

## Excerpt from *The Hand*<sup>1</sup>

BY PATRICK O'BRIEN

When I was in the third grade I had the measles. It was the first time and the only time I was ever out of school for three whole days. Someone gave me one of those puzzles of holes in a wooden board the shape of a cross. There were pegs to be moved around: all of the pegs were red except one, which was blue, and you had to figure out how to move them so that the blue one would end up in the middle. I spent about two-and-a-half days solving that puzzle. When I was a little older, I played billiards. I was fascinated by puzzles and games that require repetition and careful development and a certain kind of concentration, and drawn to any skill I could slowly think out and work out. I wasn't always sure I could handle the world improvisationally, and working on problems of this kind created a safe place for me to be.

Even as an adult the problems and puzzles I enjoy always seem to relate to things I can analyze and work out through repetition—something I can gradually come to control. Juggling is an example, and so is sleight-of-hand. There is a particular emotional element involved in this kind of work, a way of perceiving things and a need to predict what's going to happen next. It's a very little world—in your hands. Whatever you can do with your hands gives you a small world that you can actually cope with, as opposed to the big world, where perhaps you can't. I think this interest in small things explains my habit of observing people in a certain way. I am sure my sensitivity to outcomes has to do with being very insecure and easily intimidated as a kid. That feeling leads you to watch other people's faces carefully as you speak to them. My father was a machinist who worked for Sperry Rand making parts for gyroscopes. He valued precision both in process and in making tools, and I'm sure I have something of a sense of craft from his outlook. He was very laconic and, in the way of the Irish, completely undemonstrative. My mother was

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<sup>1</sup> Frank R. Wilson, *The Hand* (New York: Random House, 1998), pp. 219-23. Reprinted by permission.

born here and was a mix of Italian, Sicilian, and Neapolitan. She was very expressive, very immediate in her reactions, very emotional; she was the antithesis of my father.

As a child I heard music constantly. My first contact with an instrument was when I was a tiny kid in school; we played little plastic flutes, but from the beginning I was determined to play correctly. One cousin of mine—we were almost exact contemporaries and were always together as little kids—saw me playing a plastic flute in the first grade and immediately fell all over himself laughing at me. I addressed myself physically to this toy instrument as though I were a professional, and that was hilarious to him.

I began playing guitar sometime thereafter. I was self-taught and don't really remember the chronology very well. Somewhere around the age of seven I had saved some money delivering papers for my brother, and used it to buy a cheap guitar. I found books that taught chords and I copied things off records. I was doing this for a long time before I learned to read music. I actually was playing for a long, long time professionally—I made a good deal of money at it—before I read music.

In high school I bought a classical guitar because I was interested in South American jazz—bossa nova, originally a highly political idiom and politically a protest music that I was interested in. So I bought some books, thinking I would learn something about playing with my fingers—before that I had played with a pick, mostly playing chords.

The transition from pick to fingers is not a small thing, and it is a process I began to understand much better after I began to play the lute. When you play the lute, you don't use your nails. In fact, you still want to use your gut strings if you can. The whole process involves getting closer physically to the control of the string without any intermediary. Not the hard, stiff insensitivity of a pick, not the steel strings, not an amplifier, not even your fingernails. As I was getting closer to a feeling of touch, I found a particular satisfaction in being closer to the string, feeling more input from the string, being able to articulate more and more carefully from the right side of the instrument.

The first and only teacher I ever had was a well-known player I went to when I was going to Brooklyn College. He himself had studied with an old Russian named Alexander Bellow, who had been a pianist, an arranger, and a conductor. My teacher had a specific way of going at the strings, which didn't work out very well for me—it just wasn't a very good technique for what I wanted to do. Eventually I had to leave the technique behind but I did so in bits and pieces. Some of the things he had given me simply blew up in my hand in the late sixties. That was when

I began to play more and more adventurous modern literature, which often is not composed for the guitar and doesn't fit on it very gracefully.

