



Life Matters Journal

V. 5, ISSUE 6 — JUNE 2017

Remembering Nat Hentoff

This Jewish, atheist, civil libertarian's eloquent critiques of aggressive violence provide much to inspire nontraditional pro-lifers.

Legal or Lethal?

In light of the passing of DC's "Right to Die" law, Christina Yao delves into the studies surrounding similar assisted suicide laws in the United States and comments on the ethical questions they raise.

Dying with True Dignity

Where do human beings derive their dignity?
How can we protect this dignity across the life span?



LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Readers,

What if lethal is legal? We live in a nation in which the government has legally dehumanized huge segments of society — and is slowly adding a segment: the disabled, the mentally ill, the abandoned — through physician assisted suicide. So the question isn't *what if*, but *what now*?

Courtesy is one of the first places I look when it comes to small acts of *sonder*. Sonder is a day-to-day response to the radical dehumanization of legalized abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, unjust wars. Rehumanization, and building a culture of life, starts in small acts.

Thus, *what now* is what I thought recently, after breakfast in Manhattan — although at first it wasn't with much grace. During my long drive back from nearly two weeks at our national office in Pittsburgh working with our summer interns, I stopped in Manhattan for breakfast, and I wasn't thinking *what now* in terms of considering the unique value of all the mad New Yorkers rushing around me, or in terms of the server at the diner.

"So whatdya do?" she asked after my meal, as I got up to pay.

"Human rights work, and editing," and then I put abortion, euthanasia, and suicide into the same sentence, and the same head-space.

She was *hardhat New Yawk*. She gave me a look.

But before any of this, I had actually asked how her day was — because she was terse, slow, and rude. And wasn't my breakfast just so much more important than she was!...and no it wasn't, and so I asked — and treated her like someone, not *something*, — a someone like me. And she was like me, after all, that morning: an underslept, underfed, very tired human being.

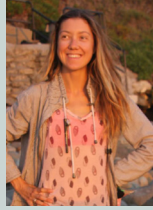
That snapshot relationship opened the door to dialogue. But before it ever did anything "useful", it did something good: it gave another human being the respect of being treated as *human*: valuable in themselves, not an object; worthy as an end, not a means.

In this issue, I've had the opportunity to gather perspectives on a specific violence: suicide. Sometimes subtle, often overlooked, a sign and symptom of a culture rotted by and rooted in a lethal legality, suicide reflects a human's internal inability to see their own humanity and worth. "When a society kills its children, its children begin to kill themselves."

I encourage you all to consider *sonder* and your encounters day-in, day-out, as unimaginably impactful, and as one of the answers to dehumanizing violence. Since *what if* is already here, this summer *Life Matters Journal* says, *what now*?

Yours for peace and every life,

CJ Williams



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This journal is dedicated to the aborted, the bombed, the executed, the euthanized, the abused, the raped, and all other victims of violence, whether legal or illegal.

We have been told by our society and our culture wars that those of us who oppose these acts of violence must be divided. We have been told to take a lukewarm, halfway attitude toward the victims of violence. We have been told to embrace some with love while endorsing the killing of others.

We reject that conventional attitude, whether it's called Left or Right, and instead embrace a consistent ethic of life toward all victims of violence. We are *Life Matters Journal*, and we are here because politics kills.

Disclaimer: The views presented in this journal do not necessarily represent the views of all members, contributors, or donors. We exist to present a forum for discussion within the consistent life ethic, to promote discourse and present an opportunity for peer-review and dialogue.



Dying with True Dignity

By J.P. Nunez

Dignity is popular these days.

When people champion human rights, human dignity is usually not too far behind, and with good reason: our rights are based on it. Conversely, things without dignity do not have rights. For example, when we get sick, we have no qualms about killing the bacteria or viruses that cause our diseases because they do not possess the same dignity that we do. As a result, we simply kill them when they get in our way.

Somewhat paradoxically, another right that people usually claim is grounded in our dignity is the right to kill ourselves if we no longer want to live. Proponents of physician-assisted suicide often contend that people have a right to do this because we should be able to die with dignity. They argue that we should not have to be reduced to infant-like states in which we can no longer control our bodily functions, move on our own, or think rationally. Instead, they say, we should be able to end our lives while we can still do all those things. Simply put, they think that we have a right to die while we still have our dignity.

On the surface, this seems to make sense. The sick and elderly are often embarrassed about the things they can no longer do for themselves, and that embarrassment is totally understandable. Nobody wants to rely on others for basic things like bathing and eating. We take pride in our independence and our ability to care for ourselves, so when we lose those things, it is only natural to feel embarrassed. People debilitated by disease or old age may even feel useless because they can no longer contribute to society in the ways they used to. Instead, they may want to end their lives while they are still independent, while they can still take care of themselves, and while they can still contribute to society. In other words, they may want to die before they lose their sense of dignity.

