

The Human Touch

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Several years ago I walked out of the Ballard Health Club after a satisfying workout. It was a beautiful summer day, warm and sunny. I felt good and probably had a smile on my face, although I wasn't aware of it. As I walked north around to the parking lot, a woman walked out of the adjacent bank. As she saw me she smiled, threw her arms open wide, and gave me a big hug. She said it was so good to see someone so happy. I was pleasantly surprised – nothing like that had never happened to me, not in Ballard or any other place in Seattle. It was so unlike the "Seattle Freeze." Maybe it was because we were both not natives of Seattle.

We then stopped and talked for a while. She said it was so nice to see someone so happy on a street in Ballard or anywhere in Seattle. She moved to Seattle from out-of-state (San Diego, I believe) a few months earlier. I moved to Seattle from Minnesota over twenty years ago.

As a Norwegian I am not used to hugging – we don't hug, we shake hands. That was how I was brought up. We can be loving but are reluctant to show it in public. When I moved West, hugging was more common, particularly among good friends. Perhaps that is more "West Coast" and among younger people, I don't know. I've gotten used to it and it's nice.

That was pre-pandemic. Now people would run away from anyone who might try to hug them. Will hugging come back post-pandemic? I hope so, but there is another human touching that is not so physical: greeting a stranger on the street or small talk with a clerk in a store.

Human connections are basic needs – essential to our health and happiness. Unfortunately, many people report feeling lonelier and more isolated than ever before. According to Cigna's 2018 Loneliness Study, almost half of Americans say they sometimes or always feel alone or left out. This is not something that began with the pandemic, but the pandemic has certainly made it worse.

With swiping, clicking, scrolling, erasing opportunities for face-to-face interaction, how can we personally connect with others in our lives? Yes, I understand the need to wear masks and maintain social distancing in public while this pandemic, hopefully, winds down. Without this, we face the danger of more COVID variants, which threaten to erase the progress we have now made.

When will we feel safe and comfortable to meet someone on the sidewalk without veering to one side or across the street, but stop and chat with visible smiles on our faces? Come to think of it, that would be an improvement over pre-pandemic times – we need a thaw in the "Seattle Freeze." Hopefully, in reaction to this pandemic, we will reach out more to other people.

My daughter and her husband drove up from California to spend a week with me recently. With all of us fully vaccinated, we could hug, talk, walk together, and interact as in pre-pandemic times. This was great, but now they have left and I feel more lonesome. With Spring underway, warmer weather, and beautiful flowers, I want to enjoy my little corner of this Earth, reach out and touch other people, even hug, if that is possible.

Enjoy the Spring!

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