

Look Ma, Hands

If I'm going to talk about my life at work, I have to start with my hands. And if I talk about my hands, I have to start with my right hand. I'm a right-hand man, and my right hand is my man. It hurts at the wrist right now, when I write, from tendinitis. The knuckles are all scar tissues merging with each other. There's a crank or gnar to the shape of the fingers, twisted slightly by forces of grip & impact & oncoming arthritis. My father in his eighties would hold his up and say "*Claws*". The veins bulge on the back of the hand and even on the base of the fingers. I often wonder at the effect of throwing one's arm in toolswings downward, how the blood is hurled out into the nether reaches of capillaries every stroke. Kids like to look at the veins, they press them down & giggle at the way they pop back up. Sometimes I see it as comely & virile. Other times it looks grotesque.

Across the back, my hands are usually sun-weathered, and now they have the beginning of an older man's spotting and parchment-wrinkle. If I look closely at the open side of the hand of course I see calluses. There are permanent vertical creases between the inside-the-knuckle horizontal folds. If you shake my right hand you feel something leathery and firm, probably a little cool. Then a hint of strength. My right hand is probably half-again as strong as my left. The inside edge of the thumb as well as the side of the first finger and the last digit of the middle finger are callused and cracking slightly from wear against tool & lumber surfaces. If I look closely at the whorling prints all across the inside of my hand I find scars in many places interrupting the patterns. If splinters left scars there would be a thousand in each hand. The back of my hand has many scars that have blended into the freckling... except for the major ones. There's that grisly stab wound from the time the metal strapping snapped back on me after I cut it with shears. The backs of the fingers on close inspection appear to have had skin grafts. No doubt all the skin on the upper two sections has been scraped and mangled off at one time or another. It's all replacement stuff.

My Right is the hand that *grazes* things. When I swing or yank with a tool, this hand pays for misses & slips. Trying to hammer a nail in between a ragged concrete surface and the Work. Prying a wall apart and the fulcrum pops loose. In a sense, this hand has itself to blame for its scars. A familiar memory of cursing after a misguided blow. It's my right hand damning itself, using my voice to say "*Idiot!*" "*Why are you always so heedless? Why don't you wait a moment & think it over? You always do this, over-confident, believing in Force and Energy, damn the torpedoes, what's a little pain, there's no way around it...*" I think that's my Left hand speaking in the wake of the injury. Blood is dripping down, the work has to stop while the leftie does the bandaging; the mind chips in with "*what's a little pain you say, but it's me has to deal with it.*" But deep in Right hand's essence is a masculine brio; a feeling that, after all, that goddamn

nail is IN isn't it? There *was* no other way. Right hand feels surprised when it bleeds; often it can will the blood to stay inside. In fact Will is at the core of Righthand's character.

I look at my hand frequently when not working. It has Presence, character. It reassures me to gaze at it. I know I can depend on it, I know how far it can go, how many Moves it has, how much pain it can take, how much Force it can muster. Know it in a secretive way. It's just between us. I can't imagine how different a person I would be if this Right hand had been, say... writing memos all my life. All the thousands of days of obscure & unreportable feats of agility & blunder & endurance meld into a single flow of knowing.

It's my Left hand that I've sawn into or smashed with a hammer or cut with a knife or chisel. I've drilled it & pared it & crushed it. I've pinned it under tons, & shot it with pneumatic nails. I like to gaze at it too, but not quite as much. Maybe a little ashamed of what I've done to it through errors & laxity. It's not quite as strong. But it can do things entirely on its own, like sorting through a handful of every-which-way nails by feeling for heads, and aligning them so one after another can be fed in rhythm to the hammer swing. I don't have to stop to tell it what to do.

There's a moment when hammer blow is about to happen. The wrist is slung in poise to whip the handle down, and the Left hand darts in at a nice distance from the last nail driven to hold the next nail very still in alignment with the line of force of the last six inches of the hammer blow. Holds it another microsecond until there is a gap of time close to simultaneity. The hammer hand needs to know with perfect certainty that it can strike with no restraint. Nails are nasty missiles if hit a glancing blow. Some times a carpenter has one spin back and stick in his eye. Or the hammer deflects to ones' other hand, or a leg.

Once I was sent to work with a crew nailing on a fascia board all around the rafter-ends of the two-story apartment buildings. I was an apprentice, in 1971. I had never done the roof edge work before. I was put on one end of a sixteen-foot two-by-ten, shown where to nail, how to start the nails first before putting the board out over the rafter ends. So far so good. I feel athletic enough, strong enough, & I'm not afraid of heights. Then I realize a 'green' redwood plank is damned heavy & then I realize how easy it would be to fall. I have to get out as far towards the edge of the roof plywood as possible in order to swing the board out and then hold it vertically with my left hand while being able to swing a strong blow *inward* towards the building. It suddenly terrified me. Partly because of the shame if I were to foul up. The other guy was impatient, probably being paid piece-rate. Then I see that if I do anything wrong, it may kill him too. We are up twenty-five feet. We've got an awkward sixty-pound plank here. There's concrete & four-foot dowels of re-bar down there. Then I get a rush of bravery and, I suppose, adrenalin. *I can do this*. The other guys can do it, so it's possible.

It's a level of cat consciousness. Feeling simian as well, nimble with lanky force. Yeah. I get the board out over the edge, and slip a little...but contain the fear and find an angle of foot-planting that accounts for the grainy surface. Now my partner says *You on the mark?.... Nail it.*

First I struck a medium-force blow to get through the plank, and just barely stabbed the rafter end. The plank held... precariously, so I slid my left hand up to put pressure inward, and hoped I could drive the spike home with one more blow. With a silent prayer I swung, a fullforce framer's swing. I'd done it many times, I knew that it would hold that plank up & free my other hand. But the hammer just nicked the nailhead & landed right on the end of my middle finger. Blood spattered in a corona all around it, spraying the plank with a beautiful pattern. My fingernail was split, there was blood all over it. But I had to keep my grip or maybe we both fall. I had to swing again, & I did, & hit the nail at last. Then finished nailing with my throbbing left hand held up in the air.

