



HANDSHAKING

A Custom Whose Days Likely Are Numbered *By E. Osborne*



PHOTO: TYLER NYX - UNSPLASH

YOU'VE NO DOUBT witnessed people with colds sneeze or cough into their palms, or use public urinals and commodes, then, when finished, walk out without bothering to wash their hands. Such behavior, coupled with all the other things that people do in a typical day – use public computers, turn door handles, push elevator buttons, etc. – can result in the hands picking up all kinds of pathogens, including E. coli (*Escherichia coli*), MERSA (methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*), and flu. And these germs can infect not only the owners of the hands but also those with whom they later come into contact. Given such hazards, the time might have come to dispense with the unsanitary practice of shaking hands.

Granted, dispensing with handshaking would be no easy fix because the pull of convention is a powerful one. After all, what gesture would people use to convince others that they are making their promises in good faith? And how would people be able to make judgments about the character or mood of others – based on whether their handshake is firm, limp, lingering, bone-crushing, or sweaty – in social interactions such as job interviews, first meetings, and business deals? Besides, what would be a feasible alternative to handshaking?

Let's take a look at the available options. Ideally, a feasible alternative to shaking would be one involving little or no bodily contact. As it happens, some already have turned to greeting gestures such as the elbow bump. But it is the fist bump that appears to have gained the most traction as a replacement for the handshake. The gesture, which involves people gently tapping their fists together, is an abbreviated form of the dap (said to stand for "dignity and pride"), a complicated routine that includes handshakes, palm slaps, finger snaps, and other moves created by African-American GIs during the Vietnam War. What the fist bump has going in its favor is that, besides being easier to perform than the awkward elbow bump, fewer germs are transferred because of the smaller surface area in contact when two fists meet. And with the advent of COVID-19, it is this fact that has made it easier for many to justify giving up handshaking in favor of the fist bump.

Indeed, if several high-profile instances of fist bumping are any indication, the gesture is growing in popularity. For example, the comedian/TV host Howie Mandel, who reportedly has mysophobia, an irrational fear of germs, opts to fist bump rather than shake hands with guests on his shows. Another fist bumper is Myron Lowery, a former Mayor Pro Tem (temporary) of Memphis, Tennessee, who used the gesture when greeting the Dalai Lama during the Tibetan spiritual leader's visit to Memphis some years ago. Other high-profile users of the greeting gesture include Barack Obama, who bumped fists with wife Michelle before taking the stage in St. Paul, Minnesota, after winning the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination; Kamala Harris, who bumped fists with former president Obama on being sworn in as vice president in 2021; and President Joe Biden, who fist-bumped with the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman during their controversial 2022 meeting in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Still, because some consider the fist bump unsuitable for formal situations, the gesture is unlikely to be embraced unanimously as a replacement for the handshake. Okay, so where would one look for a more formal substitute for handshaking – one that obviates the need to touch another?

NON-CONTACT GREETING GESTURES ELSEWHERE IN THE WORLD

A possible substitute for the handshake might be found in the Muslim world. In some predominantly Muslim nations, a popular greeting gesture involves placing the palm of the right hand over the heart. Although the gesture is done after Muslims shake hands (referred to in Arabic as "making musafahah") on arrival and departure, those non-Muslims who use this gesture typically dispense with the handshake. Other contact-free greeting forms of salutation are to be found elsewhere in the world. In India and Nepal, for example, there's the namaste, a respectful gesture that people use when greeting relatives, friends, and guests. The word namaste is derived from Sanskrit (the ritual language of Hinduism, somewhat analogous to Latin in the Catholic church) and translates roughly as "I bow to the divine in you." People perform the namaste by placing the palms together, with fingers pointing upwards, as in prayer, bringing them to the front of the chest, then bowing slightly.

Significantly, non-contact greeting styles derived from the namaste, but bearing different names, are used in those

partly Indianized countries of Southeast Asia: in Thailand (the wai), in neighboring Laos (the nop), in Cambodia (the sampeah), and in parts of the Indonesian archipelago (the sembah). Like the Indian namaste, these gestures are performed by placing the palms together, with fingers pointing upwards, prayer-like, and placing them in front of the chest while bowing slightly (and with bent knees if a female). The higher one holds the hands, and the lower the bow, the more the respect shown to the person being greeted. Again, as in India, people in these areas use the gesture to greet each other, express gratitude, and apologize for a mistake or misdeed.

Other places that might provide a substitute for handshaking are the two Chinas: the mainland republic and the offshore political entity of Taiwan. In both areas, the traditional greeting is the fist-and-palm gesture, so-called because it is performed by cupping a fist in the palm while holding them at stomach level and bowing. People employ the fist-in-palm gesture when greeting others and when saying goodbye. They also use it when visiting others during the traditional Chinese New Year and when attending weddings, birthday celebrations, and funerals.

