

Seasoned Greetings

Cultivating a cordial, credible handshake | BY MARK R. JOHNSON

When I first learned the value of the handshake at the age of 8, I used the greeting eagerly, but with certain disregard. It was a way to get attention. I offered my meager grip to any and all—especially adults—and the women would say, “How grown up,” and the men would say, “Put it there.” If I was lucky, I’d catch them offguard and be the first one to say something—such as, “Nice to meet you,” voiced in a slightly robotized fashion.

Despite my “practice makes perfect” attitude, I soon learned that I didn’t really grasp the value of the handshake. I was always the giver but rarely the receiver. Even from my fledgling perspective, I realized that, like many things, a shake must mature before it can find its place. So I holstered my hand for a time.

Meanwhile, I observed other people’s handshakes. I had a teacher in grade school who had massive hams for hands. We’d cringe when he’d offer a shake. His grip was crushing. I always thought his pulverizing squeeze served to remind us rabble that we’d better keep ourselves in line. But, looking back, I understand that it was more a reflection of the kind of stand-up character he was. It was a part of his personality, right there for the knowing. I discovered you can tell a lot from someone’s handshake.

Several years down the road, through the gentle coaching of my mother—eager to make my two brothers and me “presentable” in social situations—I discovered a new shake. It was stronger. Accompanied by a look in the eye, it felt more meaningful. It had bite. At an age when the shake was more common, more reciprocal, I found its value again. This time for good. From meeting guests to forging new friendships, I was on my way.

My mom stressed to us that the handshake was one of life’s most valuable tools. And she was right. From the playing fields of high school on up to college interviews and then job interviews, the seal of a sincere handshake has always meant a lot in any situ-

ation. It makes a good impression. It is a clasp of trust; a grip of goodwill.

When I meet people for the first time, I often remember their handshakes better than I do their names. I’m impressed, more than anything, by a stout handshake. I detest the “dead fish” shake—a limp attempt at a greeting if ever there was one.

In my mind, the perfect shake lasts only about two seconds. It must be hands shaking, not fingers grabbing. The arms are free to pump a bit: It is two pumps generally, three max. And it shouldn’t be a mindless exercise, but rather should require a level of concentration, however quick. It should be offered at all costs and never held back.

Of course, if you’re greeting Grandma, you go for the bear hug. But we’re talking about handshake situations, like at a party. With people who hardly know each other, there’s nothing I wince at more than the awkward social displays of half-hearted hugs and those lipless cheek kisses. They are the dregs of the greeting kind in my mind. I’ll take a pat on the back any day over one of those.

While I’ve been told the origin of the handshake dates to the early warring days of society—to signify that a hand was weaponless, and thus, friendly—it still seems to say much the same thing. To agree on a decision, people shake hands. They use it to confirm a bet. To strike a deal. To say thanks. It offers a sign of your “word.”

Although, for all its built-in sincerity, the handshake has its fair share of abusers. Politicians wield the all-purpose shake: a quick tug of the hand spread thinly over the voting masses. Businesspeople sometimes seem to offer their hands as mere extensions of their business cards. While it serves to break the proverbial ice, a hand offered should always be backed up with something more.

Still, there isn’t much in life that conveys as much as a rock-solid handshake. Take away the shake, and you take away one of the strongest foundations of our communication. Without it, we are disconnected. With it we are, well, joined.

Mark R. Johnson lives in Bend, Oregon.

