

# THE HANDSHAKE

A Gripping History

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## Introduction

The handshake has a pretty serious PR problem. For a long time the go-to, multipurpose, international greeting, the handshake was abruptly banished in March 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic swept the world. A common myth about the handshake suggests that it harks back to a time when you wanted to reassure someone that there was no weapon in your hand: the open palm, the shake up and down to dislodge any weapon up your sleeve, was a sign of safety and trust. But what if you can't see what is deadly? What if, to quote Gregory Poland of the Mayo Clinic, 'When you extend your hand, you're extending a bioweapon'?<sup>1</sup> Thanks to COVID, the underlying assumption of the handshake has suddenly been turned on its head. And even when it doesn't kill you, it doesn't exactly help foster connection and trust if the minute you touch someone's hand, you reach for the hand sanitiser.

Has the handshake gone forever? Is it consigned to history? Have we all been shocked into seeing what we should have realised all along: that it is sheer, reckless insanity to indiscriminately touch other people's dirty paws? The White House COVID-19 task-force member and immunologist turned American hero Dr Anthony Fauci certainly

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thought so, proclaiming that ‘I don’t think we should ever shake hands ever again, to be honest with you’.<sup>2</sup> You may think, if the handshake has been consigned to history – if it is indeed undergoing an extinction event – then who better than a palaeoanthropologist, someone who studies human evolution, to speak at the wake? Except that, as a palaeoanthropologist ... I’m refusing to write the obituary of the handshake.

Drawing on multiple lines of evidence, I have come to the conclusion that the handshake is in fact the owner of a rich, fascinating story, hiding in plain sight. See, I think the handshake isn’t *just* cultural, it’s biological, programmed into our DNA. The origins of the handshake go back far beyond antiquity, and probably beyond prehistory to before we were even a species. Our closest living relatives, the chimps, habitually use the handshake (it is more of a ‘fingershake’, really, which has many positive meanings, including ‘let’s make up’), indicating that hand-shaking probably began before our two species diverged – an astonishing 7 million years ago.

The handshake does, of course, have various meanings, both historically and geographically: we do the handshake a disservice to suggest that its only function throughout time has been as a greeting. Instead we should appreciate the handshake as a *unit of touch* (like a hug or kiss);<sup>3</sup> I believe we can’t underestimate the importance of touch to the human condition, it is an innate impulse. Both psychologically valuable and comforting, the handshake is one of the gold standards of human connection.

Perhaps we always exist in a negotiation between our desire for touch and our fear of contagion, as an example

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from my own family reminds me. My father is *very* health-conscious and a tad compulsive about germs; when my younger brother was born he wrote out a sign in English and Arabic saying ‘Please Do Not Kiss Me’ and stuck it above the crib. He couldn’t bear our massive family – and a plethora of visitors – kissing the new baby. We simply waited until Dad had left the room and ... it was showtime. The kid was adorable (for a while, at least). But if at the moment we are more of my dad’s way of thinking and – correctly – even fear the handshake,<sup>4</sup> the lesson of history is that we will tip back the other way as soon as it seems safe to do so. From the Black Death to the Spanish flu, the handshake has been banned, dropped and quarantined many times – and each time it has returned.

So I don’t think the handshake died in March 2020 – rather, it’s in temporary lockdown, social-distancing, quarantining, but, like most of us, going nowhere. Instead of being an obituary, this book is a tell-all biography, charting the twists and turns of the handshake’s story through the lens of anthropology, cultural diversity, religion, history, sociology, biology, psychology, archaeology, gender and politics. Our prehistoric ancestors left handprints on cave walls, as if they wanted to reach through time towards us. The Greeks shook hands on the battlefield, and the Romans did so to mark marriages. The diplomatic handshake has shaped the destiny of millions, from ancient Mesopotamia to the lawn of the White House, while the handshake witnessed both the birth of democracy and its rise to prominence in the West hundreds of years later. Colonialism and globalisation have determined what *kind* of handshake we use (and there were and are plenty, including a penis handshake). Its

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history is littered with famous snubs, broken taboos, eccentric scientific experiments and national pride.

It's also deeply personal to me. I know the value of the handshake because I have lived with it *and* I have lived without it: for the first twenty-six years of my life – what I affectionately call my fundamentalist period – I followed strict Muslim law (in which the majority of Muslim jurists believe that men and women should not have any physical contact: no handshakes). It was awkward, and the tactics I adopted to avoid shaking men's hands in the UK in the noughties ranged from ingenious to ludicrous. (In fact, handshake dodgeball tactics weren't an unusual topic of conversation and humour amongst my fellow devout friends.) My Muslim background, it seems, was the dry run for social distancing; it was the Dominic Cummings going to Barnard Castle.

