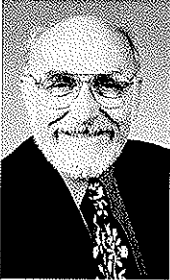


To bow or hug, that is the question

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By Bill Hall of the Tribune



Commentary

A National Public Radio report on Japan's multiple cataclysms told the story of a desperate daughter traveling by train, taxi and on foot before finding her parents alive in front of the family home. Whereupon, she did what many of you huggy people will consider strange and repressed:

"There's no hugging or kissing," the NPR report said, "just gasps of surprise and shock as she stands and bows to her parents. They bow too - the emotion of the moment palpable, even though nobody touches anyone else."

My family was like that.

We didn't bow, but we didn't hug much either. Most families didn't hug much in the Idaho of the mid-20th century. There were unspoken rules about that sort of thing. If you were a typical teenage boy, you could let your mother hug you, and maybe even give her a little squeeze in return if you had been away to Scout camp or something. But you didn't get sloppy about it.

And of course, you accepted no more than a couple of pats on the shoulder from your dad. A dad is a guy and you are a guy and the Idaho guys of 60 years ago didn't hug.

I'm told by people who have spent time in Japan that the chaste bows of that young woman and her parents are gradually fading away. More and more, modern Japanese family members have stopped resisting the opportunity to show more physically how much they love each other.

And so, of course, have we in this country. We have grown much more demonstrative, maybe too much so for my twitchy generation. Most male and female members of families today are like unchained octopuses who can't get enough of wrapping their tentacles around each other.

Nonetheless, there can be something powerful and eloquent about a daughter and her parents bowing and crying and trembling with love - never touching with their arms around each other but touching deeply heart to heart. Feelings that profound do not depend on wrapping your dad in a touchy feely half-nelson and slobbering on his face.

Sometimes people squeeze more meaning out of just being together solely by telephone. When Sharon and I first married years ago, one of the best parts for me was lying in bed on a weekend morning, listening to Sharon talking to her mother - usually about nothing in particular. The conversation often involved the weather. But what they said didn't matter. They weren't talking to convey information. They were talking just to be together.

Her mother, an ardent Baptist, has long since gone to meet her master. And now, on weekend mornings, I lie in bed and listen to Sharon, the mother, being with her daughter Shannon on the telephone. They dwell on grandchildren but also on the weather, always the weather. I think asking about the weather is how you hug by phone - or maybe bow.

I never realized until recently how valuable talking about nothing could be in binding a family or friends together. Our older friend Ellen, a sprightly and quite beautiful woman in her 80s, was limited by one of those elderly ailments that stifle your short-term memory. And if what we say to each other mattered half as much as simply talking just to be talking - making sounds to each other like two cats purring in unison - then talking with Ellen might have lost some of its charm.

But in a strange way her short-term memory loss enriched and tickled our conversations. That's partly because the wry observation is true that there are no old jokes to people with short-term memory loss. And I am an old jokester. Ellen would ask me something about the cat. And I would make a cat joke.

And she would laugh and make a similar joke herself. And I would laugh.

And then, two minutes later, we would do it all over again, her same question, my same joke, her laugh, her same joke, my laugh.

The only odd part was that I was aware of the repetition and she wasn't. We had a good time anyway. The words don't matter. The hugging doesn't matter, The bowing doesn't matter.

Being together - by phone or in person - does matter. And sometimes there is no greater affection among friends and family than laughing together - even repeatedly - at the same old joke.

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