

## **05 Sherwin B. Nuland and Jose Saramago: Writers on Death and Dying**

In the mid-1990s I had to fly across the Irish Sea from northern England to Belfast in Northern Ireland.

Because it was a short flight the plane was propeller driven, small and flimsy-looking compared to the usual jet plane.

As we flew across the Irish Sea, the plane hit a thunderstorm and started to shake and bounce. It was scary. I was sat next to a young woman, who was outwardly calm, until I reached into my bag and took out a new book to read, to distract myself. At this point, glancing at the book, she went white.

The book's title, prominently written in red, was "How We Die"!

Fortunately, we both survived the journey.

That was my introduction to Sherwin B. Nuland, the American surgeon and author of "How We Die".

I came across Jose Saramago, the Portuguese Nobel prize-winning author, after I arrived to live in Tallinn, when my friend Olavi told me about a novel he'd been enjoying called "Tujukas surm". I found and read an English translation entitled "Death At Intervals" (published as "Death with Interruptions" in the USA).

I enjoyed reading these two very different books, one grounded in the reality of the process of death, and the other a dark and sometimes-humorous fantasy. They both prompt reflections about death.

But before I turn to Sherwin Nuland and Jose Saramago what does the Buddha have to say about death?

In the Upajjhatthana Sutta in the Samyutta Nikaya, the Buddha advises that we should all remind ourselves and reflect upon five things.

Paraphrasing what the Buddha teaches, they are;

I am of the nature to grow old; I cannot escape growing old.

I am of the nature to get sick; I cannot escape ill health.

I am of the nature to die; I cannot escape death.

Everything I hold dear, and everyone that I love, are of the nature to change; I cannot escape being separated from them.

My actions are my only true belongings; I cannot escape the consequence of my actions; My actions are the ground upon which I stand.

If we sit and reflect upon these five reminders we cannot deny their truth, but in reality, we mostly live our lives as far as possible ignoring these truths.

But what if death is not inevitable? What if human beings cannot die? This is the theme of Jose Saramago's "Death At Intervals".

At this point I am giving you a big spoiler alert!

The book is set in an unnamed, landlocked country. Then, at the stroke of midnight on January 1, death takes a holiday. Within that country no one dies anymore. All human beings within the country are immortal, though death continues for all other species and forms of life.

In the surrounding countries life and death continue as normal.

At first, the end of death is a cause for celebration. But then the consequences begin to be felt.

The Catholic Church is threatened because people no longer fear what will happen after death. One of the fundamental foundations of their dogma, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is called into question. In the absence of death what is the role of religion?

The government and the pensions industry face bankruptcy because they will be paying pensions for ever to bigger and bigger numbers of people.

Undertakers and funeral directors lose their business and turn in desperation to try to encourage funerals for people's pets when they die.

Hospitals are overcrowded with more and more terminally ill people, who are permanently on the verge of dying, except they never do. Illness and old age have not ended. The healthcare system faces complete collapse.

Conflict arises within families when the elderly simply cannot die.

Because death has not disappeared in the surrounding countries, this leads to the emergence of a new kind of mafia. Effectively with government support, the new mafia will carry the elderly and terminally ill over the border where they instantly die. Other countries do not take kindly to this, and even threaten war.

But then death ends their holiday and, in a letter sent to the media, announces that human beings will begin dying again. But, in a mistaken attempt to be helpful, death will now send a letter to those about to perish, giving them a week to prepare for their demise.

The letters, contained within a violet-coloured envelope, create a frenzy in the country, as people have not just returned to dying, but also must anxiously face the ever-present threat of receiving one of these letters and having their fate sealed with it.

In the last part of the book the story revolves around death's relationship with a cellist who somehow will not die. Every time death sends him his letter, it gets returned.

Taking on human form as a woman, death sets out to find out what is happening, and personally hand over the letter.

She visits the cellist, a man, and falls in love.

As she lies in bed with the man, the book ends as it began, by stating that no one died the next day.

Death at Intervals raises many issues. Is a long or even immortal life desirable? Is it ethical to help someone to die? What point is there in religion if there is no afterlife?

In traditional Buddhism there is an unending round of individual births and deaths, which is called samsara. The only way out of samsara is to become enlightened or awakened, as the Buddha did.

In a world of immortality would awakening still be possible?

It's interesting that in Chinese Buddhism, those who reside in the realm of the gods and live incredibly long, though not immortal, lives, are amongst the least likely to break through to awakening.

They feel no pressure of time and don't work on themselves to break through. Instead, they are content to drift along in a state of bliss until they unexpectedly die, and rebecome in a much lower realm of existence.

Saramago's book creates a lot of food for thought!

Now on to Sherwin B. Nuland and "How We Die".

