

The Hand

by [Donald L. Renfrew](#) (June 2026)



The Hand (Salvador Dalí, 1930)

Everyone remembers the day The Hand appeared.

What Pearl Harbor, the JFK assassination, and 9/11 were to some in prior generations, the appearance of The Hand was for everyone in this generation.

John Langer was headed to the patio of his house in Gilbert, Arizona when he heard a crash of glass and his wife Jennifer gasp, "Oh God!"

Walking onto the patio, Langer saw Jennifer staring to the east. He followed her gaze. A gigantic hand hovered above the horizon. He dropped his cup of coffee and it joined hers in

pieces on the stone patio floor.

Langer thought: "What *is* that thing?"

It loomed in the sky like a planet sized parade float. "That makes *no sense*," Langer thought. His mind was somehow both stunned and opened. He glanced around the walled garden of his back yard. He saw it as if a dark screen had been lifted. He had no words for what he saw. The smooth pebbles on the ground seemed individually numbered yet made one continuous carpet. The plastered walls sat with a form and solidity he'd never before appreciated. Oranges hung on the tree like Christmas ornaments illuminated from within, glowing with an intensity he'd not only never seen but had never imagined. He looked down at the stone floor. Under the pieces of coffee cups, squiggles left by a Silly String party on his daughter's sixteenth birthday seemed to spell out a message in a forgotten language. His glance carried upwards to the patio furniture. He noticed a small tear along the seam of one of the couch cushions. "I need to fix that," he thought.

He looked at his wife. She looked at him. They stared into each other's eyes for two full seconds, longer than they had in years, and he reached toward her. How had he never seen her like this before?

The chorus of the Spice Girls' *Mama*, their daughter's ringtone, played from his wife's phone.

"Oh," Jennifer said softly and pulled away.

Sliding the virtual button on her phone, she said, "Hi Hon!"

"Mom, you won't believe what's happening!"

"The Hand?" Jennifer asked.

"You see it too? Like a giant hand in sky?" Emily asked

"Yes, we're seeing the same thing here!" Jennifer said,

looking at Langer.

"It looks like it's ... what ... beckoning?"

"Asking for a hand-out is more like it!" their son-in-law Brad said in the background.

"Oh Brad," Emily said. She continued to her mother: "That's so ... *Brad*." She sighed. "I just don't think I can deal with this today."

"What's wrong?" Jennifer asked with concern.

"Mia was up all night again! I got like two hours' sleep."

"Oh, Hon. Colic again?"

"The worst!"

"Did you try that oil belly rub I got you for her?"

Langer moved away from his wife and turned on the TV mounted on the wall of the patio. It opened to the default he had on all his TVs: American News Network (ANN). A reporter stood in Times Square while a crowd of of business men in suits and office workers in business casual gawked at the sky. Two apparently unrelated but similar looking long-haired young men in worn hoodies and jeans jostled against each other for position in the camera's field of view. They held up crudeley lettered signs, one of which read "Repent! The End is Near!" and the other "God is Love!"

"Yes Carla," the reporter said, apparently in response to an anchor's question, "the crowd here is staring at The Hand which, by report, is seen across the globe and by all people of every nation."

"Steve, can you show me a picture?"

Steve stepped back and gestured toward the tops of the buildings behind him. The camera panned from the crowd to an

empty sky.

“Just as has been reported everywhere,” Steve said, “cameras do not pick up The Hand.”

“That’s correct,” Carla confirmed. “None of our stateside or international locations are able to capture an image.”

Langer glanced at his phone and hit the “Camera” button while the anchor continued talking. “Apparently no images have yet captured The Hand and we’re scrambling to get scientists on the line to explain this.”

Langer pointed his iPhone at The Hand. Nothing but blue sky.

Carla went on: “We know so far that all people see The Hand but no camera records it. Stand by. We’re just learning that the president has called an emergency press conference to address the situation. We’re going to switch over to live coverage of that momentarily.. ”

Langer’s phone emitted the first four notes of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, the ring tone of his boss at Anderson Accounting.

“John?” his boss asked.

“Hey Bob. Are you seeing it too?”

“Yeah, yeah. I wanted to touch bases with all the associates. Apparently the White House is going to say something soon.”

“Do you have your TV on?” Langer asked.

“Of course.”

“He’s coming on now.”

