

‘DYING IS
QUITE
SIMPLE.
EVERYONE
CAN DO IT’



RENÉ GUDE (†) & WIM BRANDS (†)

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Translator's Notes

The dying are living until the day they die. René Gude, interviewed by Wim Brands, takes us into how he lives his last months, how he sees not only his life, but living as a human being. These are two men, friends, actively engaged in the search for meaning in life, and I wanted to share their talk with English-speaking friends and family. I hope you enjoy it as well.

Sterven is doodeenvoudig, from the title in Dutch, shows something of the matter-of-factness with which this topic is approached in the interview, and also something of the humor. It translates as “dying is dead simple,” but has the tone of the colloquial English “easy as pie.” I struggled with all the predictable trade-offs of translation, and hewed close to a literal translation where that did not force me to sacrifice too much in terms of readability, tone, and most importantly meaning. While for example the second half of the title in Dutch *iedereen kan het* would be better translated in English as “anyone can do it,” in the sense of the interview about dying, literally everyone can, and must, do it. Where it seemed helpful I have inserted short clarifications for readers not sharing some of René and Wim’s cultural reference points.

My thanks to fellow translator Serge Ornelis, and others, without whom this translation would not have been as accurate a reflection of the discussion between Wim and René.

Foreword

René and I became friends years ago after I had interviewed him at length for my radio program about books. It was on the eve of the Night of Philosophy. A few days beforehand René had called to say that he was considering not coming; in any event he wasn't going to the Night [of Philosophy] later that evening. He suspected that he was getting sick again. I can still remember clearly how calmly he said it, how he had seemed to break his leg years ago, that it was cancer, how his intuition whispered to him that there was something seriously wrong with the leg that seemed to have recovered.

Days after the scheduled broadcast he would be checked at the hospital, and we decided that the broadcast should go ahead anyway. We didn't talk about what was in store for him. But when I listened to the conversation afterwards, I noticed that death was constantly present in the background. This sounds dramatic, while I'm trying to say the opposite.

Sein zum Tode philosophized Heidegger. In the light of death we take shape, but when that death enters the room first in stocking feet and then shod, the light often goes out. I have no further judgment on that. I have, how-

ever, watched with increasing admiration how René continued to shape his life as a philosopher after the Salomon judgment. He continued to search for the right words to bring his worldview into the limelight.

Our conversations for the Human broadcasts did not differ from the conversations we had on his boat. You can read a summarized version in this book.

Der Mensch ist das Tier, dem man die Lage erklären muss [Man is the animal to whom the situation has to be explained], wrote his friend Peter Sloterdijk. René continued tirelessly with this. Death, looking over his shoulder, even got a friendly face from that.

Wim Brands

Dying is Quite Simple, Everyone Can Do It is based on conversations that Wim Brands and René Gude had on July 7 and 9, 2014 for Human's Oba Live, NPO, on Radio5. For more information, see www.human.nl/gude.

CH 1

Overtime

René, how are you?

Well, I'm living in overtime. In April 2011 I was told that I had a ten percent chance of surviving two more years. And that was already three years ago. It's nonetheless true that the treatments now taking place are no longer meant to cure me, but to stretch things a bit. But that has been working well so far.

That's what they call palliative [care].

There are two weird things about it. The first weird thing is that I actually feel pretty good in between those treatments, at those times there's not really so much wrong with me, except that I am seriously ill. The other is that in 2012 under the rubric of "The Last Word" in the NRC [a recurring column in that Dutch newspaper] I already had my last word, and that I have actually never talked so much as since then. I have become Thinker of the Nation and get invited everywhere. So if you ask me how it's going with me, then I have to say that I am deathly ill and that I

feel pretty well and am doing a lot. That feels a little uncomfortable. Wouldn't people slowly come to expect that I would feel bad and go lie down in a corner somewhere?

If people would think that, I would immediately forbid it. You talk about "The Last Word." Do you remember what you said then?

Back then I went into considerable detail on the idea that people have two drives: the drive to belong and the drive to stand out. Those drives are opposed to each other, because if you want to belong you have to give up a little of your individuality, while if you want to stand out, or achieve honors in something, then naturally you have to accentuate your individuality. People who become sick also have all kinds of drives. Lance Armstrong for example advises people to act as if none of it matters and just carry on, to fight, to battle, and to not quit. That arises out of denial. You hear that you're seriously ill and then you pretend that you're not. The problem with that is that you begin to make a really strange impression on your surroundings, because everyone thinks that's kind of weird. Those people all know that you're terminally ill, while you pretend you're not. It doesn't really seem like a good reaction to me. And the other extreme reaction is that you immediately throw in the towel and don't do anything anymore, pulling out of social life.

Have you had those inclinations?

Both, yes.

‘We always live
as though our
time is endless.’

And which one was the strongest?

I’m more inclined to act like there’s nothing going on than to lie down on the couch and cry. It’s incredibly difficult to be constantly aware that something is ending. We don’t really have categories for that in our daily life. We always live as though our time is endless.

And I’ve mostly gone back to doing that, with the difference that I have, every now and then, especially with my wife Babs, put the topic on the table and talked about it in depth.

*What does that mean, living as if our time is endless?
How do you live then?*

Well, for example accepting every invitation to come to something, but funny enough I keep concerning myself with all sorts of trivial things, like home maintenance. Actually life without end means that you are just as superficial as you always were. You would think that if someone was terminally ill, that person would not be worried about anything anymore – in any event not about minor home repairs – but I have just kept doing that. These days I permit myself that. I also start all sorts of projects – making books – even though I’m not sure I’ll be able to finish them all.



In the months before his death, René Gude, Thinker of the Nation (the Netherlands), thought about what it means when the party is over. On Dutch television, he spoke with Wim Brands about what matters in life, mood management, and the comfort of philosophy. Especially at death's door, the tools of philosophy can help you stay sane.

We do not need to lose ourselves in bitter theorizing. And about dying itself: 'That should be quite easy. Up until now, everybody did all right.'

ISVW UITGEVERS