My Right hand is in awe of that moment. It doubts whether it could have held on or not screamed. Even when I tell the story of it, my voice slides toward awe. When I see again the halo of blood on the ocher wood. Maybe I could stand up to torture if they work only on my *left* hand. Right says it would talk. Is talking.

II

Let's say that one hand *does know* what the other is doing. Even say that they can't wait for the day to get going, for clothes to put on, for example. What could be more enjoyable than pulling on pants, doing the zipper and button, left hand splaying open the buttonhole, right hand leaning the button through? What nicer than left holding buckle, right threading the belt through, cinching it back while left pops the pin in the hole? They can do this stuff while the rest of me sleeps. Button a shirt, tie a bootlace. The dance of boot-hooks, one after the other, loop-de-loo. The knot with a pair of loops, one for each hand.

These two fellows have been doing this for centuries. And the toiletry too. The piss or poop detail. The face-bracing splash. The wash-up of themselves: a little soap, a practiced massage that tries to get all surfaces in two or three passes, then the delicious rinse off, waiting until the soap-slick vanishes and the rub is exactly the way pure skin should feel with pure cold water.

One could truly say my Left hand loves my Right hand. I don't know that there is a male/female analogy, but I suppose my Left hand is Yin, Right is Yang. But is that

imposed by our civilization; for example that we make button holes on the left? One is *auxiliary*, sure. My Right makes the force-moves, Left the 'arranging' moves. When I cut my food, Left spears and holds the meat while Right cuts it. Left holds the toast, Right butters. Left holds the handle of the pan, Right scrambles the egg.

But, like real lovers, real joined-at-the-clavicle sweethearts, my hands can't wait to work together and couldn't care less *who* has the Glory. The upper hand doesn't have the Upper Hand. They're like two healthy dogs who know they're about to go out on the floodplain to chase rabbits and wade in ponds. They look in at my toolbox in the truck and just twitch in anticipation. *Oooohh, look at those chisels & saws & little files & big sledges!* As I walk around the shop making sure I have everything, I picture what I'll be doing that day, & my hands are saying *Yeah, yeah, yeah, don't forget your low-angle plane, don't forget the drill, please, bring your wonderful crescent wrench too, won't we be needing the hand-axe a little, huh? How about the new cabinet scraper & that old Yankee screwdriver, we need that. It'll come in Handy.*

If I listened to them I would need an extra trailer to manage all the tools they want to play with each day. Of course how can I blame them? All these thousand tools were invented by hands in the first place. The best of them are totally at One with the optimum action of the hands.

The block plane, how it fits to the palm. How easily the hand can know how much is shaving off below and at what bias. The handsaw, how well a hand can aim its attack and feel the right stroke. The compass, how perfect an extension into the super-abstract it manages for fingers. And hammers, Lord! all the manifestation of hammers. The Prime Tool of Tools. Primum Mobile.

My favorite hammer, the Plumb twenty-ounce curved-claw wooden-handled, was a marriage in heaven for my Right hand. The balance is phenomenal, the wood handle absorbs all vibration & kills it, the claw perfectly levers out nails & compacts the force of the steel head so that a swing is concentrated to the nail. I've had it thirty-three years, since Albert the Journeyman told me to get one or I'd never be able to keep up with him. He was cutting plywood siding on an apartment complex, and being paid piece work. I was his nailer, throwing up sheets of plywood after he cut them, and nailing rows of eight-penny galvanized nails as fast as I could possibly go with no breaks all day. That guy could measure & cut plywood at a tremendous rate. I had to expand my idea of nailing speed by a factor of three or four. But my hammer was clumsy and steel-handled, an Estwing. He saw it right away; I would be too slow & hurting too much. That night I bought the Plumb, and it was a miracle, a saviour in wood & steel. It should have said INRI on the handle.

I knew an apprentice a year or so later who had a similar opinion expressed about his amateur hammer. He had been sent to a housing project near the Bay in Marin, and was unable to keep up with the pace of nailing set by the framing crew. At lunch time the men sat out on a bluff overlooking the Bay. The foreman asked to see his hammer & he handed it over. The foreman looked at it, tested it, & scowled. *"Shit, this is no goddamn*

hammer!” And threw it clear out into the sky, hammer flipping end-for-end and my friend staring out awestruck & frightened as the hammer sailed out and down into the waters of San Francisco Bay. *“Now you go get yourself one like this tonight!”* Handed him his spare to use the rest of the day, a real framing hammer, a Vaughn 24-ounce.

Now, few carpenters use hammers anymore; everything is nailed pneumatically with a gun.. All the force & skill of ten thousand hammer blows is coiled up into an eighty-pound machine that uses a kilowatt or so and fires off nails like a machine gun. There’s a kind of skill in using one, but it’s not a skill that my hands can get happy about. It’s pulling a trigger at the right moment. More of a mental thing, a military thing. Same with the wonders of the handsaw. The advent of the electric saws sixty years ago ended the pleasures and tribulations of the hand and reduced the skill to one of whole-body grasp and delivery, with a military pleasure in pulling triggers. Not unlike the progress of the real Military. Which now consists of trigger-men in jet planes far away from the bodies of the foe.

Well, I think the truck is quite full enough... why don’t you two guys jump in and drive me to the job? My hands are only too happy to comply. Right hand on the shift knob, Left to the steering wheel. *Sure, we’ll take you wherever you want to go.*

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