

Band-Aids

November & December 2022

A week or so ago, I was doing my best to give my help to my husband. We have an old house, and the original front windows were begging to retire. Ever the craftsman, John said that he could replace the windows himself. At one point, though, the heavy windows needed to be held in place while he insured they were level. He had already drilled the holes for the screws, and I noticed that one of the holes seemed to have some fluff around it. I reached up with two fingers of my left hand and made a gesture that would normally have swiffed away the fluff.

The fluff was actually curlicues of hard plastic. The pain was a surprise, and the tips of pointer and middle-man, as goes the child's song about digits, were sliced. As blood decorated my hand, I raced to the bathroom. The wounds rinsed, my right hand alone fumbled for the box of Band-Aids in the drawer and then, again flying solo, attempted to open the box and pick out and attach Band-Aids to my wounded fingertips. This was a real challenge for someone who depends 99.9% of the time on her left hand, disregarding the French translation of "left" as "gauche".

My two fingers adhesive-bound, I began the lament of self-pity. How was I to wash my hands throughout the day without reducing the Band-aids to soggy messes that turn my fingers' texture to that of crenellated fish skin? How was I to type or complete myriad chores? What would I do while my fingers were on sick leave?

How dare we not sing, every day, praises to the mechanism we call the hand, with its delightfully helpful phalanges? It truly is wondrous. When our months-old filly kicked me in the thigh, I realized the strength, nimbleness, and accuracy of the equine hoof. Our Labrador Chauncey has learned "Give me five!" and appears to curl his claws a bit when he lays his gentle paw in the hand of his beloved human. The human hand, though, has parts, talents, responsibilities and even a psychology.

When we make a pledge or vow or promise, or we concur with a document's contents, our writing hand readies itself to seal the deal. A high level of eloquence, solemnity, and permanency is bestowed to a situation involving the fingers' grasp of the writing implement. Likewise, we send a clear message when we touch our hand to our heart, zip our thumb and forefinger to our lips, or point to the guilty party.

I must mention here one of the most marvelous and critical uses of the hand and its fingers: American Sign Language. What a gift it is for many. What a beautiful ballet it is to watch! So much said so eloquently in silence! But only silence of sound. Many years ago, my high school students brought to life the play, *The Hobbit*, for the elementary school students. With the youngsters came two women who would sign for several children. My students and I had to get used to, nearly impervious to, the signers. They were that gifted, that wondrous.

Fingers are so talented. They work in synergy, one automatically coming to the aid of others to form a salute or a cup. Prestidigitation is also part of their show, every finger moving independently while a musical instrument is played. Or the fingers work in sleight of hand to create a crafty illusion, as happens in card tricks or when locating the nickel behind your ear.

Fingers wrench off the jar lid or delicately transfer the ladybug from kitchen sink to outdoor leaf. And the adept can perform miracles under the hood of a car.

Perhaps to me, the most amazing feat of fingers is to receive the messages of the brain that signal that what we call a “word” needs to be placed on paper. Call this muscle memory—which guides or aids the musician’s dexterity as well—or the Palmer Method for cursive—alas! a dying art!—or hunt and peck. We do not have to think when we write in long-hand or type at a keyboard. Just as our fingers used to “do the walking through the yellow pages”, our fingers do the work to create a grocery list or the great American novel.

I marvel at ambidexterity. When hand-sewing, I am useless with the needle in my right hand. I can brush my teeth only with my left hand. Holding the phone with my right hand to my right ear is tricky; I believe that I can’t hear as well. Does it count, though, that with my left hand, I can write in cursive both to the left and to the right?

Many say that our eyes carry emotion. I believe that our fingers carry emotion as well. My fingers start tap-tapping when I grow impatient with a situation. They automatically tighten when I’m stressed or angry. They grow soft when I see a baby animal. I have wrung my hands in fear and shaken them in relief. I have hidden a laugh and dabbed at a tear. Fingers tell all. We can’t hide from them, even if we who deal in histrionics are told to please sit on our hands. But who can properly emote during the telling of a story without using one’s hands? Or for that matter, conjure a memory? Our hands help share the memory and the story.

For those of us who are no longer young in years, our fingers are where arthritis starts. If we look positively at the onset of arthritis, we can think of it as we do the laugh lines on our faces. I hand-wrote stories and homework for years. Later, I switched to a typewriter as a government worker and then as a teacher. Holding hard my favorite non-gel pens, I wrote many notes on many students’ many essays for many semesters. I held tightly to a water-ski rope, to occupied dog leashes, to boulders’ natural handholds, to trowels, to my sons. I clutched nail guns and twisted off juicy-juice containers. I carried firewood and lifted heavy saddles. And if my arthritis isn’t too bad yet, it’s because I’ve had years of hugging those I love. And I have kissed and held many small fingers, the love spreading to my fingers as well. And I have clapped in jubilation and praise. And I have sung those dear children’s songs where fingers and thumbs are on stage and all the rage.

How did we manage during the pandemic, when we could not shake a hand or twine one’s fingers into those of another? When we Zoomed as talking heads, our fingers limp in our laps?

We should praise our hands, and we do. For some, dress gloves are out of style, but we protect those delightful digits with fancy or utilitarian gloves that keep them snug and warm and safe. We dress our fingernails with color and design. We wear rings and bracelets which signify playfulness or poignant points in our lives. Some of us display tattoos. I recently grinned heartily at a vibrant red tattoo ladybug crawling up a woman’s ring finger.

My fingers have healed. I’m back to typing and typos. And I am grateful to Pinkie, Ring Finger, Middleman, Pointer, and Thumbkin. Such helpful companions. Take a bow, friends.