

Hands

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Published in the IEEE-EMBS Pulse vol 5(3), pages 69, 75 (May/June).

Hands are awesome. Hands are marvelous in every sense of the word, and are as important to us collectively and individually as are our intellects. Hands are the difference between thinking and doing. There may be other creatures in this world that have intelligence, but if they don't have hands, they cannot act on that intelligence. They cannot make things and place things. Without hands, they are trapped in a world that they cannot control. We should appreciate our hands; they have let us change our environments for good and bad, but always to our will.

Hands can do so many things: a soft touch, a strong handshake, a means to write and to type. Hands relieve an itch, point in a direction, pick a four-leaf clover, slice a tomato, hold an apple, twirl a baton, swat a mosquito, turn a door knob, propel and launch a paper airplane, hold a railing, unwrap a gift, form and throw a snowball, paint a picture, snap a photograph, form a ceramic piece, tie shoes, operate a computer or a diesel truck, climb a ladder, weld a brace, apply tape, hammer a nail, hang a picture, tighten a nut, adjust a volume control, and connect us to our loved ones, so many things we don't even think about.

They can hold on to things both large and small; they are capable of strength at times or yet precise gentleness at others. They feel. They caress. Their gentle touch can reassure; their strong grip can convey strength. They are expressive. Open hands convey receptivity; closed hands signal belligerence. For people unable to hear, hands are the means to communicate; when hearing is not impaired, hands reinforce what is being said. When they work correctly, as with all other parts of the human body, hands are miraculous. When they do not work well, as when arthritis strikes, hands can cause anguish.

A little story illustrates the importance of hands. It seems that a man died and was given the choice about whether to spend the rest of eternity in heaven or hell. He asked to see them both before he made his decision. In hell, he saw that the people had the most luscious food to eat piled high on tables in front of them, but that their arms were strapped so that they couldn't bend at the elbows. They could pick up the delicious morsels, but their hands couldn't deliver the food to their mouths. They anguished over the frustration of not being able to satisfy their hunger. In heaven he saw the same thing: great food and arms strapped stiff so that they couldn't bring the food to their mouths. But the residents were not hungry and frustrated as they were in hell. The difference was that in heaven the people were feeding each other.

When I look at other animals trying to eat foods such as apples, so easy for us to hold as we bite into them, I realize how lucky I am to have hands that operate as they do. Especially if the fruit is bigger than the size that fits readily into their mouths, they really have difficulty taking bites. If such a food is bigger than we can easily fit into our mouths, we can always use our hands to cut the food into smaller pieces.

As I look at my hands now, I realize that they have become my father's hands. My hands used to be youthful with taut, smooth, unblemished skin; now they have dark spots, wrinkles, and protruding veins. This is how I remember my father's hands in the years before he died. His were strong hands, hands that had performed many years of manual labor, hands that fixed cars when we could not afford to hire a mechanic, hands that held my children when they were small, hands that did not quiver as some do when they age. But, they showed his age, and that's what mine have become, too.

I never thought it would come to this. My hands were once young and strong. They could be gentle when needed; they could place a small electrical resistor in a circuit board or hold delicate thermocouple wires as I soldered them together. They could also be strong when used to open a tightly-closed pickle jar lid or hold a rope with a steer on the other end. These hands of mine, they always did what they were told, and they hardly ever complained.

When I was in high school, we frequently played softball in the springtime. I loved to play center field; from that position, I could see everything happening in front of me, I could run around to back up the other fielders, and I could make spectacular catches of fly balls hit my way. When I didn't remember to bring my glove, I played anyway, and my hands, always on the larger side, could catch those fly balls with nary a problem. I became known for my bare-handed catches.

During and after college, I used my hands in artistic ways. I took up the guitar, and used my hands to entertain me and others around me. I had to play a 12-string guitar because the size of the neck on a 6-string guitar was a little too small to fit my large fingers comfortably. The sound of a 12-string guitar was pleasant to my ear, so I enjoyed playing. I also painted on canvas and tried a little sculpting. Although not museum-quality masterpieces, these works helped me to express my creativity in ways that nothing else could satisfy. These hands of mine have done a lot of things that have made my existence richer and more fulfilling than would have been the case without them.

I have always thought of the healthy human body as a technological marvel. The way that everything works together, much of it automatically, and most submissive to our will, can be beyond belief. If we, as engineers, had to design a human body from scratch, we could do not an iota as well as the body each of us has without thinking of it. And a large part of that is due to the hands we have that make life better through manipulation. Even my hands, which have now become as my father's, are still a source of comfort, satisfaction, and awe.

We appreciate comfy warm gloves in winter's bitter cold; how much more thankful we should be for the hands that fill the gloves.