



MY LEFT HAND

Southpaws have it rough in a right-handed world

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It was difficult for me to learn to tie my shoes. I sat across from my mother and watched carefully as she attempted to create a loop with her opposite hand, cross it with the other lace, and try to make a knot. I knew right then and there that something about me was different. After several more failed attempts, she got flustered and showed me how to make “Mickey Mouse ears” with the laces. Since then, it’s the only way I know how to do it. I’m 23 and I tie my shoes like a six-year-old. Awesome.

I’m left-handed, and I face an everyday struggle. It’s not such a rare condition; most sources estimate it afflicts about 10 percent of the world’s population. That being the case, this is very much a right-handed world.

We’re an unfortunate lot, us lefties. We’ve been cast aside and lambasted for centuries. Take Joan of Arc, for example. After she was burned at the stake, artists of the era often portrayed her as left-handed to make her seem evil, even though there’s no reason to think she was a lefty. There are countless stories of left-handed students being forced by their elementary school teachers to write with their right hands. In some Arabic cultures, left-handed people are considered unclean because the left hand is the one they use, well...to wipe themselves with.

Sinister. Gauche. Southpaw. These are just some of the “street” terms for left-handedness. I can’t remember when I first demonstrated that I was afflicted with it; I’ve always had the impulse to *go left*, whether that was holding a writing utensil, eating or throwing something. Name a verb, and it’s probably left to me. In my life, right has always been wrong.

The first obstacle I face is opening the door. With the knob aligned to the left, it’s appropriate to think I’d grab it with my left hand and exit the room. Not so. With the door hinged on the right, it opens at an angle that essentially requires me to cross over my left hand to exit. It’s not possible. That’s the first of many daily reminders that I’m a minority in my own environment.

When I reach the kitchen, I am convinced it’s designed to defeat me. Everything is backwards; it’s a veritable house of horrors. I’ve developed a legitimate prejudice against can openers because the grip and handle are aligned so a right-handed person can turn and open the can with little effort. I’ve always had to

think about the logistics of opening the can, how to affix the opener to the lid and which direction to turn. Most of the time, I end up doing an entire rotation without cutting the lid open because I haven't noticed I'm turning the handle toward me instead of away from me. A quick look around the room offers more reminders: microwave and toaster oven controls on the right, where I have to reach across the door for them; refrigerator door handles on the left but designed to be opened toward the right.

Once in a while, I'll cut out a newspaper or magazine article I particularly like. But there's one big problem: the actual act of cutting. Scissors are the bane of my existence, with their grips rounded to fit a right hand. It's impossible for me to cut anything perfectly straight. There's hope at the beginning of the cut, but by the time I'm done cutting something out, there's a slight curve going to the right. Although left-handed scissors exist, they aren't easy to find at your local store. Alright, *maybe* at Ned Flanders's Leftorium on *The Simpsons*.

Writing and its related actions are easily the worst and most constant reminder of my left-handedness. It's incredibly annoying. I have vivid memories of trying to write on lined paper for the first time, struggling to learn cursive in my elementary school by mimicking my right-handed teacher's motions backwards.

Left-handed people really have two different styles of writing, according to the Handedness Research Institute (yeah, it really exists). The first, which some sources describe as "hooked writing" or "overwriting," is a technique in which the lefty writes over the line on the paper, with his wrist at an extreme angle so he can see what he is writing on the page. I am what is considered an "underwriter." I write under the line, with my wrist positioned at an angle that looks like a mirror image of a right-handed person.

But that's just the beginning. Most right-handed people take for granted that desks in schools are aligned with an armrest on the right side. Through my entire school career, I've rarely come across a desk for people like me. The Handedness Research Institute's website notes that "chronic back and neck pain can result from contorting one's body around a right-biased desk." For me, right-handed desks cause fatigue in my left arm and a tendency to write very hard and small.

Other writing related annoyances include spiraled notebooks (righties, think

about trying to start a page writing over a notebook spiral) and the ever-present graphite stains on the bottom of my left hand. I've also smeared countless pages when my hand moves across what I've just written, and have been accused by teachers of sloppiness. Woe is me.

Then there's eating. It's problematic to sit to the right of a right-handed person because we bump elbows eating with the opposite hand. So I always have to sit to the left of other diners at the table.

I've been a big music fan for a long time now, and it was a no-brainer for me to pick up the guitar when I was 14. However, there was one glaring problem: I needed a left-handed guitar. My guitar teacher at the time obviously didn't think so, so I started playing a standard right-handed guitar. He insisted I strum with my right hand and fret the guitar with my left, and he became frustrated when I couldn't accurately strum intricate notes because I lacked the necessary dexterity in my right hand to get to the right string.

It was difficult for my right-handed friends to teach me new songs on the guitar because I had to convince my right hand to perform the motion. It made playing a lot more difficult and discouraging than it should have been, and probably contributed to my loss of interest in playing guitar. Oh, and contrary to popular belief, there really is no real correlation between left-handedness and being "right brained," which is associated with the arts and creativity.

I'm even encountering the difficulties of being a lefty as I sit here writing this story. The mouse is the most glaring evidence of right-handed favoritism. In earlier years, many computer mice had a right-handed curve, making them impossibly uncomfortable in my left hand and forcing me to use my less dexterous hand. That has changed, but the keyboard's numerical pad remains on the right side, which is inconvenient for me. I'm glad to say that the mouse I'm using now shows no favoritism and it's hand-neutral, although I'm still using my right hand because the cord isn't long enough for it to stretch from the computer's right-side USB port to the left side of the computer.

Lefties have a special and respectable place in politics, however. Last fall, I was immersed in election coverage, watching the debates between President-elect Barack Obama and Senator John McCain. In between their exchanges, I noticed something that got me a little more excited than it should have: both men were

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writing with their left hands! Being the responsible journalist I am, I felt I needed to investigate. Sure enough, they're both lefties. There was actually a "Lefties for McCain" banner for sale online, and a "Lefties for Obama" website.

It turns out that six previous Presidents of the United States were left-handed: James Garfield, Herbert Hoover, Harry S. Truman, Gerald Ford, George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. That's far above the 10 percent average, and probably doesn't even account for any would-be lefties who were converted to righties by well-meaning school marms. Other notable lefties include Jimi Hendrix, Kurt Cobain and Jack the Ripper. Apparently some are more infamous than famous. The world may be a bit backwards to me, but for all the trials and tribulations, I take pride that I'm in some pretty exclusive company.

There's also a legitimate Left Handers Club, formed in 1990 with the mission to "keep members in touch with developments, make their views known to manufacturers and others, provide a help and advice line, [and] promote research into left-handedness and development of new left-handed items." Membership is free, and includes a "backwards calendar" and discounts on left-handed items.

If that wasn't enough, we lefties have a day of our own. During International Left-Handers Day, on August 13, "left-handers everywhere can celebrate their sinistrality and increase public awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of being left-handed," according to the Left Handers Day website. Not something I'd be particularly interested in, but more power to my cack-handed brethren.

Although it can prove to be nettlesome and complicated at times, I wouldn't change my affliction if I had the option. Although it would be nice if the world offered more left-handed or even neutral-handed objects, I'm getting by. I do complain from time to time to my right-handed friends and family, and they typically tell me to shut up. Then I say something that gets their eyes rolling.

"Everyone is born right handed; only the greatest overcome it."