However, if we look beneath the surface, we can see that this understanding of dignity is actually quite shallow. In fact, it is nothing more than a hollow caricature. True human dignity means that we are valuable in ourselves, not simply because of the good qualities

we have. It means that our very existence is good no matter what shape we may be in, and that we always deserve to be loved, even when we can no longer take care of ourselves or contribute to society in a practical way.

This dignity is based simply on the fact that we are human, so we can never lose it no matter what we do or what condition we find ourselves in. The elderly and the sick are still human, so no matter how bad things get, they always retain their basic human dignity. It is always good that they exist, and they always deserve to be loved, no matter what. That is real dignity, and physician-assisted suicide can never help us to preserve it.

On the contrary, killing ourselves is a great offense against our dignity. If we can end our lives when we lose certain abilities, then we are not valuable in ourselves. Rather, we are valuable only to the extent that we have certain qualities, and once we lose those qualities, we no longer matter. If physician-assisted suicide is permissible, then once we lose our value, we no longer deserve to be truly loved.

I can scarcely imagine a more frightening vision of society, but that is where the logic behind “dying with dignity” inescapably leads. It turns people into mere things to be used and then thrown out once their usefulness is gone. It makes us no more valuable or dignified than the tools and instruments we use to accomplish our own personal goals.

Conversely, dying with real dignity means that people die naturally when their time comes. It means that we recognize their value and worth no matter how undignified they may seem or feel and that we see in them a dignity that sickness and old age cannot take away, one that they can never lose no matter what happens to them. To truly help people die with dignity, we have to love them till the end, not make that end come about sooner than it has to. We have to treat them with the same respect we give to people in good health and make sure they know that they matter just as much as anyone else. That is dying with real dignity, and anything less is a sham.



How Suicide Is Connected to Other Killing

By Rachel MacNair

If we start with the theory that people killing themselves is connected to other kinds of killing, can we find studies to back that up? We can — and also studies to show that stopping killing also reduces suicides.

War

It's well-documented that combat veterans have a shockingly high suicide rate. Much of this comes from being traumatized by war. There are many kinds of trauma, and the one I study most is the kind that comes from the act of killing itself.¹

I got the US government's data set (for the combat veterans, sample size of 1,638) from a major study on its veterans of the war in Vietnam: The National Vietnam Veteran's Readjustment Study. One question was: "Did you kill or think you killed anyone in Vietnam?" I made two groups — those who answered "yes" and those who answered "no" — and compared their trauma scores.

For trauma as a whole and for every symptom but one, those who said yes had much higher trauma scores than those who said no, even when taking intensity of battle into account.

The symptom that was the one exception was suicidal thoughts. I remember puzzling over this, until I got chills as I realized one possible explanation: being "more severe" in suicidal thoughts could lead to having actually committed suicide. Those whose symptoms were most severe may not have lived to be included in the data set.

Abortion

Post-Abortion Women:

Post-abortion aftermath is only a controversial area because those who support abortion availability wish it to be (see the American Psychological Association's 105 page report for a well-done pro-abortion spin on the studies).² However, there is evidence to suggest that abortions are more likely to lead to suicides.

Studies based on thousands of records comparing medical records and death certificates show considerably higher suicide rates in Finland, Great Britain, and California for women who have had abortions compared to women who gave birth.³ A mental health study in New Zealand found that young women who aborted had significantly higher risk of suicidal behaviors.⁴

Abortion defenders point out that when we've selected women who have had abortions, we've also selected a group more likely to have problems, such as being victims of intimate partner violence.

Still, there are reports of attempted or completed suicides on the anniversary date of the abortion or expected due date, which suggests that abortion may in fact be the reason for the suicide.⁵

There are also individual women's stories that suggest an abortion-suicide connection.

Un-aborted Children:

What about children whose mothers intended to abort them but were unable to? One justification offered for abortion is that it's so very hard to be an "unwanted child."

A 1988 book called *Born Unwanted: Development Effects of Denied Abortion* tries to make this case.⁶ They report on studies in Sweden, Finland, and Czechoslovakia, coming from the days when women had to apply to committees for abortions. If they were turned down, they appealed. If turned down again, they had the baby. Follow-up studies were done matching these children with children of similar demographics.

Were these children more likely to end up in mental institutions or jail? No, the authors report, with a straight face: "the UP [unplanned pregnancy] subjects are not so much overrepresented on the extremely negative indicators as they are underrepresented on the positive ones."⁷ That is, they're underrepresented among the above average. They were excessively average.

The authors argued this grave disadvantage means abortions shouldn't be denied. This led Frederica Mathewes-Green, editor of *Sisterlife*, then the newsletter of Feminists for Life, to report on the book using this headline: Prof Repulsed by Working Class; Recommends Elimination. Not Clear Who Will Repair His Mercedes.