The white house press secretary, an attractive young woman in an immaculate blue suit and radiant white blouse, looked gravely over the crowd of reporters and said: “We are all

aware of the events of this morning. The President will now speak to the state of affairs, followed by a question and answer period. Please hold your questions until he is done with his opening statement.” She moved aside to let the president take the podium.

The President cleared his throat, looked solemnly around the room, and said:

“My fellow Americans, let me say first: ‘Do not panic!’ We are *not* in danger. Military intelligence assures me that The Phenomenon presents no threat or security risk. Scientists in both the government and at our premier universities are analyzing The Phenomenon, and as far as the scientists are concerned, as it cannot be detected with any scientific instrument, it is not genuinely real. They have proposed to call The Phenomenon ‘The Illusion,’ but our official position is that it should be called ‘The Phenomenon.’

“I’m ordering all US government employees to report to work as usual and to do their jobs as if nothing has happened, and I have encouraged and will continue to encourage all states, municipalities, universities, and businesses to do the same. Government offices will be open and, I hope, so will schools and businesses. We need to keep the country running. We are working to clear up the various traffic jams that have resulted from The Phenomenon. To all who have stopped along the road or even *in* the road, I encourage you to get back in your cars and drive as you normally would to your destinations and stop staring at The Phenomenon. I will say this: the self-driving cars have performed incredibly well in this situation. We have also encouraged the airlines to switch all planes to autopilot. Machines handle The Phenomenon better than humans. Before opening this up for questions, let me reiterate: ‘Do not

panic!' In fact, I will quote one of my illustrious predecessors: 'We have nothing to fear but fear itself.' I will now take questions."

A cacophony of "Mr. Presidents!" and a flurry of raised hands ensued. The president restored calm with a wave of his palm. "Yes, Mike, you first."

The ANN reporter asked: "Are there plans to send spaceships to investigate The Hand?"

The President smiled slightly and said: "You mean 'The Phenomenon.' As is well known, The Phenomenon is not detectable by any instruments but only by direct visualization by a human being. The location of The Phenomenon is unclear since it looks to be in the same place regardless of the observer's position, which is one reason the scientists are calling it 'The Illusion'. Sending probes makes no sense since probes can't detect The Phenomenon. Observations from jet fighters at high altitude as well as from astronauts in the space station report the same thing seen from the Earth's surface. Yes, David," the President gestured to another reporter.

"Several churches here in the states are calling this thing 'The Hand of God.' Is the government considering use of this term?"

The President frowned and shook his head. "Absolutely not! For one thing, we have a strict separation of church and state in this country. For another, the scientists say that such a designation is profoundly unscientific. Remember, they want to call it 'The Illusion,' although the official name is 'The Phenomenon.' Yes, Jim," the President said, gesturing to another reporter.

"What should we do? Do we just go about our lives as if nothing

has changed?"

The President gave a single quick authoritative nod. "Exactly! That is the official position of the US government and, I have been assured, of the European Union, as well Russia, China, and the remainder of the world with the exception of a few isolated backward regimes. Let the experts figure out what to do about this. In the meanwhile, do what you would normally do. Return to your work and your lives as if nothing unusual has happened."

"Well, that's certainly a relief!" Langer heard his boss say. Langer muted the television to listen to Bob. His boss continued: "Here we are in March already right in the middle of busy season! I need you to pitch in this year the way you've always done in the past, John. I know I can count on you." He cleared his throat and paused. "The way things are rolling right now, John, I'm pretty sure we'll set new records for billing again. You know what that means: record productivity bonuses! Like The President says, the best thing to do is come on in to work and dig in."

"Well, yeah, I suppose," Langer said. He glanced at The Hand and shook his head. "I'll shower up and head in."

Langer looked back at the garden. What a few minutes ago was aglow and vibrant and alive looked as though it had been replaced by cardboard and styrofoam props: rocks, walls, plants, and a sidewalk with faint random stains. He still had the tear on the couch cushion to fix.

Driving to work, Langer thought about what his boss had said: a record productivity bonus! Langer moistened his lips. At age 52 retirement was in sight.

