

“Raise Your Hand If Two Arms Aren’t Enough”

Do you drop things all the time? I do. Mainly keys. Sometimes a book, a sweater, a cellphone. That’s not a good thing to drop.

Do you worry that this is a sign of ageing: an August sneak peek at the winter blockbuster *Crippling Arthritis*? Are you haunted by the thought that this might be the dreaded Dr Parkinson whispering “Pleased to meet you” with a ghostly handshake?

Unknit that fevered brow. I have figured it out. This business of dropping things is due to age only in the cosmic sense. I blame evolution.

That first fish that crawled onto land: it should have been an octopus. I have been told, patiently, that then we wouldn’t have spines. But I honestly don’t see why we couldn’t have evolved spines if we wanted to stand up. With eight arms, we might never have wanted to.

Does anyone really think two arms are enough? For soccer, perhaps, as long as you’re not playing in goal. For tennis, on those days when you’ve got eager children to retrieve the balls. Now imagine the exponential increase in excitement if the Lakers had forty arms between them. How about a lover with merely four?

Two arms are pitifully inadequate for the tasks of everyday life. Here is a picture of me, getting ready to leave the house. Spear my arm through the handles of my handbag: great, I still have two hands. Balance the zip-up binder that we call the portable office of Los Rios River Runners in the crook of my elbow. The dry cleaning on top of that. Oh - my water bottle; I can hook it over my pinkie. But wait: I haven't filled it. I can hold it out with my other hand, but I can't reach the tap with my chin. Everything down; everything up again. Hmm, it seems to be clouding over. I'd better take a sweater for my son. "I'm hungry," he says, though he's just eaten breakfast, so I grab a fruit rollup. I'm contorting myself trying to lock the front door... and here it comes: I drop the keys.

Now, how is that my fault? I'm even trying to be ecological, kicking reusable shopping bags toward the car and turning off lights with my elbows on the way out.

My niece recently went for an interview to study anthropology at the University of London, and was asked by the professor to name something that evolution couldn't explain. "Sid Vicious," she answered brilliantly off the top of her head, and got in. My answer would have been babies. Specifically with reference to arms.

Chimpanzee babies grab onto their mother's fur and ride under her belly until they're old enough to ride on her back. In the millennia between the time when we lost our fur and the invention of the Baby Bjorn, a baby required half its mother's available total of arms. And this, while hunting and gathering and running from sabre-tooth tigers. When was

the last time you tried to hunt or gather with only one arm? It's astonishing that our species didn't become extinct.

Evolution, we are told, produced the staggeringly complex eye in incremental stages, each of which conferred an infinitesimal advantage. Are we honestly to believe that no living creature ever sprouted a growth that could have increased the stock in the arm department, and that the proto-limb wouldn't have added more to the sum of human happiness--by providing, say, something to hang things on--than those first light-sensitive cells? It's ludicrous. It's enough to turn one into a creationist.

Still, evolution isn't supposed to be benevolent. God is. This is, I think, a slam-dunk argument for atheism, but only from the creationist point of view.

And that's what happens when you bring religion into it; argument explodes into a million tiny fragments. Which I don't have enough arms to gather up.

Religion either speaks to you or it doesn't, and the religion that's speaking to me these days is Hinduism. Think of Lord Shiva. There he sits, or dances: four arms gracefully arranged around a perfectly upright posture--proving, by the way, that multiply-branched arms are absolutely compatible with a spine. Or the goddess Durga: eight arms (the magic number), and on top of that she rides a tiger. I've never seen either Shiva or Durga carrying groceries or a child's sweater or a credit-card machine, but you get the

point. They carry what they need: cup, staff, whip, cobra. You cannot imagine them dropping anything.

I have to say it: Evolution got it wrong. In my next lifetime, in an alternate universe, I will be a creationist Hindu, made in a god's image: Lord Shiva's.