Many mothers changed their minds, as over a third — 36% — denied they had made the abortion request, and 73% were satisfied with how the situation was resolved.⁸

As for suicide? The children don't seem to agree with the proposal they're better off dead. Only one suicide was found, a very small proportion given the size of the group.⁹ Based on these data, there's no reason to think that failure to kill the children earlier means they'll just kill themselves later on.

Abortion Legislation:

One study found states with parental involvement laws (notification or consent) were associated with an 11% to 21% reduction in suicides among females 15-17 years old but found no difference for males in that age group or older females.¹⁰

Another study looked at what impact waiting periods had on mental health: did such periods serve as a protective cooling-off period or a source of additional stress?¹¹ It used suicide rates of women in different states as a way to measure mental health. The analyses found the states with waiting periods associated with about a 10% reduction in suicide rates.

While it may be that notifying parents or being informed and waiting may lead post-abortion women to be less likely to commit suicide, another explanation is that these methods lowered the abortion rate and thus lowered the suicide rate.

Assisted Suicide/Euthanasia

Finally, the most obvious connection of unauthorized suicides is to "authorized" suicides: Once you tell the 16-year-old girl that her grandmother is justified in committing suicide because life with a severe disease or disability is so difficult to bear, how do you tell her that the fact that her boyfriend left her doesn't make her life too

difficult to bear? With talk of bringing on death as a form of autonomy, and individuals deciding for themselves what is and isn't a worthy life, where does the reasoning end?

We're also disproportionately putting certain people — especially those with disabilities — into a category of people who don't get the suicide-prevention services normally offered to everyone else.

The alternative idea by euthanasia proponents is that offering assistance is supposed to reduce suicides, because people don't feel the need to do it quickly while they still can, before they get too sick.

The major study done on this, comparing US states, found that all suicides did in fact go up, and that “non-assisted” suicides stayed about the same once researchers statistically controlled for several things.¹² So the pro-euthanasia idea that allowing euthanasia lowers suicide rates isn't backed up by the evidence.

Far more study is needed, since just one study isn't enough to show much. In particular, the states that allowed physician-assisted suicide in that time period and so were able to be studied were fortunately very few, but that makes it necessary to gather more evidence from more states.

In this field, we have another variable that studies tend not to consider: the actions of the pro-life and disability-rights movements may have served as a brake on suicide reasoning being applied too broadly.

Notes:

¹ Rachel M. MacNair, *Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress: The Psychological Consequences of Killing* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2002).

² American Psychological Association (APA), Task Force on Mental Health and Abortion, Report of the Task Force on Mental Health and Abortion (Washington, DC: APA). Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2qEEpSt>.

³ Mika Gissler, Riitta Kauppila, Jouni Merilainen, Henri Toukoma, and Elina Hemminki, “Pregnancy-Associated Deaths in Finland 1987-1994: Definition Problems and Benefits of Record Linkage,” *Acta Obstetrica et Gynecologica Scandinavica* 76, no. 7 (1997): 651-657; available at <http://bit.ly/2r3jTwb>; Christopher Morgan, Marc Evans, John R. Peters, and Craig Currie, “Suicides after Pregnancy: Mental Health May Deteriorate as a Direct Effect of Induced Abortion,” *British Medical Journal* 314, no. 7084 (1997), available at <http://bit.ly/2q140bk>; David C. Reardon, Thomas W. Strahan, John M. Thorp, Jr. and Martha W. Shuping, “Deaths Associated with Abortion Compared to Childbirth — A Review of New and Old Data and the Medical and Legal Implications,” *Journal of Contemporary Health Law and Policy* 20, no. 2 (2004): 279-327; available at <http://bit.ly/2rCYyMt>.

⁴ David M. Fergusson, L. John Horwood, and Elizabeth M. Ridder, “Abortion in Young Women and Subsequent Mental Health,” *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry* 47, no. 1 (2006): 16-24. Available at <http://bit.ly/2q38TuL>.

⁵ Carl L. Tishler, “Adolescent Suicide Attempts Following Elective Abortion: A Special Case of Anniversary Reaction,” *Pediatrics* 68, no. 5 (1981): 670-671.

⁶ H. P. David, Z. Dybrich, Z. Matejcek, and V. Schuller, eds, *Born Unwanted: Development Effects of Denied Abortion* (Prague: Avicenum-Czechoslovak Medical Press, 1988).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁰ Joseph J. Sabia and Daniel I. Rees, “The Effect of Parental Involvement Laws on Youth Suicide,” *Economic Inquiry* 51, no. 1 (2013): 620-636. <http://bit.ly/2pWdYsL>.

¹¹ Jonathan Klick, “Mandatory Waiting Periods for Abortions and Female Mental Health,” *Health Matrix: Journal of Law-Medicine* 16 (2006): 183-208. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2q16DK9>.

