

SHELL SHOCKED

Hugging – the Equal Opportunity Human Connector
By Art Stevens

World leaders do it. Kids do it. Married couples do it. Unmarried couples do it.

Baseball players do it. Grandparents do it. Even tough Marine sergeants do it. It's universal, commonplace and widely accepted. What do they do?

They hug.

The hug is the highest form of personal communication and it far surpasses the miracle of the internet, email and I Pads. It is emblematic of sorrow as well as joy. It is a connection, a bond, a gesture – an ice breaker.

I once saw a You Tube video where some volunteers agreed to carry signs offering free hugs. They didn't have to work very hard to get those hugs. Total strangers passed them and were intrigued by the offer. Many stopped for a quick but well meaning hug, smiled and went about their business. The hugs made their day.

The huggers themselves became transfixed by the experience. It changed their lives forever. It opened up the nascent humanity in them. The hugging experience took the place of psychotherapy, anti-depressants and four martinis. The hugging experience demonstrated that two human beings sharing a hug can better their lives.

I have a cousin who was the Scrooge of overt behavior. During family get togethers he would be the only one who refused to hug other family members. He would back off when someone came too close and would invariably say "I'm not a hugger. Don't touch me." We almost expected him to say "humbug".

But then one day I sneaked up on him and gave him a slight hug before he had a chance to recoil in horror. I said to him, "there, I did it. Now did you fall apart at my touch? Was my body odor too much for you to overcome? Was it so painful?"

And, honest to God, he was stuck for words. His defense mechanisms were at work but so was his humanity. His humanity won. I could swear his eyes were glistening with tears when he approached me and gave me the biggest bear hug I'd ever gotten. He almost cracked my ribs but I was elated nonetheless.

We had converted a humbug into a hugger. He had gotten the message about hugging. From that day on he would not be denied. Whenever he was at a family gathering he was the first one to open his arms and invite family members to hug him.

His initial hugs were a bit rough and hard. But he learned. He became an expert hugger and opened himself up to the love that his family was always willing to give him.

Hugging is so universal that there doesn't need to be a precise reason as to when it's applied. It expresses love and affection. It expresses pride. It expresses kinship. It expresses victory.

When a major league baseball team wins a game all the players line up and hug each other. When a high school student receives a graduation diploma she receives as many hugs that day from family, friends and fellow students as the number of courses she had to take to achieve that reward.

But a few do's and don'ts on when to give hugs. Don't try hugging a police officer when he stops you for speeding. Don't try to hug a night club bouncer to try to get in front of the line. Don't try to hug a theater usher when she escorts you to your seat.

And don't try to hug a restaurant waiter while he's carrying a tray full of the evening's entrees. Be judicious and discreet. Hug under the right circumstances and your joy barometer will go through the ceiling.

I consider myself to be an equal opportunity hugger. I will hug men and women alike. And children, dogs, cats and even giraffes if I can reach that high. I'd even hug an alligator if I could find one that was trusting and loving. Hugging closes wounds, opens positive feelings, eases grief and validates connections. It signals a job well done, a support mechanism that encourages and inspires, and a doorway to closer bonds.

I urge the Sanibel City Council to designate a "Hug a Stranger" day and watch the dynamics of an already warm community ratchet up a gear. And, finally, hugging isn't for sissies. Once you commit to giving or receiving a hug you're in a different place. You're in a place where you're letting people into your life. Now what could be wrong with that?