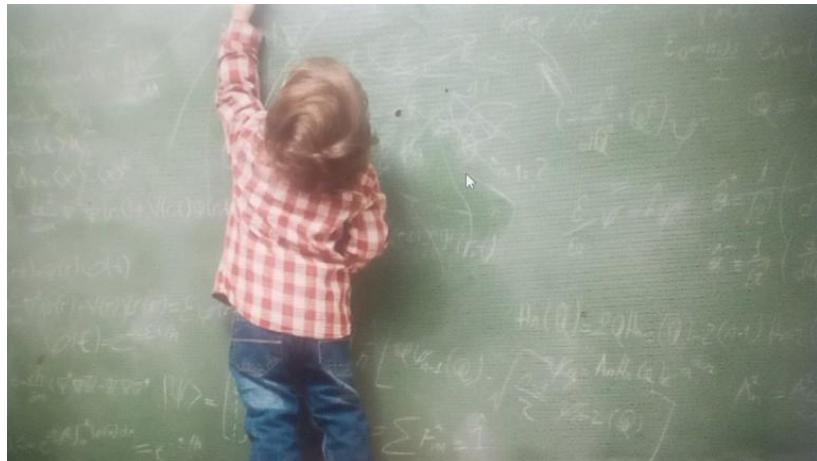


JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Quick, Timely Reads On the Waterfront

Busted Sinistral: Life from the Wrong Side

By David Frew, Scholar in Residence
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Lots of my family members are left-handed. Including me. Called “sinistral-ism” by scientists, it is now known that left-handedness is genetic. My father, one of my three children, and a few of my grandchildren are lefties. The scientific term for this condition has been taken from the word “sinister,” which is how most people have regarded those of us who are lefties. Sinister and mysterious. Why? Is it simply because we are rare? Only eight percent of humans are left-handed, so we are clearly outnumbered. But are we really scary?

We lefties have a lot of well-known company: Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey, Harry Truman, Babe Ruth, Jerry Seinfeld, Mozart, Charlie Chapman, Paul McCartney, Lady Gaga, Leonardo DiVinci, Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and Hellen Keller, to name just a few, are members of the lefty club.

My left-handedness was not exactly celebrated when I was a kid. Try to teach a lefty how to tie his shoes, for example. But my father (also a lefty) seemed pleased since he imagined that I would have an advantage in sports. I coasted through kindergarten unnoticed as a lefty, but the affliction came to a sudden and grinding halt in first grade. With a limited number of left-handed desks available for arriving kids, the first-grade teacher declared me a righty and plunked me down into a suitable desk. Suitable for a right-handed kid. From then on, I was "normal." My father objected; my mother did not seem to care, and life went on. Thanks to grade school and the Sisters of St. Joseph, I learned to write and do most of the "activities of daily living" right-handed. I essentially forgot about being a lefty. It was "in the past."

Then came graduate school. During fall 1968, I found myself sitting on the edge of a large sensory deprivation tank. It was filled with salt water, heated to the exact temperature of the human body, and housed in a room with strange, low-level lighting. What can I say, it was the '60s. I was participating in an exercise, which was part of a doctoral-level psychology class in which my student colleagues and I were about to experience a lesson in "states of consciousness." The professor was carrying on at painful lengths about the learning experience and its theoretical underpinnings. It was a small class -- only 10 students, all men, and wearing swimsuits.

Eager to integrate personality theory with the exercise that we were about to experience, the professor went off on what seemed to be an unrelated tangent when he asked how many of us were left-handed. That question made little sense to most of us who were eager to climb into the tank. One student raised his hand. The professor commented on the expected statistical result.

"Aha, one in 10," he commented. "Just about what would be expected, since the national average is eight percent."

"Can we get in now?" We were wondering.

"But there may be a problem," the professor continued. "Since left-handedness is connected to personality I would have expected a larger group of lefties in this class. Left-handed people are much more likely to be what personality theorists call divergent thinkers, a thinking style strongly associated with persons who pursue advanced academic degrees."

Then he looked directly at me, pointed and said, “I am pretty sure that I have found another lefty.”

“Me?” I answered.