As I started to push my playing, my hand started to hurt constantly, particularly what we call the "a" finger—the ring finger of my right hand. Rather quickly, I developed a *gigantic* tendinitis. So there I was with my hand problem. I began to ask people questions; I called up doctors, therapists, chiropractors, all the musicians I could think of, and no one seemed to know what this was. In fact, no one even said the word "tendinitis" to me.

A few people said to stop playing for a while, and I tried that. It didn't help. I just went through an awful time, thinking I wasn't going to be able to play or teach any more. Eventually I began to see a way out of it. I did work my way out of it, but it took me a couple of years to do.

The whole time was strangely like being eight years old again, sitting in bed with the measles, fiddling with that peg game day after day. I just worked it out, alone in my room, quietly by myself. Finally I found a way of playing which made my hand hurt less. And the change gave me a better tone. It gave me, eventually, more speed, more power, and much more independence between the different fingers in plucking. The repair job gradually coalesced into a systematic way of approaching the instrument, but I have only recently had any idea what's underneath the change: it comes down to avoiding unnecessary distal flexion in the fingers. That was a habit which I had gotten into, and it was a costly one because of the pattern of sustained repetitive cocontraction I had fallen into. I still just barely have a sense of what *that's* about.

I think that the predisposition to handle the problem as I did comes in part out of my background. I was brought up in the Roman Catholic Church, and I had a father who would say "allergies and divorces are for rich people," and we couldn't afford them. What he meant was that you had to solve your own problems. You had to analyze what was going wrong yourself, then figure out how to deal with it, or just cope with it. Every week when you're a little altar boy in the church, in the days when I went to church, you said: "Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa." You really assimilated the idea of personal responsibility; *you* had done something wrong and there were consequences. So I was ready, when I began to see my hand hurting, to accept that I had done something wrong, and that is why it hurt.

The pain actually helped me in an odd way, I could *feel* every day whether I was doing the right thing or not, because my hand would feel better or worse. Merely stopping playing didn't help. I stopped for a month; I didn't use my hand for *anything* for a couple months at one

point, and it still hurt like hell. When I did finally solve the problem I had no idea how I had done it—I hadn't even a theory. Of course theories are *all* I have now, but for a long time I had only the most naïve concept of what I was doing.

A considerable part of my work now involves helping injured musicians. The players with the most severe problems usually require changes of technique, changes in the way individual fingers are used, and a very slow, careful imprinting of an entirely new pattern of motion in the hand. In the process of working *that* slowly, evaluating everything *that* carefully, listening to the tone of each individual note, just watching the finger move slowly, the injured player will have to begin to change *as a person*.

They have to let go of a certain kind of goal orientation which has always told them to grip and grab everything as hard as they can, to get ahead in their career. It is as if a misguided life metaphor is visited on them in their hand. And they *have* to change. Whereas previously perhaps they dashed their way through things—approximating—they now have to begin to think about *every* motion. And they must develop a very, *very* refined sensitivity to what their body feels every time they move it. They have to learn to completely relax between notes, which of course they may never have done before in their lives. Perhaps they have never done that with any part of their personality, in anything they do. They move as fast as they can, play as fast as they can, and set the metronome up a notch arbitrarily, once every day, force-feeding themselves the instrument.

They have to let all of that go. They may even have to say, “I don't care if I never play a concert again; I just want to be able to *play* again.” There's something really profound about that, forsaking the goal of winning a competition, getting into a certain conservatory, playing better than the guy down the street, whatever it is. They have to be able to say, “I want to do it, even if only privately, for myself. I'd like to be able to play something simple.” These are almost universally people who would *never* have said that before. They have to stop *driving*. Some people just can't make that change.

Having acquired a particular combination of insights—the ability to see into problems in technique—would not necessarily give you the empathy you need to work with other musicians with problems. I went through so much pain in my own situation, such a terrible crisis, wondering whether I was going to be able to play again—what would I do with my life if I couldn't play? There was nothing else I wanted to do as much as I wanted to play the guitar. That gave me considerable empathy for other injured musicians.