"How We Die" gives a frank account of the dying process for major killers, including heart disease, stroke, AIDS, cancer, suicide, Alzheimer's disease, and even murder. Introducing the book Sherwin B. Nuland writes this:

"I have written this book to demythologize the process of dying. My intention is not to depict it as a horror-filled sequence of painful and disgusting degradations, but to present it in its biological and clinical reality, as seen by those who are witness to it and felt by those who experience it. Only by a frank discussion of the very details of dying can we best deal with those aspects that frighten us the most. It is by knowing the truth and being prepared for it that we rid ourselves of that

fear of the terra incognita of death that leads to self-deception and disillusion.”.

Describing the book in that way it might be thought that reading it is a harrowing experience. But for me and many others who have bought and read the book, it is, on the contrary, somehow full of compassion and is an uplifting experience.

In the book Sherwin Nuland gives us many reflections that we would do well to absorb. They stand alongside the Buddha’s five things to reflect on, urging us to examine how we live our own lives, and how we, and others, close to us, might die.

Nuland is critical of the modern American emphasis on trying every conceivable medical intervention, however small the chances of success, to prevent death. Rather, he argues, we should choose quality of life rather than one more heroic attempt to defeat the forces of illness and decay.

Although we may hope for ‘a good death’ ultimately, Nuland writes, “The dignity that we seek in dying must be found in the dignity with which we have lived our lives.”

The writer and poet Patrick T. Reardon has collected some of the most evocative quotations and reflections from Nuland’s “How We Die”. Here are some examples.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> century Philosopher of the French renaissance Michel de Montaigne:

“Montaigne believed, in that uncertain and violent era, that death is easiest for those who during their lives have given it most thought, as though always to be prepared for its imminence. Only in this way, he wrote, is it possible to die resigned and reconciled, ‘patiently and tranquilly,’ having experienced life more fully because of the constant awareness that it may soon come to an end. Out of this philosophy grew his admonition, ‘The utility of living consists not in the length of days, but in the use of time; a man may have lived long, and yet lived but little.’”

On cancer as ‘a mob of misfits’:

“In the community of living tissues, the uncontrolled mob of misfits that is cancer behaves like a gang of perpetually wilding adolescents. They are the juvenile delinquents of cellular society...There comes a point at which home turf is not enough — offshoots of the gang take wing, invade other communities, and, emboldened by their unresisted depredations, wreak havoc on the entire commonwealth of the body. But, in the end, there is no victory for cancer. When it kills its victim, it kills itself. A cancer is born with a death wish.”

On the purpose of death:

“We die so that the world may continue to live. We have been given the miracle of life because trillions upon trillions of living things have prepared the way for us and then have died — in a sense, for us. We die, in turn, so that others may live. The tragedy of a single individual becomes, in the balance of natural things, the triumph of ongoing life.”

<https://patricktreardon.com/book-review-how-we-die-reflections-on-lifes-final-chapter-by-sherwin-b-nuland/>

Although nothing by Sherwin B. Nuland has been translated into Estonian, a more recent book that touches on some of the same themes has been published in Estonian. The book, originally entitled “Being Mortal” is written by Atul Gawande and is available in Estonian entitled “Surelikkus”. I’m going to finish with two comments from Atul Gawande.

“Medical professionals concentrate on repair of health, not sustenance of the soul ...We’ve been wrong about what our job is in medicine. We think our job is to ensure health and survival. But really it is larger than that. It is to enable well-being. And well-being is about the reasons one wishes to be alive.”

“For human beings, life is meaningful because it is a story,” Gawande writes. “People want to share memories, pass on wisdoms and keepsakes, settle relationships, establish their legacies, make peace with God, and ensure that those who are left behind will be okay. They want to end their stories on their own terms.”

(Gawande quotes from Michael Quinn, writer and book critic; <https://www.mastermichaelquinn.com/book-report/review-of-how-we-die-by-sherwin-b-nuland-and-being-mortal-by-atul-gawande>)

I started this talk by referencing the Buddha advising us to reflect upon five things to do with life and death. The writings of Sherwin B. Nuland, Jose Saramago and Atul Gawande reinforce and add much that is valuable to those reflections.

One final thought relating to what happens when we die. Is there an afterlife?

Sherwin B. Nuland is a sceptic when it come to the possibilities of an afterlife. His advice does not depend on there being an afterlife. But he writes this:

“As a confirmed skeptic, I am bound by the conviction that we must not only question all things but be willing to believe that all things are possible.”

As we shall see the issue of what happens after death comes up in my talk next week on Star Trek Next Generation.

Link to recording:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/t187olqtfxpvszzk9w69/05-English-Only-Sherwin-B.-Nuland-and-Jose-Saramago.MP3?rlkey=gclclf27ahqe9onphca9zqvlc&dl=0>