“Yes, you,” he continued. “Stop by the office tomorrow and I will tell you why.” It had been almost 20 years since my first-grade experience and while I had a vague recollection of it, my life after 1949 was conducted as a right-handed person. I write that way, played baseball quite successfully as a right-handed hitter and fielder, and was definitely a right-handed basketball player.

The following day I was escorted into my professor’s office, where he revealed that his visual tip-off was that my left nipple was lower than my right. I was shirtless and wearing a swimsuit. He added that the nipple placement was a sign that the musculature on the left side of my body was more developed than on the right side. From there he explained that there were other dimensions of left-handedness and conducted more measurements. We soon learned that my left eye was significantly stronger than my right, and also that my left leg was stronger, longer, and more flexible than my right.

I was not just lefty, but very lefty!

After the meeting, I was invited to audit his psychotherapy class, which was just beginning to discuss psychological regression, the process of recalling early life events that have been blocked from current memory. That class also gave me the chance to explore personality theories associated with left-handedness. Lefties are likely to be “divergent thinkers” and like all personality types, that style presents strengths and weaknesses. The primary advantage of being a divergent thinker is the “flexibility” provided by not seeing or too quickly finding or expecting to find the “one best” answer or problem-solving strategy. “Divergents” are compromisers who prefer to seek buy-in from all who are involved. And while that approach seems logical on the surface, it often leads to painfully slow decisions, confusion, and unexpected last-minute twists and turns. Convergent thinkers (the opposing style), on the other hand, are faster, linear, and usually more charismatic. This thinking and problem-solving style reduces vagueness and confusion and assists in organizing.

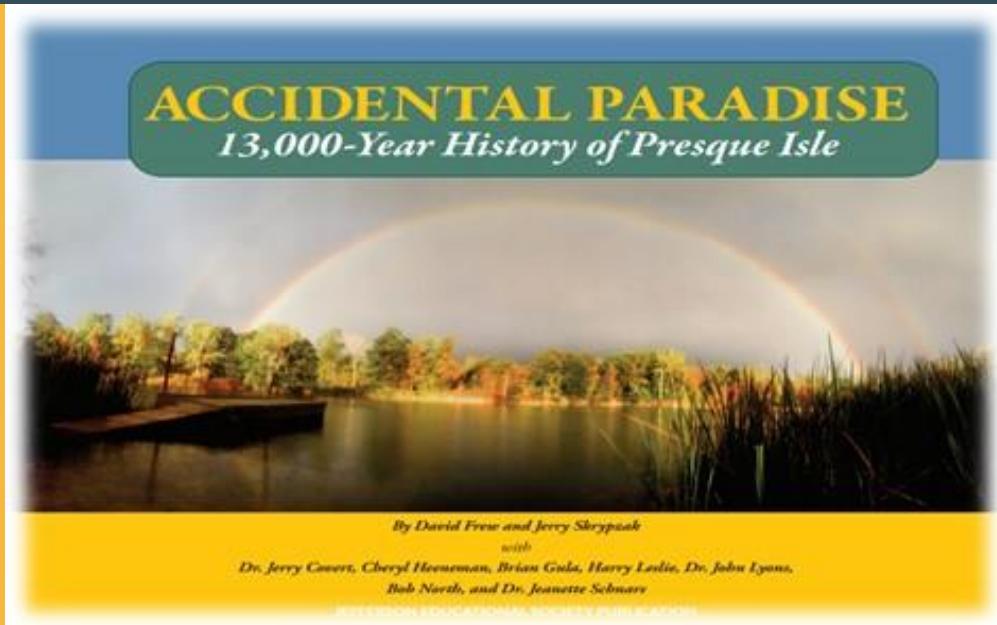
Author’s note: More than 50 years have passed since my introduction to left-handedness and much has been learned since then. First and most important, it now seems that earlier estimates of the percentage of left-handers were somewhat low. The actual number is probably closer to 10 percent than eight. Also, better testing has suggested that while there is a genetic component to left-handedness, it is probably only about 30 or 40 percent. Finally, it is now known that animals are also capable of being left-handed, particularly our close genetic relatives, like chimpanzees.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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