

Review of

## **The Art of Ageing**

Sherwin B. Nuland,  
*Scribe Publications, 2007*  
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Reviewer: Brenton Holmes, COTA Over 50s

Sherwin B. Nuland he is well credentialed – a full professor at Yale, a National Book Award winner and Pulitzer prize finalist. His latest effort, *The Art of Ageing*, is a thoughtful contribution to a topic that is probably of more than passing interest to the several million Australians already beyond the age of fifty, and who, according to the statistics, are likely to be sticking around for a while yet. Preferably not sticking; more like walking, dancing, jogging, thinking, creating, connecting, contributing, as Dr. Nuland would have it.

*The Art of Ageing* is not just one more of those exhortatory self-help books that clutter the shelf at your local bookstore. There is an element of American chutzpah to be found there, but when it comes to giving advice, Nuland is at pains to distance himself from windy pontificators and the “staggeringly banal pronouncements of would-be sages”. And by and large, he achieves his goal.

An early forty page chapter surveys in a matter-of-fact way the changes in body and mind that accompany ageing. While there is remarkable variability in both the timing and degree of changes that people experience, it simply happens that the mechanisms and metabolism that keep the remarkable human machine ticking over gradually rust or retire. The chapter is a perfect layman's guide to cellular dynamics, genetic predispositions, nerves and synapses, blood flow, brain function, muscle strength and bone density, libido and sensory decline. Smokers, we learn, are not to be envied.

But the story is not one of decay and senility. Rather it is a narrative of accepting the changes that come with ageing - not to simply roll over into acquiescence, but to adopt a prudent course of planning for ageing, attending to the many preventative

measures available, and managing the process in a systematic and reflective way. There is much to find encouraging in the proven and simple techniques for maintaining health in such key areas as bone strength and muscle tone. The things we have always known about diet and exercise remain worth knowing – and acting upon.

Much of the book is devoted to stories of individuals who, in their quite distinctive ways, have experienced satisfactions and sustained wellbeing right through their latter years, notwithstanding serious episodes of illness, or early lives lived at high pressure, or under physical or emotional hardship. The widely-known story of the rehabilitation of actress Patricia Neal, wife of author Roald Dahl and victim of a severely disabling stroke, is included, illuminated by an interview with Ms Neal as an eighty year old. None of the stories is cloying or sentimental. Nuland has done well to use them to paint a rich picture of possibility from a diverse palette of human experience – an Emeritus Professor, a factory worker, an immigrant, afflicted woman.

The stories reinforce Nuland's own messages about ageing, notably the importance of making choices, especially in the face of adversity. It is one's response to adversity, rather than the adversity itself, that determines the shape of the future. Eschewing both Pollyanna and Pangloss, Nuland has a very Aristotelian approach to ageing. He urges us to model ourselves on those whose way of growing old we admire. He stresses the importance of cultivating habits that favour wellbeing in our senior years. "Every hesitant trip to the gym, every tempting calorie reluctantly pushed away, every difficult refusal to allow rancour 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".

In a particularly entertaining chapter, Nuland engages with the theories and politicking of scientists who are at the frontline of genetic and similar research into the challenges of mitigating or reversing the ageing process. His focus is on a charismatic, iconoclastic and highly intelligent Cambridge biomedical engineer and theorist, Aubrey David Nicholas Jasper de Grey: "almost more than a man, he is an entire movement". Nuland explains de Grey's analysis of ageing as a seven-fold process of atrophy, accumulation of junk cells and other biochemical processes, for which he prescribes an array of genetic intervention, stem cell therapy and drugs. For de Grey, the right to life is unbounded, and he intends to devote all the energy he can muster, the intellect he can apply, and the money he can extract from venture capitalists and wealthy narcissistic individuals, to realise his vision.

Nuland is in genuine awe of de Grey's intellectual capacity and his personal commitments, but totally unimpressed by the endeavour's philosophical underpinnings. Nuland regards a finite life as an essential part of what it means to be human. As well, he shares Montaigne's view that nature knows her business better than we do. "A little lengthening of a telomere here, a bit of genetic material from a soil bacterium there, a fistful of stem cells – and the next thing you know, it all explodes in your face".

The book concludes with a reflection on what Nuland has discerned to be the three pillars of a successful old age – wisdom, equanimity and caring. The senior years are, in their special way, a developmental period, much as are the periods of youth and the middle years. Of the rewards of ageing, "few are more gratifying than the unexpected discoveries we make about ourselves".

While age does not necessarily bring wisdom, successful ageing demands it. Nuland speaks of "watchful circumspection" and the importance of self-knowledge that comes from an examined life. Opportunity for creativity is a catalyst for personal, emotional and spiritual growth. He argues that if the ageing brain is "well used, knowledge grows, as does the inclination and the opportunity to integrate knowledge into reflective thought".

Making decisions and choices is an important aspect of growing older, and Nuland believes that the process is greatly facilitated if one can become comfortable with ambiguity, uncertainty and contradiction. But equanimity does not mean mere placidity. Wisdom "needs a measure of constructive discontent".

Nuland dwells at length on *caritas* - caring love. It is a question of retaining, or developing, connectedness with others. He reminds us that one's mere existence as an elder figure, in a family or a social group, invokes an inner sense of relatedness for - and is often surprisingly important to – other members, even if one's actual presence is limited by circumstances of time and place.

*The Art of Ageing* is not a step-by-step guide to one's senior years. Rather it suggests ways of thinking about how we approach old age, the challenges it presents, but also the opportunities it provides. Read it as a letter from a respected and loved older friend or mentor, and as George Eliot would have it: "keep what is worth keeping, and with a breath of kindness blow the rest away".

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