Then there's the Japanese ojigi (meaning "bow"). Historically associated with the samurai warrior class, this gesture is used, among other things, for greetings, making introductions, showing gratitude, and apologizing. Men bow with their hands at their sides, and women bow with their hands in the front.

Whether people bow formally, from the waist, or casually, with a slight nod of the head, depends on the degree of respect accorded to the recipient of the bow.

As the preceding culture-specific greeting conventions show, shaking hands is hardly a universally practiced custom. As they also show, there is no need to touch people – and in so doing to make judgments about them based on their handshake – which is, in a sense, a kind of intrusion into another's personal space. In the end, should you choose to adopt a particular greeting gesture as an alternative to shaking hands – be it bumping fists or bumping elbows, bowing, or whatever – here's hoping that others won't judge you too harshly for doing so. After all, discontinuing the shaking of hands will not change your core being, just the way you choose to interact with others in a particular social-contact situation.

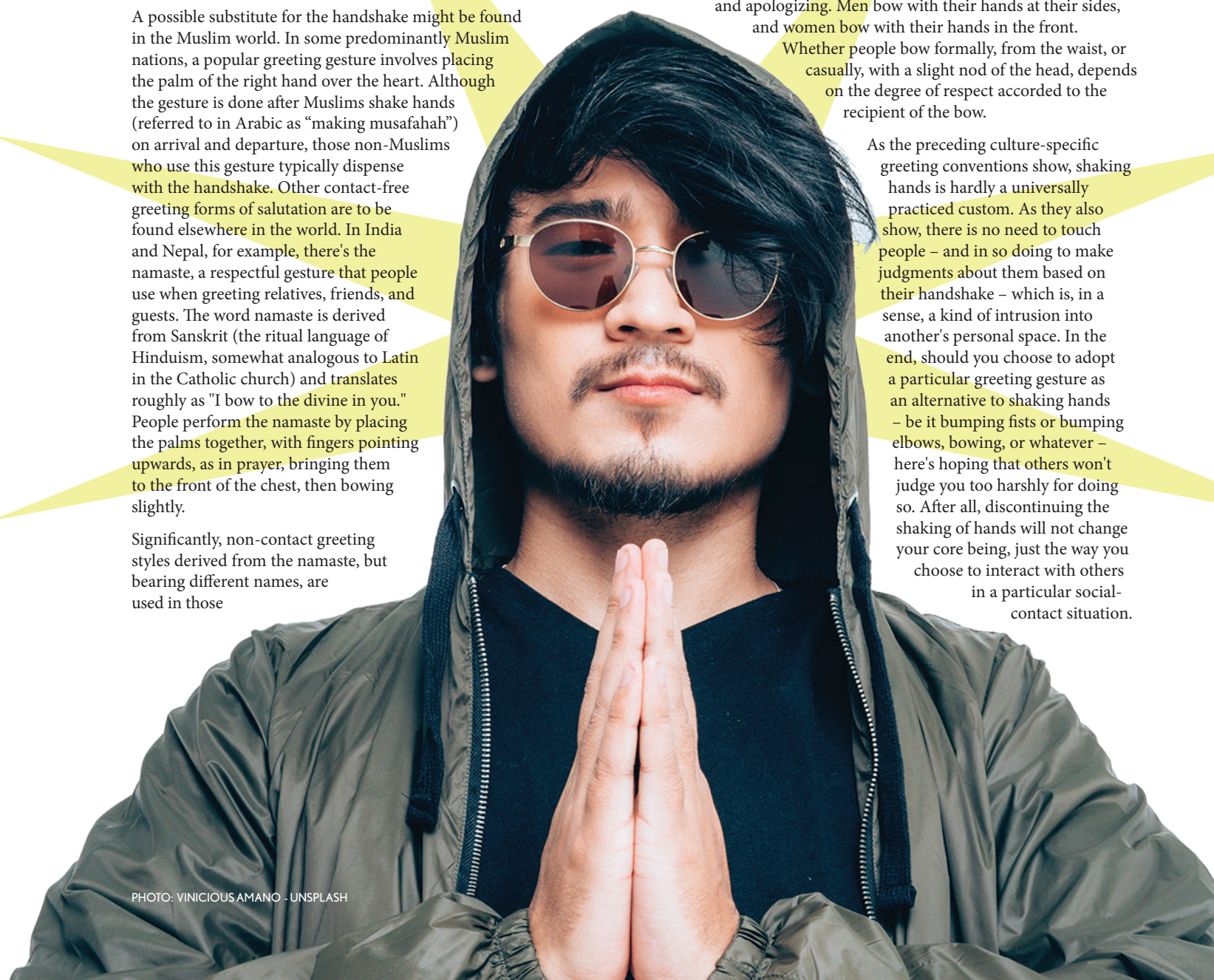


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