

What's in a thumb?

By Karen D. R. de Corrales | June 2014



At first I hadn't even realized that I'd cut myself making the evening salad meal. When I did, I made a firm mental note to forego my every-other-day, salt-based (!) magnesium oil treatments for a while. Began this account two days later, when I noticed the minuscule spot – (what, two pen-tips wide?) near the left rim of my right thumb nail – throbbing after I'd gone to the bathroom. This was after the day when the spot was still raw and it felt somewhat sensitive while I was peeling my mandarin. At that time I reflected how fortunate it was that the spot wasn't larger, causing any real pain. I hastily put a stop to unwelcome visions of – clumsily, do doubt – having to use the *other* hand or trying to accomplish the peeling of the mandarin with other fingers or using my mouth.

There's so much we take for granted. If we remain with the thumb for a moment. Righty or lefty, if you really think about it, a substantial portion of human – and some animal – activity involves the proper function of this body

part on the corresponding side of the physique. Gripping – a wild variety of items – peeling fruit, tying our shoelaces – oh, wait; that also involves gripping! Compare it with – say – your ring finger or pinkie or any one of your ten toes; these you could easily do without, if strictly necessary. Surprisingly, the list of possibilities in *absence* of the protruding digit is rather lengthy: walking, running, dancing, waving, scratching, whacking someone, and – yes – typing! Even in intimacy – potential feeler though it is – the thumb is *not* the digit of choice, as most of us well know. Thumbs up (or down): use the other hand, or where would the emperors and gladiators of old be, not to mention the hiker wanting to hitch a ride! Even an infant would quickly make sucking-amends, should the aforementioned finger be lost to it on its dominating end.



A couple of less obvious angles, now. Although several martial arts show off push-ups using the thumb *exclusively*, Kyokushinkai karate – among others – knows a variation that requires only the *knuckles* of the *other* fingers. In practicing sports in general, hobbies, and the playing of musical instruments, the importance of the mere thumb is of course paramount.

Two signalled opposites in relation to this account merit a spotlight. Prior to 1700 the thumb – to witness the legacy of surviving musical pieces for the harpsichord – was notably could-shouldered, passed over and plainly underutilized, because of a given desired maximization of finger sensitivity,

whereby – alas! – the thumbs, in the natural hand position favouring the *other* eight digits, fall woefully short. Luckily for mankind's auditive enjoyment, later composers chose to employ the outer extremity as much as humanly possible anyway. On the other hand, the 'kalimba', also known as 'sansa', 'mbira' and thumb piano (!) apparently is a rather popular African instrument held with the other fingers, manipulated with those very thumbs!

Rare indeed, is the instance in which a person would desire the oh, so useful appendage to be removed, but this lamentable condition does exist. It has been called Apotemnophilia and Amputee Identity Disorder but is most commonly known as Body Integrity Identity Disorder (BIID). It involves someone's brain not justifying the attachment of a body part to the whole, seeing it as 'foreign', therefore preferring its removal.

On a lighter note. The significance of the thumb is also vividly illustrated by its prominence among popular expressions, such as 'green thumb', 'rule of thumb', 'thumbing one's nose' and even 'naughty thumb'!

Lastly. If we consider palm reading the foretelling of our future, involving the contemplation and interpretation of the lines in the *entire* hand, then the story – without the extremity in question – would be rather incomplete, wouldn't you say?

So, what's in a thumb? Quite a lot, actually!