¹² David Albert Jones and David Paton, “How Does Legalization of Physician-Assisted Suicide Affect Rates of Suicide?” *The Southern Medical Journal* 108, no. 10 (2015): 599-604. Retrieved from <http://bit.ly/2rogOXc>.



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Legal or Lethal?

Thoughts on DC's "Right to Die" Law

By Christina Yao

I remember sitting in one of my classes as an undergraduate and hearing my Management of Aging Services professor tell the story of an elderly man she had worked with who had lost his will to live. Most of the people he loved had already gone and he wished to die. The whole class, a night class made up mostly of middle-aged women, let out a collective groan, as if to say “How sad! We are in this freakin’ long class on a freakin’ Thursday night to help him! Where is he? Let us help him!” in one drawn-out syllable. The professor then said something that left me shaking.

“In a few years, you won’t be sad. You will have come to realize that some people should be able to choose when they want to go. You can’t afford to keep the baby boomers alive forever. We will be too big a strain on the health care system.”

One of my classmates smiled, looked at my professor with dreamy eyes, and said, “That’s why ‘Right To Die’ is gonna pass.”

After the class, I went back to my apartment trembling. If I greeted either of my roommates, I don’t remember. I closed the door to my tiny bedroom, curled up on my rickety desk chair, and wondered what I should have said. What I should have done. If I could have stopped the seemingly two-second culture change that just took place in that Baltimore classroom.

The Maryland “Right to Die” bill was taken off the docket in 2017, but a similar measure passed in the District of Columbia on Feb-

ruary 18 of this year. After the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee voted 22-14 to block the measure, opponents of the bill hoped Congress would follow suit. They were wrong, and this dangerous bill was turned into law.¹

While it is too early to have much in the way of statistics for the DC law, much research has been done on the Oregon “Death with Dignity” act. The law legalized physician-assisted suicide in 1997, and prescriptions for lethal drugs have risen at alarming rates in Oregon, from 24 prescriptions in 1998 to 204 prescriptions in 2016. Since 1997, 1,749 lethal prescriptions have been written in Oregon.²

When people think of assisted suicide, they may think of the famous 2014 case of Brittany Maynard, a beautiful young woman tragically struck by a terminal brain tumor. Maynard wanted

Since 1997, 1,749 lethal prescriptions have been written in Oregon.

people to respect her choice to die in peace when she decided the time was right and her suffering became too great.³ According to Oregon's statistics, however, most assisted suicides are not like this. Assisted suicide disproportionately affects the elderly. In 2016, the average age at time of death of those who died from assisted suicide in Oregon was 73 years, and 80.5% of those who died by ingesting lethal drugs were over age 65. Shockingly, in 2016 as well as other years, being a burden on caregivers was cited by more people (48.9%) as a reason for asking for lethal drugs than concerns about pain (35.3%). Since 1998, 3.4% of people who committed assisted suicide in Oregon have chosen to die because of financial issues, such as a lack of money for medical care. So my professor was right in saying that there is an economic advantage to helping people take their own life.

The solution to ending assisted suicide lies in the reasons people resort to it. Elderly people need to know their lives are worth more than the responsibility they place on caregivers. Doctors need to be more invested in palliative care to relieve the pain of the dying. When a doctor is spending her time lobbying to legally kill her patients rather than figuring out how to best serve them while they

are alive, there is a huge problem. Also, of course, no one should choose to die because they feel they cannot afford to live.

In our society, the loss of autonomy, physical pain, and lack of financial means can often negate a person's human rights. It should not be this way. We need to create a society where no person feels as if it would be better to die. We need to create a society where all people realize their lives are highly valued and their rights are non-negotiable.

No one should choose to die because they feel they cannot afford to live.

Notes:

¹ "Washington, D.C., Death with Dignity Act Takes Effect," *Compassion & Choices*, accessed May 16, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2qnozy4>.

² "Oregon Death with Dignity Act: Data Summary 2016," Oregon Health Authority, accessed May 16, 2017, <http://bit.ly/2rbwEnP>.

³ Lindsey Bever, "Brittany Maynard, as Promised, Ends Her Life at 29," *Washington Post*, November 2, 2014, <http://wapo.st/2rbj0wm>.