Over the years I tried:

1. Avoidance: rarely works in a way which makes you feel good about yourself.
2. The right hand placed on the heart: I liked this as it made me seem mildly exotic, hippyish and it communicated warmth. I've found myself reverting back to this on COVID-19 Zoom calls.
3. A salute: I thought it made me look hip and cool. In hindsight, a Muslim woman in a floor-length, dark abaya cloak in the 2000s saluting people was probably startling and perhaps 'off-brand'.
4. Communication: I tried simply saying, 'Oh, I don't shake.' When delivered well it seemed endearing, but my delivery was often hit-and-miss – well, more hit-and-run.

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5. Covering my hands with a glove or material: I decided that this was an acceptable loophole. However, I still cringe at the time I was handing over the keys of a Scout site to its manager, and, when he stretched out his arm, I quickly flicked my long sleeve down to cover my hand. I stuck to the rules! I was relieved, until my friend immediately commented on how unsubtle the whole thing was. I still worry that he might have thought that I didn't shake hands because I thought his were grubby. His hands were fine – I was just a bit fundo.

Very, very rarely I would relent. If it just seemed too awkward or if too much was at stake, I shook hands, and in doing so I was following a minority view amongst Muslim jurists that handshakes were permissible – as long as, and this was the important bit, they weren't flirtatious. I have since learnt that there is a big difference between hand-shaking and hand-holding.

As I became secular, I learnt to embrace the handshake. But there was still a protracted period of heightened awareness: touching male hands, with their strange sensation of coarser skin and larger size, was still very novel and I was hyper-conscious about all of it. Those with conservative religious views believed that when it came to touch, it was a slippery slope. They actually weren't wrong – at the time I was tentatively embracing handshakes, the secular world simultaneously wanted me to embrace the embrace. And hugs with the opposite gender were something I was *not* prepared for.

Although these days I am quite the hugger, at the time I

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struggled with it: when my new best friend Rich tried to hug me, I would have neurotic conversations with myself along the lines of ‘This is normal in this culture, this is just what people do, don’t overthink it’. I basically had a mantra. A year or two later, when I confided this to Richard, he was, of course, mortified: he had had no idea what a culture shock it was. In a surprising plot twist, it turned out that Richard also hated hugs. He was forcing himself to do them because he thought it was just what people did.

At the same time, I was forging a career as an academic and explorer, specialising in hostile, remote and disputed territories. In one of my earliest *National Geographic* interviews, I was asked: ‘What surprising thing is always in your field kit?’ The answer was ‘tonnes of disinfectant’: even before COVID-19 emerged, I Dettol-ed toilet seats before using them and have been known, after a good hand-washing, to stand by the entrance of a public toilet till someone opens the door so I can avoid touching the handle. In some ways I had taken it too far, and in the field it was a bloody hassle. I found myself in a cave in a disputed territory being showered in dirt and bat guano. When it was time to eat, we didn’t have any water, only antibacterial gel. All I was doing was wiping the mud, microbes and guano *around* my hand; at best, it was an exercise in redistribution. Enough was enough, and in January 2020 I made a promise to myself that I was going to care less about washing my hands. And I did. I guess a once-in-a-century pandemic is how the universe chose to repay me.

But even if it didn’t quite turn out like I expected, I’m glad I overcame my fear of contamination, and I’m glad I learnt to shake, and that Rich and I persevered with our hugs. I’m

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happy that I normalised it all, because I can see how important physical contact is for human connection. The stricter Muslim law on this was specifically designed to create barriers against human connection between the genders, but now I cherish that easy bond between all humans. To be tactile, I would argue, is the best way to build a connection. Touch unites us in a way that keeping our distance can't bridge – ironically, an outstretched palm, a grip of someone else's flesh, is the physical embodiment of the hand on the heart. It's why the handshake, across time and space, symbolises so many positive things: agreement, affection, welcome, acceptance and equality. I've already lived through trying to find an alternative to the handshake – I'm telling you, nothing lives up to it. Some of us waited a long time to shake hands; I'm not ready to give it up.

# 1

## Origin Story: Where Does the Handshake Come From?

### Uncontacted

The Sentinelese live on North Sentinel Island in the Indian Ocean. Nominally it's a part of India, but in practice the people who live there govern themselves. The outside world knows almost nothing about them, and they know very little about the outside world; they are an 'uncontacted tribe'. In the age of globalisation this is no small feat; at a time in which most populations on earth are in contact with each other, where that contact is often instantaneous, where our societies and cultures grow ever more homogenous, uncontacted tribes are the dissenters. They have opted out. Having seen how 2020 played out, I'm inclined to commend them on their foresight. But their very isolation from this enormous information exchange that influences the rest of us means that they are fascinating for people who, like me, study anthropology and human behaviour.

