



Bernard Nathanson

Obstetrician and gynaecologist who ran one of the largest abortion clinics in the USA before becoming a pro-life advocate. Born in New York City, NY, USA, on July 31, 1926, he died there from cancer on Feb 21, 2011, aged 84 years.

"I know every facet of abortion. I was one of its accoucheurs; I helped nurture the creature in its infancy by feeding it great draughts of blood and money; I guided it through its adolescence as it grew fecklessly out of control", Bernard Nathanson wrote in his 1997 memoir *The Hand of God: A Journey from Death to Life by the Abortion Doctor Who Changed His Mind*. A prominent obstetrician and gynaecologist who fought for abortion rights in the late 1960s, Nathanson later became a pro-life activist.

Nathanson received his undergraduate degree from Cornell University and his medical degree from McGill University in 1949. He then served in the US Air Force before opening a private practice in Manhattan. As an intern at the Women's Hospital in New York during the mid-1950s, Nathanson treated poor women who had undergone illegal abortions, which he later called "the number one killer of pregnant women", and which convinced him of the importance of expanding access to legal abortion services.

In 1969, Nathanson co-founded the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws (NARAL), now known as NARAL Pro-Choice America, an advocacy group that worked for the legalisation of abortion in the USA and continues to lobby for expanded access to abortion. When New York repealed its abortion laws in 1970, Nathanson became the

director of the Center for Reproductive and Sexual Health, then the largest abortion clinic in the USA. He ran the Manhattan clinic for 2 years before becoming the chief of obstetric services at St Luke's Hospital from 1972 until 1978. During that decade, Nathanson estimated that he oversaw some 75 000 abortions, including 5000 that he performed.

"I started changing my mind in 1973, when advanced technology moved into our hospitals and offices. I speak now of ultrasound imaging, fetal heart monitoring electronically, hysteroscopy, fetoscopy—things that gave us a window into the womb. Over a period of 3 or 4 years, I mulled over these technologies and what they revealed", Nathanson told *The Interim*, a Canadian pro-life newspaper in 2009. He recalled that, as a medical student, he was told that science couldn't answer the question of whether the fetus is a human life. By 1974, he wrote in *The New England Journal of Medicine*: "There is no longer serious doubt in my mind that human life exists within the womb from the very onset of pregnancy, despite the fact that the nature of the intrauterine life has been the subject of considerable dispute in the past."

Nathanson continued to perform abortions for medical reasons until late 1978 or early 1979, when he performed his last abortion on a woman with cancer. Then, in 1979, he published *Aborting America* with reporter Richard Ostling. In the book, Nathanson claimed that he and other abortion rights activists inflated statistics, such as the number of illegal abortions and the number of women who died from them each year, in arguing for the repeal of abortion laws. He wrote, "These false figures took root in the consciousness of Americans, convincing many that we needed to crack the abortion law." In 1985 he produced *Silent Scream*, a controversial short film that showed the vacuum aspiration abortion of a 12-week-old fetus; according to Nathanson's narration the fetus could be seen "rearing away" from medical instruments. He also made a documentary, *Eclipse of Reason*, about abortion procedures, including late-term abortion. Planned Parenthood charged that Nathanson's films were based on ideology, not on medical science.

Nathanson was an assistant professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at Cornell University from 1984 to 1990 and an associate professor at New York Medical College from 1990 until 2002. He is survived by his fourth wife, Christine, and a son from a previous marriage. Nathanson maintained that he became a pro-life activist through scientific reasoning based on the advent of ultrasound imaging rather than for moral reasons. He was a self-described Jewish atheist until 1996, when he was baptised a Roman Catholic. "I felt the burden of sin growing heavier and more insistent", he wrote. "I have such heavy moral baggage to drag into the next world that failing to believe would condemn me to an eternity perhaps more terrifying than anything Dante envisioned."

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