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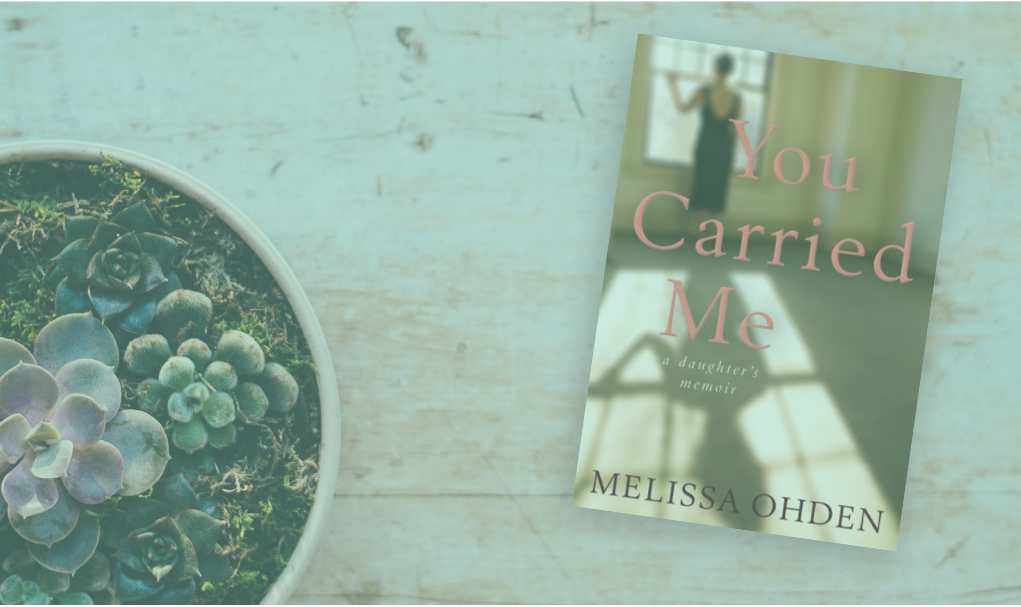
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You Carried Me Carries Rehumanizing Depth

By C.J. Williams

Melissa Ohden's autobiography is a surprisingly un-self-conscious narrative. Stylistically and substantively, it is a very human book, and from its first-person perspective to its direct, chronological summary of events, it lets you quietly in on the intimate day-to-day thoughts and business of a woman who is very like you or me.

And then you discover something more.

Ohden was aborted in 1977.

(The fact that many children survive attempts to end their lives in-utero is rarely acknowledged or discussed, partially because most preborn people who are born post-abortion-attempt are summarily left to die either in medical waste containers or on the surgical table. Sarah Terzo's columns on LiveAction.org are a good resource for further information and support.)

The shock is almost muffled by the matter-of-fact continuation of Ohden's story — she knows she was adopted, and she has a wonderful family and life. These parts of her life are so vivid that when her bitter sister throws the she wasn't wanted! news down in a fit of immature ire, the full tangible reality of the life she has almost makes you discount it.

Well, of course, but that was, you know, then. She is clearly wanted now.

But if she is human, so human — what, the underlying question hangs there (and Ohden wisely sees no need to draw attention to it), what would being wanted have had to do with her humanity?

From there, Ohden details her psychological and physical journey; her academic career (excellent); her casual, unquestioned use

and support of Planned Parenthood (she becomes a social worker and personally goes to PP for birth control as a young adult and is shocked and betrayed to find they perform abortions); her eventual marriage — and her tenacious search for her medical records and birth parents.

Her life, again, is so like ours. Part of the excitement in the read is discovering family — and other things — so I won't go into detail. I will, however, quote her near the end, when one revelation perhaps even more shocking than the news of her abortion-survival hits her: "[...] the violence of abortion is directed against both the child and its mother. [...] A mother can never really be separated from her baby."

If that quote doesn't show it, know that Ohden is thorough, pricelessly honest, and never bitter or blaming. Perhaps a key grace in her story, and the strength of it, is her personal ability to see everyone in her story — birth mother, birth father, et al — as human, with no bitterness or blame.

So is she, ultimately, not like us? Something super-human — or, if we're to follow the abortion logic, subhuman? Or perhaps it is the opposite. Her courage and willingness to tell her story, perhaps that story itself, proves as un-self-consciously as her narrative flow that in a nation that permits the abortion of preborn human beings, we are all alike as humans, humans who might have been aborted.

Ohden just got much closer than you or I.

But her story not only "rehumanizes the fetus" ("Of course," she writes, "my mission was also to personify the humanity of the... [so-called] 'fetus'"). Her story clarifies and lays bare the bleak reality of abortion in all of our lives. Her search for her birth family plods a path that shows how the thread of abortion is twisted into the lives of too many others to count, leaving guilt, despair, death — and horrible voids.

For as her 4-year-old child quips more than halfway through the autobiography, after Ohden has miscarried and sadly told her daughter that the baby "was never born":

"Mommy, he was too born! The day he was made is the day he was BORNED — and I said it was the best day in my life, and it was!"

Her story challenges without preaching — because you don't really have to preach about a life. Lives write larger words than any pen and louder words than any mouth could ever speak. Ohden looks at this world through the lens of reality: that reality is abortion. Its collateral damage is millions of Someones. For as Ohden's book shows so plainly, she was, and is and we were, and are — all human.



