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Book Reviews

The Hand of God: A Journey from Death to Life by the Abortion Doctor Who Changed His Mind by Bernard N. Nathanson, M.D., Regnery Publications, 1996, 206 pages, \$24.95

In June of 1985, Bernard Nathanson prefaced his remarks before 2,000 pro-lifers at Washington's Hyatt Regency Hotel by revealing something of a personal nature: "My intellectual odyssey has come to an end, but my spiritual odyssey is just beginning." Upon hearing this declaration, the assemblage immediately sprang to its feet and cheered, long and loud. The ovation was more a sign of welcome than a gesture of victory. And if there was any lingering doubt about what this sign truly signified, it has been put to rest by Nathanson's recent account of how the generous and accepting manner of pro-life advocates warmed his heart and converted his soul.

A few years ago, the notorious abortion entrepreneur Bill Baird told a *Boston Globe* reporter how much he was impressed by the selfless attitude of pro-life enthusiasts: "...I could switch sides. I get lots of emotional support from the right-to-lifers. At their annual conventions, when I'm picketing, they always come up and hug me. When's the last time someone on my side hugged me?"

Though Nathanson may be the most important of right-to-life converts (certainly the most celebrated), he is welcomed into the fold with the same unrestrained enthusiasm that pro-lifers have for any nameless unborn child whose mother decides to eschew the abortion clinic and allow her child to experience the gift of life.

The Hand of God is an important and serious work. It is important because it is an intelligent and convincing account of how Nathanson – through long and painful experience – came to the conclusion that abortion is a monster, the malevolent by-product of an ethical system that is inherently "fragmented, fatuous, and odious." It is serious in that it offers a candid testimony of the blindness and then the insight of a man who journeyed from being the director of what at the time was the world's largest abortion clinic, to becoming a fervent and eloquent advocate for life.

"Odyssey" is Nathanson's apt word to describe his trial-filled journey, made even more problematic because of events that took place before he was born. The story of his background, involving suicides,

children consigned to orphanages, grinding poverty, bitterly unhappy marriages, deception, and hatred, reads like a Greek tragedy. Nathanson's three failed marriages are so painful to him that he can not bring himself to share anything concerning the second and third. And when he is not Odysseus, confronted with great trials and formidable demons, he is Virgil taking us by the hand and showing us the torments of the Inferno.

There are some disappointments, however. Some readers will feel deprived knowing that his entrance into the Catholic Church, the culmination of his odyssey, took place after the completion of his book. All he gives us about his relationship with the Church is a terse reference to lengthy conversations over a five year span with Fr. John McCloskey, an Opus Dei priest.

Some readers will also be disappointed that this "semi-autobiographical" work has too much to say about intellectual issues and not enough a spiritual journey. The chapters fragment more than they unify. He tells us that from 1978 to 1988 he would awaken each morning at four or five o'clock staring into the darkness, hoping to find moral acquittal. We need more of this autobiographical material.

The strength of this book is neither theological or literary; it is intellectual and personal, a powerful account of how an abortionist found the humility to recognize that life is sacred. —**Donald DeMarco**

**University of St. Jerome's
College, Waterloo, Ontario**

Nature, The Physician, and The Family, The Collected Works of Herbert Ratner, M.D., Catholic Physicians' Guild of Chicago, 8700 West 121st Street, Palos Park, IL 60464, \$15.

On the occasion of Dr. Herbert Ratner's 90th birthday in May, 1997, the conversation among his many assembled friends and admirers inevitably moved to the necessity of preserving the legacy of this remarkable man. Although Dr. Ratner was an inveterate writer and an acclaimed and sought-after speaker, his versatility had been the undoing of several attempts to collect his works into a single volume. Although Herb Ratner's disciples were legion and most were characterized by an adoption of his world view in whole or part, there was no one truly duplicating the uniqueness of his literary achievement. There followed from that festive evening a resolve on the part of his medical colleagues in the Chicago Catholic Physicians' Guild to undertake the assembling and publication of the collected works of Dr. Herbert Ratner as *Nature, The Physician, and The Family*.

