A Journey of the Hands

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According to my father, my hands were inspected and fingers counted within my first few minutes by a midwife who was no doubt wearied by the late hour of my arrival. I imagine those infant fingers reaching for my mother's breast, my thumb first finding my mouth, and my hands being touched and held by my parents with the same sense of wonderment that I have for my hands today.

The earliest visual record of my hands is a dog-eared black and white photograph I found among my father's personal possessions shortly after his funeral. Taken in the small back garden of the two-storey, pebble-dash house in East London where I was born, the picture radiates the aura of a mother's love for her six-week-old son, as she squints a little into the pale sunshine of what was to be her last English spring. My eyes are screwed tightly closed, mouth open, elbows flexed, fists clenched, as if resisting the pull and yarn of a bright new day. This picture, in which my hands are incidental, is witness to something that is no more, an emanation of a past reality, and the only means I now have of touching my mother.

As I grew, my hands played together, worked together and, on occasions, comforted each other. They learnt to communicate through touch, and acquired a dialogue that was uniquely theirs. Their mutual tactile relationship was a continuous interchange of subjectivity and objectivity, in which passivity and responsiveness harmonised. In time, my hands acquired a confidence and certainty in their separate and combined strengths. The designation of toucher and touched alternated constantly, and I cannot now say when I became aware of my right hand overtly asserting itself over the left. It was my right hand that led me into experience and became my proxy of first contact, the left usually subservient but never taken for granted. Later, in my practice as a surgeon, I learnt to tie knots one-handedly with each hand but, curiously, although strongly right-handed, nearly always employed the left to knot sutures.

Awareness of the abundance of life's textures arose through the childhood experiences of my hands. When I was seven, my father taught me to peel an orange with a penknife, a process of unconscious bimanual collaboration and conscious textural pleasure. He taught me to half-cut the crown of the fruit by passing the knife around between the soft white mesocarp of rind and apex of the segments, and avulse the crown and central core in one movement. My thumb ran over the beaded exterior just ahead of

the blade as it cut and tugged the rind from the segments, producing a single, curling strip of peel. Once skinned, the segments were disassembled by inserting my thumbs into the central space and plying them apart, bursting some, the juice spurting, running over my fingers.

From being tentative and inchoate, my boyish hands grew. Saturday morning school cricket, under Sydney's summer sun, brought its own education to my teenage hands. As I ran in to bowl, my eye measured the distance to a good length, while the blazing-red Kookaburra was gauged and counter-balanced by my thumb and two fingers placed obliquely across the raised seam. I hung on to the ball until the last moment of each delivery, then willed it on a would-be curving trajectory, around the tentative bat at the far end of the pitch and, rarely, onto the stumps.

Cricket encouraged my hands to become further attuned to each other, to engage in their silent discourse while sharing a division of labour. Taking a catch, a sky-er in the out-field or a dolly at mid-off – I was never trusted to field at slip – reinforced the temporal and spatial harmony that hands can share with each other and with the body as a whole. The hands' spontaneous synchronicity, that led to the ball being imprisoned within a cage of fingers and thumbs in a momentous act of sporting triviality, brought joy to me and my teammates, and the certain felicity of hands touching in ‘high fives’.

Equally, I discovered the uncertainty of touching. At the age of fourteen, walking on a late afternoon beach with a girl who would become my first girlfriend, I anticipated touching her. Such a surfeit of desire swelled in me – I had an overwhelming need to touch her, but my hands hung silently at my sides. After almost an hour, I could wait no longer and I took her hand. It was thin, her fingers long, her palm as damp and chill as mine. She glanced up and her brown eyes smiled, for she knew as keenly as I that this one action was more than touching – it was an act of awakening, an asking for acceptance and a statement of acceptance, set amongst a festival of feelings. We walked on, fingers entwined, caring only for what our hands told us. A new part of my life had begun, for my hands had lost an innocence.

Beyond the desire to hold that girl's body, I found myself in a wondrous space of tactile sensations. I experienced a hitherto unknown *jouissance*, a state I now know as that emotion, that madness, called first love. But it was surrendered about a year later. My father decided to move our family back to England, and we departed on an ocean liner from the Overseas Terminal at Circular Quay one Monday in early autumn. What remains with me of that day is the gesture of her hand waving goodbye, its rhythmic movement in the late afternoon light still visible to me now, rippling through a prism of

tears and sudden emptiness. Her motioning hand held my line of sight, and let me see her recede and become lost in the crowd of well-wishers leaving the ship. Her waving hand, I realise, was a metaphor, for movement is the quintessential emblem of change. It was her hand that signalled the end, the hand I never saw again, her open palm and spread fingers pointing to what I knew, even then, was the sorrow of loss.