Remembering Nat Hentoff (1925–2017)

By John Whitehead

Defenders of life lost one of their most eloquent, frustrating, and idiosyncratic voices earlier this year when Nat Hentoff died on January 7, at the age of 91. This Jewish, atheist, civil libertarian, pro-lifer's critiques of abortion, the death penalty, euthanasia, poverty, racism, and war, provide much to inspire adherents of the Consistent Ethic of Life. Hentoff's writings also provide much to disappoint this same audience, as toward the end of his life he fell away significantly from the Consistent Life Ethic.

The Boston-born son of Russian immigrants, Nathan Irving Hentoff worked as a print and broadcast journalist for over 60 years, writing for periodicals such as *Down Beat*, the *New Yorker*, the *Village Voice*, and the *Washington Post*. During his long career, Hentoff published over 35 books, both fiction and non-fiction. In a style that blended righteous indignation with wry good humor — and was punctuated by Hentoff's characteristic use of the phrase “Dig this” to draw attention to an important point — he covered topics such as jazz, the civil rights movement, peace activism, education, freedom of speech — and the life issues.¹

Hentoff became involved in peace activism partly through his acquaintance with A. J. Muste, a pacifist and civil disobedience strategist whose work influenced Martin Luther King.² Hentoff would eventually write a biography of Muste and edit a collection of the pacifist thinker's writings. Along with Muste and Dorothy Day, he also participated in a civil disobedience action in New York City meant to protest preparations for nuclear war.³ Later, Hentoff

accompanied Muste and others to a meeting with US-Ambassador-to-the-United Nations Adlai Stevenson, in an (unsuccessful) attempt to get Stevenson to take a stand against the Vietnam War.⁴

Hentoff continued his opposition to American involvement in Vietnam through his writing and other public statements, commenting in a 1968 radio broadcast “I think this is still news to the American public that we have been committing war crimes in that country.”⁵ Such anti-war sentiments, combined with his criticism of the FBI for its surveillance of American citizens, earned Hentoff the Bureau's enmity and his own FBI file.⁶

The great sea change in Hentoff's career that would lead to his becoming a Consistent Life Ethic champion was his acceptance, relatively late in life, of a pro-life position on abortion. Hentoff knew little about the pro-life cause, having lived his life surrounded by pro-choice people, and identified the cause as being rooted in religious beliefs he did not share.⁷ He had even served on the Board of the New York Civil Liberties Union during a period when the organization contributed to a successful effort to make abortion more accessible in New York State.⁸

Hentoff's dramatic change on abortion occurred in the early 1980s as the result of studying and writing about the Baby Doe cases. These cases, as Hentoff reported them, were episodes in which infants with disabilities such as Down's Syndrome and spina bifida were, by their parent's request, intentionally denied significant, even life-saving, medical care.⁹ A particularly disturbing case was of a baby boy with Down's Syndrome in Bloomington, Indiana,

who had a malformed esophagus that prevented him from ingesting food. Rather than performing surgery to repair the esophagus — and feeding the boy intravenously until he could eat normally — his parents opted to allow the baby to starve to death.¹⁰ Hentoff was outraged by such cases and disturbed by how so many people on the political Left did not share his outrage.

The view among many Hentoff knew, both in journalistic and political circles, was that the parents' right to privacy should allow them to make these kinds of decisions about their children's medical care. Perhaps the most significant defense of the parents' alleged privacy rights that Hentoff encountered came from an ACLU staffer specializing in reproductive issues. This woman argued that the right to deny certain types of medical care from a girl infant with spina bifida "was really an extension of reproductive freedom rights — a woman's right to choose."¹¹ While Hentoff disagreed with the ACLU staffer's conclusion, he did follow her line of argument by connecting the cases of neglect and even infanticide that so disturbed him to the issue of abortion.

As he later recounted

I began to recognize the zealotry of the abortion-rights movement. And I also began to question their "evidence" that the unborn were not entitled to any rights. I began to read the medical textbooks that physicians in prenatal care read — not pro-life books, but such standard texts as *The Unborn Patient: Prenatal Diagnosis and Treatment...*

I spoke to a number of physicians who do research in prenatal development, and they emphasized that life is a continuum from fertilization to birth to death. Setting up divisions of this process to justify abortion, for example, is artificial. It is the life of a developing being that is being killed. The euphemisms for an aborted fetus — "the product of conception" and "a clump of cells" — are what George Orwell might have called newspeak... [emphasis in original]

As time went on, I began to understand that there is much more to abortion than abortion itself. The mindset — the ability to regard as just and necessary the killing of at least 1.3 million developing human beings a year — helps strengthen the consistent ethic of death in the nation — including the discounting of the Baby Jane Does and the rise of support for "assisted suicide."¹²

His desire to stand against the "consistent ethic of death" made Hentoff an outspoken critic of euthanasia and assisted suicide along with abortion.

