicine for many years. As was the case with many of those whose lives he affected and who listened to and corresponded with him the impact on me was singular and lasting. In my own experience, only William Sloane Coffin, chaplain at Yale, anti-war activist, and preacher without peer, came close to holding a similar hold on my imagination. My abiding interest in Nuland and his work led me to write reviews of three of his books that appeared in the pages of the *Journal*. They are *The Wisdom of the Body* (later reissued as *How We Live*) in 1997, *The Mysteries Within: A Surgeon Reflects on Medicine's Myths* in 2000, and his brief but revealing autobiography *Leonardo Da Vinci* in 2003. I had commenced my literary exploration of Nuland's work with an earlier review for another professional publication of *How We Die* that won a National book Award in 1994.

Nuland's biography is an archetypal American tale. He was born of immigrant Russian parents in 1930 in the depths of the Depression. His mother died of cancer, the disease that also took his life, when he was 11 years old. He lived among extended family members and had at best and a strained and distant relationship with his father who appeared to his son to be forever adrift, lonely, and overwhelmed. It is no accident that his painful and searing personal family memoir is entitled *Lost in America*. The family lived in New York City where Nuland was raised in a cramped apartment in the Bronx. He was a striver, an overachiever par excellence, determined to rise above and out of what he knew to be sad and limited circumstances. He attended New York University and then the Yale School of Medicine where he became, in spite of his being Jewish, the Head Resident in the Department of Surgery. The

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Head Residency in surgery was a position at that time most often reserved for WASPs. He thus entered yet another select circle usually reserved for young men (and they were almost all men at the time) who were not only medically gifted but socially privileged.

It always seemed to me, and this Nuland affirmed, that he was forever a kid from the Bronx driven to achieve and succeed in the face of great odds. The greatest of these blocks came in the form of a crippling and protracted depression that brought Nuland close to the brink of seeming to be untreatable save through lobotomy. A young resident psychiatrist pushed for a last chance at moving past and through what seemed an interminable and intractable darkness. This advice was for administration of electric shock therapy (ECT). After two series of ten treatments (the usual course was six to eight), he began to recover. Nuland spoke in print and in person about his treatment and return to practice and included words to the effect that “all great religious traditions speak of redemption and resurrection because they know it, see it.” From that point in life forward, he went back into the practice and teaching of surgery and on to a renewed career as medical historian, ethicist, and essayist with large professional and nonprofessional audiences.

Nuland developed a refined inner existential balancing of a patient’s hope for cure alongside a harsh and realistic knowledge that organs fail, bodies decay, and whether we like it or not, death is often not pretty, let alone dignified. Two quotations, favorites of mine, come to mind for capturing the polarity and paradox in Nuland’s work as he grappled with these realities. The first is from Robert Penn Warren in *All the King’s Men* (1949)

Man is conceived in sin and born in corruption and he passeth from the stink of the didie to the stench of the shroud. There is always something.

And then, there are these words of Eugene O’Neil in *The Great God Brown* (1926)

Man is born broken, He lives by mending, The grace of God is glue.

Nuland realized, I believe, what grace is even if he remained a determined skeptic and a respectful nonbeliever. His recovery and new chance at life allowed his readers to see flesh being sown together, organs repaired, or see them break down or be invaded by metastatic disease. *There is always something.*

He once wrote to me in response to another of my book reviews in the *Journal*, this one of the Michael Bliss biography *William Osler: A Life in Medicine* (1999), that he agreed with my assessment that even with this great physician’s abandonment of his father’s religious beliefs and vocation as an Anglican priest in Canada, he remained true to the elder Osler’s embrace of Victorian “high seriousness”: hard work, earnestness, honesty, and service to others. These habits of mind were nurtured in Osler as a son of the manse. Osler became part of the priesthood of medicine dedicated to scientifically based approaches to healing. One may leave the religion and culture of one’s early life only to find its essence transformed and later expressed in ways honoring that formative experience. Though not directly stated, I believe Nuland saw a similar process in his own life.

Sherwin Nuland was a doctor and a writer. He was a sensualist who loved the contours and colors of paintings and sculpture. A reader can sense his excitement when he describes what he calls in *How We Die* a “voyage into the gut,” the region of the body so well known to him through many days and nights in the operating room. He saw and he helps others to see in intimate detail what he calls “the mysteries within” each of us. He was a passionate man. As Robert Penn Warren says in his poem *Audubon*

He walked in the world, Knew the lust of the eye.

The same may be forever said of Sherwin Nuland.