Langer thought of his life as on "on cruise control". Like his car which easily loped down I10 when he and his wife visited his daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughters in Los Angeles, he was comfortable and covering massive amounts of ground. He

occasionally thought of the pilgrims and what an unending struggle it must have been to trudge along the Gila Trail across the desolate, dead desert. His latest car did cruise control one better with a self-driving feature which let him relinquish control and relax as the vehicle whisked Jennifer and him along I10's smooth swath of concrete. He would take an occasional glance at the rocks and mountains but mainly focused on the distance signs along the way, just as he focused on his personal spreadsheet denoting his progress toward retirement. Like vacations, medical procedures, and trips to California, Langer found the middle of the week rarely memorable in comparison to the beginning or the end. Sunday was his round of golf with the boys and the afternoon nap on the sofa, the work week lasted from early Monday morning through late Saturday afternoon, after which the week would end with taking Jennifer out to dinner and then a movie.

Once at work, the Monday morning The Hand appeared was like all the others during busy season: he logged onto his multiscreen workstation and loaded multiple software programs and started in on the hundreds of emails, thousands of forms, and unending spreadsheets (with an occasional glance at his own), interspersed with Zoom call after Zoom call with clients. Between talking with his clients and supervising the six junior accountants under him, he barely had time to breath.

Though he drowned in a sea of work, Langer had a vague sense that perhaps something was lacking or wrong about his life, despite the fact that he was an excellent provider and he and his family were well taken care of: he could not imagine a scenario wherein he and his wife did not have abundant resources to house, clothe, and feed themselves and to enjoy the latest Netflix series as well as movies, dinners out, trips to see his daughter and granddaughters, and an occasional vacation. Regardless of his complete satisfaction as an organism in an environment, however, he felt an

occasional slight twinge that something was missing. Did The Hand have something to do that feeling? He realized that some would say he worked too hard, particularly during busy season when he stayed at the office so late that when he got home he had barely the energy to say two words to Jennifer. But she understood and accepted the routine: busy season meant they'd see less of each other but that would change in the middle of April, and then *really* change in a decade or so when he was able to retire.

In the break room Wednesday as he grabbed one of the endless busy-season cups of coffee the perpetually running television showed an ANN expert panel on The Hand which captured his attention.

"Hello, I'm Karen March," the journalist and moderator introduced herself. Langer recognized her from frequent appearances on ANN: a thin, late middle aged woman with beaten blonde tinted hair and bags under her eyes. "I'm here today with our expert panel to discuss The Hand." Langer noted that, like most people and despite government efforts to refer to The Hand as The Phenomenon, the media just called the hand The Hand. "We have here speaking on behalf of the administration Senator James Brockton from North Carolina" (the camera cut to a well-groomed clean-shaven man in a somber blue suit wearing a red tie), "Retired General Victor Harlan to provide insight into military matters" (the screen changed again to show a square-jawed man wearing a permanent scowl), "Professor of physics Elias Thorne from Caltech" (the screen showed a disheveled man wearing horn-rimmed glasses covering his darting eyes, a bow tie, and a rumpled shirt that looked like it had been slept in for three days), "Dr. Victor Moreau, NYU professor and chair of psychiatry" (the camera showed a lean, bearded man with a penetrating gaze) "and finally Dr. Julian Hale, Professor of Comparative Religion at Harvard Divinity" (the camera showed a kindly, smiling, overweight bald man).

"First to you, Senator Brockton. What are the administration's

plans to repair the damage caused by its grossly inadequate preparation for the crisis we are now in?"

The Senator smiled warmly, used to unprovoked on-air attacks. "Well, first let me say we are addressing the matter with the full seriousness that it deserves. The administration has taken all efforts to alleviate the inconvenience and even distress that The Phenomenon has caused our citizens, and in addition is in constant communication with other heads of state in coordinating an international program that best addresses the issues at hand."

March, undeterred, said "All observers see the hand as that of an elderly white male. How can this be interpreted as anything but an indictment of our current patriarchal, racist society?"

"Karen, I think people report what they see, but that beyond that it is up to each individual to determine what it is that what they see means. This is a position we support fully and will continue to support going forward."

"Very well," March said curtly. She turned to look at the next panelist: "General, what can you tell us about the military aspects of The Hand?"

"I can assure you that The Hand presents no military threat to us. The US military maintains a close watch on The Hand and so far it has demonstrated no overt threatening actions. Indeed, since its first appearance at 2 PM Greenwich Mean Time March 7th, there has been no observable change."

"But what is there *is* a change? What if it *does* become threatening?"

"We have no reason to think that will be the case." He straightened in his chair. "But if it does... "

"Yes?"