Such a stance earned Hentoff more than a little hostility. As he recalled, three editors at the *Voice* all stopped speaking to him after he became pro-life, although he later had a rapprochement with

one of them.¹³ A much closer source of criticism was his own wife, Margot, who was fiercely pro-choice and had, as Hentoff put it, "utter disdain for all pro-lifers, including, intermittently, me."¹⁴ Moreover, the couple's difference on this issue had a more-than-ideological significance: roughly 20 years before Nat's pro-life conversion, at an uncertain time in their marriage, Margot had had an abortion.¹⁵ Despite their disagreement on abortion, and the extraordinary personal history they had with abortion, the Hentoffs managed to remain married for the rest of their lives.

Hentoff found new colleagues within the organized pro-life movement, but his views created frictions with this community as well. Speaking before an "almost entirely Catholic Republican" audience at a Right to Life convention in Columbus, Ohio, Hentoff urged his listeners to oppose capital punishment, war preparations, and Ronald Reagan's cuts to the supplemental food program for women, infants, and children. This prompted an angry reaction from the audience, some members of which rushed up to Hentoff afterwards to inform him that his benighted views were because he "had not yet found God."¹⁶ (Such comments were perhaps balanced by a Jewish pro-choicer's remark that Hentoff was "a self-hating Jew" and "that all authentic modern Jews were pro-abortion.")¹⁷

As his combination of views might suggest, Hentoff had come to embrace the Consistent Ethic of Life. He explicitly affirmed his acceptance of the Ethic in various contexts, recording an interview for the organization the Seamless Garment Network, now known as the Consistent Life Network.¹⁸ Although not an absolutist on nonviolence — he acknowledged that he would use violence in response to a direct attack on his children and described himself as "an imperfect pacifist" — Hentoff generally opposed the major socially approved forms of killing.¹⁹ At a 1992 conference, he expressed his opposition to the recent Persian Gulf War and "practically all wars," and by the decade's end, he would write scathing criticism of the Clinton administration's bombing campaign against Yugoslavia.²⁰ His memoir *Speaking Freely* praised such Consistent Life Ethic stalwarts as Rachel MacNair and Mary Meehan.²¹

By the turn of the 21st century, Hentoff could be considered a hero for advocates of the Ethic. His views regrettably did not stay constant, however.

Following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, Hentoff reacted true to his civil libertarian roots, warning of repression and urging adherence to the Bill of Rights.²² He soon became a ferocious critic of George W. Bush and his administration. In one crucial respect, however, Hentoff supported Bush: he endorsed

the United States' 2003 invasion of Iraq. Disturbed by the sufferings of Iraqis under Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, Hentoff had reached the conclusion that Bush's war of "regime change" was the solution.²³

Hentoff noted that "friends with whom I had marched against the Vietnam War were appalled by my apostasy."²⁴ Supporters of a

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He will continue to be an important figure for non-religious or otherwise unconventional pro-lifers.

Consistent Ethic of Life could share the sentiment: that such a gifted advocate of the Ethic would become a supporter of the Iraq War was bitterly disappointing. Moreover, Hentoff's departure from his previous anti-war stance did not stop with Iraq. After years of reporting on human rights violations in nations such as Sudan, Hentoff urged additional US military interventions to overthrow the repressive regimes responsible for such violations.²⁵ Not content with supporting ongoing wars, Hentoff felt moved to call for more.

In Hentoff's defense, two factors mitigated, even if they did not excuse, his new-found hawkishness. First, his support for American wars was driven not by fears of terrorism or weapons of mass destruction but by concern for people suffering under tyrannical regimes in nations such as Iraq, Myanmar, or Sudan. His motives were generous ones, similar to those that drove him to defend the disabled and preborn. While endorsing American military might as an instrument for advancing human rights was woefully misguided, the underlying impulse was an essentially consistent one.

Second, Hentoff's new hawkish stance did not make him any less critical overall of the American national security establishment than he had been in his anti-Vietnam War days. His columns in support of the Iraq War, for example, were vastly outnumbered by his columns attacking the Bush administration for its use of torture, indefinite detention, and other civil liberties violations.²⁶ This oppositional stance continued when Barack Obama became president, as Hentoff wrote numerous hard-hitting articles on the Obama administration's use of targeted killing by drones.²⁷

Meanwhile, Hentoff continued into his last years to write in opposition of abortion, assisted suicide, and the death penalty. Yet even taking into account his continued defense of preborn lives, the incarcerated, and those at risk for euthanasia, Hentoff at this stage could no longer be considered an advocate of the Consistent Ethic of Life.

What is his legacy? While advocates of the Ethic cannot fully claim him as one of their own, much that Hentoff wrote and said can inform and inspire those committed to defending life. His speech "The Indivisible Fight for Life," for example, remains a classic articulation of the Ethic.²⁸ He will continue to be an important figure for non-religious or otherwise unconventional pro-lifers. No doubt many will continue to value his writings on the Bill of Rights and jazz.