In these 235 pages there is a timeless resource aimed primarily at the medical profession but a wisdom and a sensibility to nature as God's handmaiden which bridges many professions and cultures.

Herb Ratner's personal odyssey is a fascinating progression from a liberal New York Jewish background (His family's position on the political spectrum can best be discerned by Herb's boast that his mother had dated Trotsky before marrying). In medical school, he met and married Dorothy Smith, his classmate who eventually led him to the Church. At the University of Chicago, he was part of a group including the charismatic philosopher Herbert Schwartz, psychiatrist Kenneth Simon (now Father Raphael, a Trappist monk) and Winston Ashley (now Father Benedict Ashley, O.P.) who made giant leaps of faith to be converted to the Catholic Church. His biological-philosophical writings attracted the attention of Robert Maynard Hutchins, the esteemed president of the University of Chicago who appointed him a senior member of the Committee on Liberal Arts which prepared the original Great Books curriculum.

It was as Student Health Director and a member of the Public Health faculty at Loyola Medical School that his radical and challenging and totally Christian approach to the profession of medicine began to be formulated and passed on to succeeding generations of medical students. The two models held up to the students were the revered founder of the art of medicine, Hippocrates, and St. Luke, the beloved physician who completed Hippocrates with the Christian vision in the way that grace perfects nature.

Ratner's esteem for Hippocrates not only in the Oath but the wisdom of the entire corpus of his work forms a large part of the writings included in *Nature, The Physician, and The Family*. Some of the medical power structure is now reluctantly rediscovering the principles of Hippocrates which remain timely 2,500 years after they were written. Dr. Ratner's approach to the practice of medicine as an art and not a science is likewise timely in the current depersonalized and technology-driven medical scene. In the Ratnerian view, it is nature who heals, not the physician and it is the primary role of the physician "to do for nature what she would do if she were able."

The lead article in this book is the famous interview of Ratner by Donald McDonald. This interview, a question and answer format, is one of the most provocative and insightful global views of the place and purpose of medical care ever published. It is a classic which demonstrates the brilliant and unique approach of Dr. Herbert Ratner to the philosophy of medicine.

Ratner was not merely an armchair philosopher, however, and his numerous scientific achievements as the Public Health Director of Oak

Park, Illinois are also substantiated in his writings. His courageous stands against the conventional wisdom of the medical establishment are legendary. As Public Health Director, he declined to allow the new, highly-publicized Salk vaccine to be administered in Oak Park. He was dramatically vindicated by the subsequent occurrence of multiple vaccine-induced cases of polio which led to sweeping changes in the preparation and subsequent safety of the vaccine. He was also one of the first to recognize the dangers of the contamination of the vaccine by Simian virus 40, a virus now being linked to the occurrence of certain neoplasms in later life.

He was also an early and persistent critic of the safety of the contraceptive pill. The thromboembolic complications of the pill have led to sharp reductions in the estrogen component of the pill which tacitly recognize the legitimacy of his critique. He also confronted the numerous theologian apologists for the pill who led the dissent from *Humanae Vitae*.

He was an early and eloquent defender of the sanctity of human life and provided much of the early impetus to the Pro-Life movement, particularly in articulating the resistance to converting medicine into a killing profession. His articles entitled "Condoms and Aids" and "Semen and Aids" show that he remained au courant and influential in his approaches to the huge public health challenge posed by the epidemiology of HIV infection.

Even those of us who have been familiar with the writings of Herb Ratner and who chose him as our mentor are nevertheless overwhelmed by the impact of the diversity of this book and the probity and clarity of his style. Those meeting the Ratner philosophy for the first time will be convinced that this was truly a Renaissance Man, both as a Christian and a scientist.

Dr. Ratner worked with me as the editor of *Nature, The Physician, and The Family* and approved and selected every article included in the volume. On December 4, 1997, he suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and died suddenly. It was extremely fortuitous that we were able to preserve the wisdom of this truly remarkable man in a format of his choosing. *Nature, The Physician, and The Family* deserves a place on every short shelf of modern medical classics.

– Eugene F. Diamond, M.D.
Chicago, IL