The General paused. "Let me say this. The Pentagon has a newly

developed weapon that far exceeds all prior capabilities. I am not at liberty to reveal specifics, but it goes by the code name 'Shiva' and my sources tell me there's nothing ... and I mean *nothing* ... that can possibly survive it. I understand that, if necessary, we will deliver this device against The Hand."

"Deliver?" March asked. "How can you deliver such a device? No instruments can detect The Hand, even using the most advanced AI."

"Well," General Harlan said, "Let me just say this. You have no idea of the dedication that the brave pilots of our military have and the sacrifices they are willing to make. My own son is, in fact, a pilot in the Air Force and I'm certain he'd gladly volunteer for such a mission."

March looked blankly at the General. "I see," she said after a few moments. "Moving on!" March turned to the physicist and said "Dr. Thorne, what have the scientists found out so far?"

"Well, you see!" he said. "That is, we *all* see, do we not! It is a *visible* phenomenon and of course this means that our retinas are being stimulated by electromagnetic radiation in the range of 400 to 700 nanometers. Everyone knows this! The strange thing," he leaned forward "is that our instruments do not *detect* this radiation! What does this mean? Of course there is . . . or there *will be* ... a scientific explanation for The Phenomenon. Of that we may be certain."

"What will the explanation be?" Karen asked.

"Well of course we can't know *that!*" he said. "The beauty of science is the wonder of discovery! We never know beforehand what the scientific explanation for a novel discovery such as The Phenomenon will be! We only know that there *will be* a scientific explanation! There always has been and there always will be!" he concluded triumphantly.

"But nothing so far?" March asked.

"Investigations are ... ongoing!" Thorne said. "And will continue to be so!"

"I understand," March said. "Dr. Moreau, what can the medical profession tell us about The Hand?"

"We prefer to call it 'The Illusion' or even 'The Delusion', Karen" he said in a simultaneously ingratiating and condescending tone. "Of course, as has been well established, The Illusion can only be seen" (he made air quotes as he said "seen") "by humans and not by scientific instruments. Our current hypothesis is that The Illusion exists in the mind only, and is, indeed, a form of hitherto unrecognized psychiatric disease."

"Oh? So we're all crazy, Doctor?"

"Hardly! 'Crazy' is a perjorative term which should never be used. The psychiatric community as a whole recognizes that The Illusion is a problem which, so far, is not going away."

"What do you intend to do about it?"

"Well, now *that's* a good question," Moreau said approvingly. "We have conducted several large scale epidemiological studies to determine whether patients currently treated with antipsychotic medications experience The Delusion."

"I thought it was 'The Illusion,'" Karen interjected.

"Whatever," Dr. Moreau waved his hand deprecatingly. "So far we have not found an improvement comparing those on antipsychotic medications to the general non-medicated population. You realize, of course, that we are speaking about epidemiological studies and not randomized controlled trials and therefore the results must be analyzed accordingly. However, there are currently studies underway, fast-tracked and approved by the Government's Medical Ethics Committee, to

determine whether increasing the dose of existing medications will yield better results.”

“And what *are* the results?”

Moreau shook his head. “Too early to tell.”

“What happens if the drugs don’t work?”

“We are actively pursuing other treatments,” Moreau assured.

“Such as?” March asked.

“There are many interventions that have been – perhaps prematurely! – abandoned in psychiatry. ECT, PFL, etc.”

“What are those?”

Moreau pulled on his chin whiskers thoughtfully. “Well, perhaps I’ve said too much. Just know that we are willing to take the steps necessary to rid ourselves of The Delusion.”

“I see. Well, we’ll just have to say ‘stay tuned’ and have you back on a follow-up panel, won’t we?”

“Please do,” he smiled.

“For our final panelist, we invited Professor Julian Hale, Chair of Comparative Religion at Harvard Divinity. While our initial plan was to invite an Iman, a rabbi, a protestant minister, and a Catholic Priest, we felt that this would make the panel too large, and almost certainly lead to pointless bickering as well. Dr. Hale, what can the Great Religions of the world teach us about The Hand?”

Dr. Hale gave a warm smile. “Please, Karen, call me Julian. And thank you for inviting me here today.