Above all, though, Hentoff reflected a simple but valuable credo that he adopted while still a young man: "I decided that when you know exactly what someone is going to say in answer to every single question you ask, you ought to put your nickel in some other machine."²⁹ Whether one agreed or disagreed with him, whether one was encouraged and disappointed by him, no one could reliably predict how Nat Hentoff would answer a single question. The world was a more interesting place for his presence in it. And the world is a wiser place for having been challenged by his wit and his intellectual integrity.

Notes:

- ¹ Robert D. McFadden, "Nat Hentoff, Journalist and Social Commentator, Dies at 91," *New York Times*, January 7, 2017, <http://nyti.ms/2muLP5Y>.
- ² Nat Hentoff, *Speaking Freely: A Memoir* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 25-26.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 122; Hentoff, "Where is the Peace Movement?," *Village Voice* May 4, 1999, <http://bit.ly/2noSC5q>.
- ⁴ Hentoff, *Speaking Freely*, 30-31.
- ⁵ *The Pleasures of Being Out of Step: Notes on the Life of Nat Hentoff*, directed by David L. Lewis (New York: First Run Features, 2013), DVD.
- ⁶ Hentoff, *Speaking Freely*, 121-127; 128-129.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.
- ⁹ Hentoff reported on the Baby Doe cases in a series of seven columns published in the *Village Voice* in late 1983 and early 1984. These are reprinted in Nat Hentoff, *Insisting on Life* (New York: The Ad Hoc Committee in Defense of Life, 2005), 9-42. He also provided an account of his experience with the Baby Doe cases in *Speaking Freely*, 170-173.
- ¹⁰ Hentoff, *Insisting on Life*, 17-18, 20-21.
- ¹¹ Hentoff, *Speaking Freely*, 171-172.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 173-174.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 179.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.
- ¹⁵ *Pleasures of Being Out of Step*.
- ¹⁶ Hentoff, *Speaking Freely*, 178-179.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ¹⁸ The video, titled "The Seamless Garment," is available on YouTube on <http://bit.ly/2muv4bh> (accessed March 15, 2017).
- ¹⁹ Hentoff, *Speaking Freely*, 5, 26; Nat Hentoff, Statement in "Killing Abortionists: A Symposium," *First Things*, December 1994, <http://bit.ly/2mumKIA>.
- ²⁰ *Pleasures of Being Out of Step*; Hentoff columns on the 1999 Yugoslavia war include "Where is the Peace Movement?"; "Oh What a Lovely War!," *Village Voice*, July 13, 1999, <http://bit.ly/2nc1Q4B>; and "Kosovo— Was There Another Way?," *Village Voice*, July 20, 1999, <http://bit.ly/2nc2mPU>.
- ²¹ Hentoff, *Speaking Freely*, 179-180.
- ²² Hentoff, "An Attack on Civilization," *Jewish World Review*, October 1, 2001, <http://bit.ly/2mKqP7x>.
- ²³ Hentoff, "Weapons of Mass Destruction in Plain View," *Jewish World Review*, June 17, 2003, <http://bit.ly/2n1bpmk>; Nat Hentoff, "Why I Didn't March This Time," *Village Voice*, April 1, 2003, <http://bit.ly/2nbKoxe>.
- ²⁴ Hentoff, "Weapons of Mass Destruction in Plain View."
- ²⁵ Hentoff, "Pacifism Fails in the Face of Sovereign Evil," *Village Voice*, June 3, 2008, <http://bit.ly/2mudtjS>.
- ²⁶ For just a sample of such criticism, see Hentoff columns such as "The White House and Torture," *Jewish World Review*, March 21, 2005, <http://bit.ly/2m1DBq9>; "Will Bush Obey the Supreme Court?," *Jewish World Review*, August 7, 2006, <http://bit.ly/2nbRoKv>; and "The 'W' Stands for 'War Criminal,'" *Village Voice*, June 24, 2008, <http://bit.ly/2n1o1Kr>. Hentoff devoted a book to critiquing the Bush administration's counter-terrorism policies: Nat Hentoff, *The War on the Bill of Rights and the Gathering Resistance* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2003).
- ²⁷ See, for example, Nat Hentoff, "Obama's Extra-judicial Killers Subvert American Values," *Cato Institute*, November 24, 2009, <http://bit.ly/2ntLQbo>; Nat Hentoff, "U.S. Targeted Kill Lists for Next Generations?," *Cato Institute*, October 31, 2012, <http://bit.ly/2noU8EN>.
- ²⁸ This speech was reprinted by the Consistent Life Network; see Nat Hentoff, "The Indivisibility of Life and the Slippery Slope," in *Consistently Opposing Killing*, eds. Rachel MacNair and Stephen Zunes (Bloomington, IN: Choice Press, 2011), 25-32. The speech is also available online at <http://bit.ly/2a1M9nc> (accessed March 15, 2017).
- ²⁹ Hentoff, *Boston Boy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 77.

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