The Sentinelese have a history of hostility to outsiders, which is entirely understandable, especially when you think that their most significant recorded contact with the outside world came when the British naval officer Maurice Vidal

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Portman kidnapped a number of them in the nineteenth century. Some died immediately, probably due to a lack of immunity to outside infectious diseases, and the others were returned a few weeks later, presumably having been gruesomely experimented on, as was his *modus operandi*.

Before beginning the research for this book, I stumbled upon some extremely rare footage of the Sentinelese, taken in 1991 as the anthropologist Trilokinath Pandit and colleagues from the Anthropological Survey of India were cautiously trying to make contact. In the footage I watched, the anthropologists stayed in their boat and sent gifts of coconuts bobbing through the water towards the Sentinelese on the shore. Things were going significantly better than in other reported incidences in that no one had been shot by an arrow, and many of the Sentinelese were coming into the water to collect the coconuts. Then the narrator of the film explains that the Sentinelese have signalled to the anthropologists to leave. The narrator does not expand on this, but when I saw what happened, I almost fell off my seat. As a palaeoanthropologist I knew the implications of what I was looking at, and as a stand-up comic I was all too familiar with that sign – it was a favourite of some of my male stand-up buddies.

A tribesman had grabbed his naked penis and literally (not, figuratively, like my friends on stage) yanked his hand up and down it repeatedly. He was literally telling the anthropologists and cameraman to ‘fuck off’. I recently saw a fellow cyclist in London use it to tell a driver this very same thing. But I had always imagined that it was a relatively modern gesture.

The implication was extraordinary: if people who are

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uncontacted are doing something that is universally understood by those of us in the rest of the world, it strongly implies that a sign or behaviour isn't a recent development. Not because uncontacted people are 'primitive' or 'ancient': they made it to 2021 just like the rest of us and are therefore just as modern as we are. But their voluntary isolation gives us an insight into a world before any kind of globalisation; they didn't adopt their behaviour, traditions and mannerisms from a popular sitcom or band, nor did their ancestors adopt this behaviour from a missionary, an explorer or an oil prospector. It is very possible that it is not 'learnt' at all, but embedded in their DNA, the same DNA they share with my furious British cyclist.

The Sentinelese made such an impression on me that when I began writing about the handshake, my first question was: do uncontacted tribes shake hands? The problem with finding out is that first-contact encounters are incredibly rare. Most are not recorded, and even if they are, they may well be terrifying for the tribe – so we wouldn't really expect the encounter to feature a polite 'How do you do, fancy an Earl Grey tea and crumpets?' Yet, remarkably, evidence exists for handshakes upon first contact with a number of tribes. There is a *National Geographic* photograph, and silent film footage, of a handshake that takes place in 1928 in New Guinea: it captures Ivan Champion, a member of the 1928 US Sugar Expedition, with a man who is (presumably) a member of an uncontacted tribe, holding an oar in his left hand and with his right hand shaking Champion's.<sup>1</sup> David Attenborough tells a story about searching for birds of paradise, also in New Guinea, in 1957, and getting into a potentially hairy situation with a tribe who sound like

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they might have been uncontacted. The whole incident was caught on camera. They charged at him while brandishing spears and knives and he averted the situation by simply sticking out his hand and wishing them a ‘good afternoon’. They pumped his hand up and down.<sup>2</sup> I’ve faced neighbours in north London with less skill.

These handshakes are fascinating and, taken together, suggest that some uncontacted tribes intrinsically know what a handshake is without having previously come across one in the outside world – a remarkable finding. Of course, there are caveats: the hand-shaking may be behavioural mirroring (when people unconsciously imitate each other’s behaviour and movements, often to build rapport), or perhaps the tribes weren’t, in fact, uncontacted or had picked up this behaviour from other neighbouring indigenous groups who had contact with the outside world. However, the ethnologist Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt describes encountering hand-shaking amongst tribes in New Guinea who had only made contact with the outside world some seven months earlier. The Kukukuku and Waitapmin tribes, as well as patrol officers, confirmed to him that they had always practised hand-shaking and that it didn’t originate post-contact.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, there are reports of handshakes with newly contacted tribes in a completely different geographical location, the Amazon, in the 1970s. So we have similar reports from two different places: which also happen to be the two places in the world with the highest number of uncontacted tribes.