“First I want to emphasize my distance and also the distance of the heads of the established churches—Sheikh Abdulla al-Harbi, Reverend Dr. Jonathan Whitaker, The Most Reverend

Edmund Hargrove, Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Robert Thorton, and even the Pope Francis II—from the reactionary crowd which has been clamoring that ‘The End is Near’ and making such a nuisance of themselves, especially in the, shall we say, more *backward communities*.”

“The fundamentalists?” March suggested.

“Exactly,” Hale agreed. “Doomsday cults have sprung up through the ages predicting the end of the world: Heaven’s Gate, Aum Shinrikyo, the Peoples’ Temple, and the Branch Davidians to name but a few. The cults themselves often have deadly results, and of course in all cases the result is the same: the predicted day comes and goes, and the world goes on as before.”

“So what should we do in this case?” March asked.

“As a professor of comparative religion it is not my place to tell *you* what to do,” he admonished. “I can only tell you what you might do if you were, for example, a Hindu, a Zoroastrian, a Manichian, a Buddhist, a Confusian, a Muslim, a Jew, or a Christian.”

“And what would that be?”

“Ah, there’s the rub!” he replied, actually rubbing his own hands together. “Depending on what you believe, you may do anything, everything, or nothing!” He paused. “A good place to read about this topic is my latest book, *Signs and Meanings*, available on Amazon and now listed at number 6 on the New York Times nonfiction bestseller list.

“Very good professor,” Karen said. “I would like to get *your* answer, but we’re running into a hard break here.

“When we come back, what the professor says. Later in the hour: how minorities and women have been disproportionately disadvantaged by The Hand.”

Langer had to get back to work and could not wait for the professor's answer.

Saturday he stayed even later than usual at the office and had to skip the routine movie and dinner out. He grabbed take-out on the way home and ate it then fell asleep to the spy adventure Jennifer and he were currently watching. He wasn't sure if it was because he was so tired or because the series were all the same, but he could never keep the characters or plots straight.

Sunday Langer made it to the golf course ten minutes before the first tee time at his club. He and his partners had the opening time reserved in perpetuity and had played together for years. It was a great way to start the week. During the round they shared brief remarks about family or work but mainly concentrated on the game. They had a years-long Nassau running that kept them focused on every stroke, even though there was a running joke that if they had started with three twenty dollar bills at the start of betting a decade ago, the same three twenties would have passed back and forth multiple times with no need of a fourth.

Why did golf attract Langer? Was it that golf took his mind off other worries: no matter what was going on at work or in the family, he could go to the golf course and forget about it for four or five hours? While true, this begged the question: why was golf able to do this? Of course, the camaraderie and fellowship of his long time golf buddies and the excitement of the Nassau were part of it, but Langer enjoyed the same escape when he played as a single. He couldn't put his finger on why golf attracted him, but he felt that he was somehow most himself during the one or two seconds when he focused on the golf ball as one immanent object in the universe, held his target in mind, and felt the energy of his swing. The round passed as countless others had, with one exception: he found that The Hand made an excellent alignment target on the eastward facing holes of the back nine.

Langer stopped at the office after his round to put in a few hours, just to keep his head above water, and didn't realize the time until after dark.

He smiled to himself as he crossed the parking lot to his car. At the rate he was going, this year's productivity bonus was going to be a monster! He thought of his spreadsheet fondly and knew that if he put in the number he thought he would get for a bonus, it could move his retirement age up by as much as a month or two.

"Maybe," Langer thought to himself as he pushed the "Home" button on his self-driving car's screen, "the end is nearer than I think!"

He awoke the next morning after a solid eight hours of dreamless sleep feeling rested and ready for anything, even another busy season week at Anderson Accounting. He poured his morning cup of coffee and headed toward the patio where Jennifer was drinking her own morning cup and looking at her phone. He stepped onto the patio and glanced upward to where he expected to see the now familiar Hand and, as he had a week before, froze in his footsteps, dropped his coffee cup, and gasped.

He looked at Jennifer who, startled at the sound of the breaking glass, was looking at him.

"Do you see what I see?"

The Hand had turned into *The Finger*!

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Donald L. Renfrew, MD and Walker Percy (The Hand is a Percian riff on Proverbs 16:18) both had: fathers who died young by gunshot; an early and avid interest in science; a degree in

medicine; contraction of TB while working in a hospital; and adult conversion to Catholicism. Unlike Percy, Renfrew's TB never became active and he spent his career practicing radiology and writing scientific articles and medical textbooks. He enjoys time with his wife, five children, and four grandchildren..

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