

Journal Entry #6

Apart from his atrocious prose, I take issue with Nuland's assertions in Chapter 3 of *How We Die*. In this chapter he takes as his theme the cause of death in the aged. It is not, he says, any of the things you will find written on a birth certificate – stroke, heart failure, kidney failure, and the like. Rather, the true *cause* of death is the inexorable process of aging, of the wearing down of the bodily mechanisms until they finally cease to function. He gives us the rather protracted example of his own grandmother's slow decline unto death. While her death certificate said "stroke," Nuland sees this as merely the "terminal event" rather than the *cause* of her death.

This is a problematic view. Consider someone around the age of 60. If they die of a stroke, would Nuland attribute this to a pathology or to the weakened effectiveness of the body due to age? What about if the person were 70? 80? 50? You see the problem. We are constantly decaying, from the time at which our growth stops and we become adults. From there on out, the road is, in biological terms, downhill. So is the (non-accidental) death of anyone beyond the age of, say, 30, to be attributed to aging? Certainly we could make the argument that any pathology observed is a result of the increasingly weakened bodily mechanisms. But this seems an absurd theory to promote – if someone in their 40's suffers kidney failure, we do not attribute this to old age.

Nuland's argument has sentimental appeal, to be sure. It is quite poetic and makes sense on an emotional level – I do not blame him one bit for feeling that calling the cause of his grandmother's death a "stroke" was mere formality. However, death certificates *are* formality. Medicine is a scientific field, and while there is much to be said for considering emotion when dealing with patients, in the end the medical treatment of patients is a scientific matter. This is

not to say that patients should not be able to choose for themselves the treatments they would like to receive – rather, that whatever treatment they do choose is a scientific procedure. The same can be said of the cause of death. No matter how much we may feel that our dearly departed relative was killed by the weight of years, this is not strictly true. If we are to be rigorous thinkers we must admit that the direct cause of death was the “terminal event” as Nuland calls it, and that while the aging and decay of the body may then have been an *extremely important* secondary cause, it was *not* the *actual* cause.