

The human touch

David R Smith* 

The handshake of the host affects the taste of the roast—

Benjamin Franklin

We are well into another year of a global pandemic, and social distancing practices have now become second nature for most of us. Long gone are the days of a handshake before a meeting or a pat on the back after a job well done. At this point, I cannot even fathom the idea of a consensual embrace between friends or colleagues, something that was commonplace before COVID. But as vaccination rates increase and immunity to COVID-19 becomes more and more widespread, will we be quick to return to our pre-pandemic ways, when it felt natural to highfive a student after a paper was accepted, or has physical distancing now been ingrained in us (and universities) for the long haul?

All of this has me thinking about something that happened many years ago, when I was a postdoc at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. On one Sunday in July 2011, I set out on a morning bike ride and, following my normal routine, I cycled onto a school soccer pitch to do some chin-ups on the crossbar of a large aluminum soccer goal. After a few chin-ups, I sat on the grass to catch my breath. In the school parking lot beside the soccer field, I noticed a single parked car. In the passenger's seat was a young boy of around eight years old staring at his feet. In the driver's seat sat a middle-aged woman staring at me.

I smiled and nodded. If I spotted a short, bearded man in Lycra with a fluorescent bike helmet doing pull-ups on a soccer goal, I'd be staring as well. As I prepared for another round of exercises, she started the

car and began reversing, but before the car was halfway out of the parking spot, it stopped, the driver's door opened, and the woman started walking toward me. She was around five foot three, thin, and wearing jeans and a T-shirt. I stood casually beside the goal post, watching her approach. I figured she was coming to warn me about the dangers of dangling from a soccer goal—maybe she worked for the school and was worried about a lawsuit. She came closer and eventually was standing in front of me.

After a brief silence she said, "Can I ask you a favour?" Relieved that this was not about my chin-ups, I said, "Sure thing." She took a deep breath and said, "Can I have a hug?" At first, I thought she was joking, but she stood there looking at me and said nothing else. Then, I thought maybe it was one of those "pass-it-on" things, where she hugs me and then I'm supposed to hug someone else. There was only one way to find out. "Alright," I replied.

She leaned in, wrapped her arms around me, and pulled me close, so that her head was pressed against my chest. Slightly taken aback by the firmness of the embrace, I placed my arms lightly around her. Through the motion of her breathing, I soon realized she was crying. I did not know what to do. Her crying grew more and more intense, so I held her tightly. This went on for about three minutes. Over her shoulder, I could see that the young boy in the car was watching us. Finally, she released herself from the embrace, wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands and said, "Last night my husband said he wanted a divorce. I haven't told anyone. I haven't told my son." "I'm so sorry," I said. She hugged me again, but this time for not as long and without crying. She then let go, turned around, walked back to the parking lot, got in the car, and drove

away. I watched the car turn the corner then got on my bike and rode home. I kept going back to the soccer field that summer but never saw the woman or boy again.

Something tells me that in the coming months and years, when we have finally defeated COVID, there will be a lot of people needing physical gestures of kindness, be it a hug, handshake, or pat on the back. Our rational sides might tell us that any physical contact opens the door to the spread of disease, to the next global pandemic, and that for safety, we should keep as many of the current distancing protocols in place as possible. Perhaps that is the best course of action, but sometimes a wave from across the street or a high five over Zoom just does not cut it. Sometimes social interaction needs to take precedent over statistics, provided it is consensual and appropriate.

In my time as a university teacher, I have had to console students on many occasions, including those whose loved ones were sick or passed away as well as students dealing with physical or mental health issues or whose journey through academics was not what they envisioned. To be clear, I have not gone around embracing every distressed student in my path, nor am I endorsing such behavior, but I have taken the time to sit across a table from a student and lean in while they quietly tell me their story. Often just being near another human being can be comforting, be it in a coffee shop or lecture hall.

It appears that many universities will be substantially more open by the New Year, if not sooner, but it is likely that social distancing policies, in one form or another, will persist on campuses for the foreseeable future. Whatever happens, I'm so happy that I have the memory of that hug under the soccer net all those years ago.

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