

The Wimps of the Wilds?

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There is a profound wisdom in the body, in the pulsing of the blood, the rhythm of the breath, the turning of the joints. Once we are aware of its subtle power, the body becomes a sensitive antenna for tuning into nature and other people. It can serve as a metaphor for every human thought, emotion, and action. It is the royal road to the unconscious. It is a small, handy model of the universe. All the books, computers, and electronic networks in the world contain only a miniscule fraction of the information it takes to create one human body.

— George Leonard & Michael Murphy,
The Life We Are Given



In our ITP practice, we often employ the body as a wise and sensitive teacher, skillfully helping us achieve the awesome potential in every aspect of our being, even in our ability to sense emotional states. But there is also the body simply as a physical entity through which we meet, influence, and are influenced by the physical world. It is here that we often tend to underestimate our own potential skill and power.

I can't remember my ninth-grade science teacher's name but there's something she once said to our class I've never been able to forget. She told us that the only way our species survived during prehistoric times was through the use of our superior brainpower. She went on to explain that we had no bodily weapons to speak of--no fangs, no claws, no tusks, no horns, no thick fur or tough protective pelts. Not only that, we were comparatively slow of foot. We were, in short, the thin-skinned, big-brained wimps of the wilds.

Such a characterization seemed at first to make sense, not just to me but also to most people. Our science fiction, for example, has often tended to see humanoids of the future as weird creatures with shrunken bodies and heads like balloons. But in the mid-1960s, when I began making a serious study of the human potential—body, mind, heart, and soul—I was forced to question the usual characterizations of the human individual as a weakling among animals.

Yes, we might envy the blazing sprint speed of the cheetah, the prodigious leaps of the kangaroo, the underwater skills of the dolphin, and the gymnastic prowess of the monkey. But, as my studies suggested, no animal can match the human animal in all-around athleticism. If we were to hold an imaginary mammal decathlon with events in sprinting, endurance running, long jumping, high jumping, hurdling, swimming, deep diving, gymnastics, and throwing, other animals would win

most of the individual, specialized events. A well-trained human, however, would come up with the best overall score. And in endurance running and throwing—and probably gymnastics as well—the human athlete would outperform all other animals.

Surviving primitive people, in pursuits lasting up to two days, are known to have run down many animals known for their great speed: the deer, horse, steenbok, gemsbok, wildebeest, zebra, kangaroo, as well as the pronghorn antelope, one of the fastest of all mammals. This in spite of the fact that our way of running is relatively slow and inefficient. (The energy cost of running on two legs is about twice as high as running on four.) But overheating is the ultimate constraint in endurance running, and the human ability to dissipate heat is unparalleled.

Naked speed and stamina

Our unique nakedness, in fact, most likely evolved so that our evaporative cooling system (we have the most efficient sweat glands in the animal kingdom) would work even better. In addition, due to our upright, bipedal stance, we absorb only one-fourth the radiant heat absorbed by four-legged animals of the same size when the sun is overhead, while the copious hair on our heads shields the skull and shoulders from the sun.

Our bipedalism also allows us to breathe at the most efficient rate no matter what our speed, while four-legged runners are generally limited to a certain breathing pattern for each gait. In pursuit of horses, American Indians managed to make them run between two gaits, thus throwing off the rhythm of their breathing as well as the efficiency of their running.

Even our unusually large adrenal and thyroid glands predispose us toward a prodigious athleticism, tending to increase the levels of those hormones that help the muscles use fatty acid and glucose efficiently. And our omnivorous diet itself, especially our capacity to load up on carbohydrates, gives us an edge over carnivores and most other animals during lengthy bouts of strenuous exertion.

The marvelous human hand

Just for fun, let's say that our evolutionary forebears made a deal with nature. We would give up fangs, claws, tusks, and other fearsome bodily weapons for one unique feature, our highly complex and capable hands. We are rarely if ever taught in school that this would turn out to be one of the best deals any species has ever made.

The evolutionary journey toward the development of the modern human hand was already well underway some four million years ago in a species of small and small-brained African apes named *Australopithecus* ("Southern Ape"). According to skeletal remains, this rather diminutive creature walked fully upright and, though it did not have fully opposable thumbs, as we modern hominids do, could pick up a stone and throw it overhand, as a weapon. This required numerous evolutionary changes from the hands of apes that had evolved earlier. The chimpanzee, for example, can also throw sticks and stones, but only underhand.

Some paleoanthropologists maintain that the development of the human hand not only preceded the growth and complexity of the human brain but also played a major role in creating it. We're so accustomed to our hands that we're generally unaware of their anatomic complexity and oblivious to

the subtlety and intricacy of their operations. Watching them for a couple of hours while paying close attention to the sensations of touch that often accompany their movements can be a revelation.

Our hands, in fact, easily trump fangs, claws, and tusks, whether used to throw sticks and stones or spears, wield clubs or swords or slings, fashion clothing from animal skin and fur and cloth, build protective fences and houses, and finally create a technology that reaches across much of the known world and, beyond that, into space.

Ultimate athletes of planet earth

Before considering what space exploration might bring, however, let us travel back in time some 100,000 years and imagine a small group of males of our own species (*homo sapiens*) walking along somewhere on the present-day Serengeti Plain. The sun is high and our ancestors are dressed only a sort of loincloth. They are carrying spears and singing as they walk. About a hundred yards to the right are a pride of lions. The hunters do not change course, nor do they stop singing.

The lions watch them as they pass. They do not attack. They know something my ninth grade science teacher didn't know. These creatures who walk on their hind legs and carry strange objects are by no means the wimps of the wild. To the contrary, they—and we too, with proper training and long-term practice—must rank among the most accomplished athletes of the planet upon which we all now live.