In another decade, as a medical student at the University of Edinburgh, I came to know the marvels of the hand. With five fellow students, I dissected an elderly female corpse, the first dead human I had seen. Any beauty possessed by that formalin-soaked, leathery body, lying rigid, gaunt and naked on a stainless steel table, resided solely in its structure. After overcoming much trepidation, my hands became vehicles for interrogating what to me were sacred mysteries beneath the skin. I was able to touch the corpse, cut it, place my hands inside it, find tissue planes with my fingers, and remove successive layers of mortified flesh to reveal its inner contrivances. There was no violence or mutilation in this rational exposition of body parts, but rather an alignment of enquiry, awe and respect. The structures of that body were breathtaking in their splendour and complexity, efficiency and compactness, fragility and strength.

It was while dissecting the cadaver's stiff and shrivelled hand that I came to recognise the central narrative of anatomy – the correspondence between parts and the whole. I saw the hand as an expression of a metaphysical essence more complicated and enthralling than I had ever imagined. I realised the hand was the ultimate example of all instruments and tools – an instrument that uses instruments, a tool that uses tools. My hands and the hand they were dissecting were the same symbolic unit – the living enquiring of the dead and the dead serving the living, a theme repeated constantly throughout my later work as a transplant surgeon.

I had been in Edinburgh – 'Auld Reikie' as the eighteenth-century poet Robert Fergusson referred to the city in his eponymous 300-line poem – for four months when, on a December Saturday afternoon, I set out for the village of Duddingston, about a half hour's walk from my student hall of residence. A pale sun struggled through the mineral air. Not being aware that such unassuming beginning-of-winter days often ended in snow

and sleet, I fell victim to the commonest of human errors – not thinking of storms ahead when the weather appears fine.

The village, with its quiet loch and cluster of stone buildings, is noted for its small sandstone kirk, built in 1124 by Dodin, a Norman knight. The kirkyard gatehouse was added in the early 1800s to guard against ‘resurrectionists’, or body snatchers, looking to steal recently buried corpses to sell to anatomists at the Medical School. The kirk was dour and humble, as cold inside as out. I was alone in its musty antiquity, except for a few who, centuries before, had been placed in burial vaults in a tiny chapel. The marble statue of a knight, perhaps Dodin himself, lay on one sarcophagus. Almost subconsciously, I ran my fingers over his smooth, stone hands that pointed skywards as if in perpetual invocation.

Outside in the gathering gloom, the village had been transformed into a snow land, a monochrome beauty foreign to me at the time. The air smelt of snow. I pulled up the hood of my duffle coat and sank my tingling fingers deep into sheepskin gloves. As the night came in, the wind punched the air from my lungs and peppered my face with thick snowflakes that dissolved on my cheeks as tears.

We almost bumped into one another under the sudden glare of neon light in the foyer of the Hall, I going in, she about to leave.

‘Och! Look a' yue. Yer covered in snow. You'd be freezin',’ she said in a lilting lowlands accent. In an instant, she set about brushing the caked snow off my hood and shoulders. I had no idea who she was.

‘Turn aroond!’ and she spun me around, sweeping away the white crusts from my back with quick broad strokes.

‘There! That's betta,’ she smiled.

I turned back towards her, and felt her eyes rest on my wet eyebrows, my icy cheeks and lips. Without a word, I took hold of her hands in gratitude. They were cold, slight, almost fragile. She gave the smallest response, her fingers not pulling away but holding mine, a tiny gesture that I devoured. In those few seconds of mutual generosity, our hands spoke of a closeness, a pact of solidarity against the common foe of coldness, and gave us fleeting access to each other. Then it was gone.

‘Och, yer cannae do that. Ma boyfriend's waitin'!’ She pulled her hands away and turned towards the door. Then, as if having second thoughts, she turned back. She leaned towards me and I caught the faint sweet smell of alcohol on her breath. She put her hands up to my cold face and kissed me hard on the mouth.

'Dinny forget aboot keepin' warm toneet!' she laughed, and skipped away, disappearing into the darkness.

That *dreich* evening, 'keepin' warm' alone in my room, I made little progress with an essay on the principles of calcium metabolism. It was her hands I kept recalling and, yes, her mouth too. The vagabond lightness of the sweep of her hand across my back had betrayed a carnal ease, a carefree sweetness. The confidence, albeit aided by a little vodka, with which she held my face in her hands revealed a fearless tenderness full of promise. I wondered what our meeting had been for her – just a tipsy flirtatious moment most likely. But I imagined it to be so much more – an unconscious expression of a deeper need for intimacy beyond physical contact, as Emily Dickinson described in her *Poem 657*: 'This – / The spreading wide of my narrow Hands / To gather paradise – '.

It was during my post-graduate surgical training that my hands learnt to operate. For me, operating was nearly always exciting and, on rare occasions, frightening. Operating was also sensuous. Colours were vivid under the acetylene brightness of operating lights: sky-blue drapes; white cotton sponges and packs; body organs in multiple tones of mustardy-yellow, grey, russet and pink; and, of course, red blood. And smells: pungent disinfectants; the flat, sweet smell of an open abdomen; acrid blue-grey smoke from points of flesh charred by the electro-cautery; and the stench of faeculent spillage and gangrenous tissue. Operating had its own sounds too: the sucker's harsh rasp removing fluid and blood; the repetitive click of a needle holder's ratchet; background banter of anaesthetists and their machines; and, worst of all, the sound of torrential bleeding.

It was in such environments that my hands grew up. I witnessed their coming of surgical age, observed their surgical learning, and acquisition of dexterity and autonomy. I saw the joy and relief they were able to give to most, but not to all. I took from those operating rooms the stories my hands created, replayed them over and over in dreams and in the long hours after they sometimes woke me.

My principal surgical interest was in organ transplantation. Among the many abiding images of my operating hands is a profusion of dead bodies – brain-dead but heart-beating cadavers that were organ donors. My hands removed hundreds of organs for transplantation from corpses that appeared more alive than dead – their hearts drumming, skin pink, tissues bleeding freely at the dash of the scalpel. My hands came

to know the texture of each organ – the kidneys firm and pulsatile; the liver heavy, smooth and red, its edges almost floppy; lungs light and softly crepitant; and the heart, robust and thumping against my hands as if resentful, protesting at being lifted from the chest. My hands were the mediators in these operations that were intensely emotional and, at the same time, routine and rational. In the deaths of these donors, there was such sorrow for their loved ones but also extraordinary joy for the organ recipients often *in extremis*, a polarity that I found almost impossible to resolve.

And what of the living? I remember the faces of many patients. The look, the whole physiognomy, of one middle-aged man who underwent a kidney transplant is still vivid. The day after his operation I stood by his bed and shook his hand. His new kidney was functioning well. I can see his blue eyes brimming behind heavy rimmed glasses, his full head of white wavy hair, his cheeks lined by fine capillaries. I can hear his soft Welsh voice, struggling through emotion to thank me. He clung to my hand with both of his. He could hardly believe that such good fortune had come to him out of the tragedy of a twenty-year-old being propelled headlong from a motorbike two days before. After eight years of never being well, he could now resume his former life and all the quotidian minutiae that the rest of us take for granted – drinking as much water or tea, or whisky, as he liked, dietary freedom, resuming work and, needless to say, passing urine again. When I withdrew from his bedside, his tears fell on my hand as he kissed it.

I remember, too, a young man's parents who found some comfort in my hands. Their son, about to be married, was the driver in a high-speed ‘car versus tree’ nightmare, only this was not a dream. He had lost a lot of blood, his pupils were dilated and his brain was probably dead, but his heart was strong. Just before midnight, my hands began an urgent sojourn into his blood-filled abdomen in the hope that his brain might recover once the haemorrhage was controlled and his circulation restored. It was so important to do something, even in the face of hopelessness, and surgery is easiest to embark upon when there is no alternative and time is pressing. The young man bled from everywhere, and I was unable to save him. His parents grasped my hands in that shabby hospital corridor at five in the morning and, through their tears and grief, thanked me for what my hands had attempted to do.

As I sit here, watching my index fingers tap away at the keyboard, I face the undeniable impact that the sway of time has brought to my hands – the skin is thinner and no longer supple; the veins are more obvious and tortuous; scars, as short white lines, are evidence of petty injuries long forgotten; freckles and two small soon-to-be-treated skin cancers are reminders of cocksure, youthful carelessness under the Australian sun; some finger joints are a little crooked. But with the ageing and evolution of my hands have come vast opportunities and experiences, stretching from the intricacies of operating to the simple act of holding the hand of someone I love or someone dying. My hope is not to lose the learning of my hands.