

Gentle touches

by [Brian Doyle](#) in the [March 16, 2016](#) issue

Spent all day and deep into the evening Saturday at a wedding studying the ways and means and manners by which people gently touch each other, and so communicate this and that and the other thing; to wit,

how fathers gently affectionately lay their hands on the thin eager elegant swannish necks of their children, as a way to say *stay* or *pause here* or *hang on one minute while I complete this conversational business up here and then you can launch off into the distance*;

and the way a man will almost unconsciously but not quite extend his elbow toward the woman he likes best, thus creating a space for her to slip her arm into his as they step through the door or start down the stairs or stroll away from the car toward the event at hand;

and the way that a woman will ever so gently touch the elbow of an older woman (often, it seemed to me, her mother or aunt or grandmother or beloved teacher or nun or neighbor) and so offer support if necessary, or, in one case, steer the older woman toward a room where she might find sunshine and wine;

and the way a man will very briefly touch the shoulder of another man as a way to say hello or good-bye without all the florid foofaraw of hugging or the formality of shaking hands or the young man's soul brother gestures and grips and rituals, which turn out to have an expiration date probably sometime in your thirties, after which you turn to the ancient gesture of a gentle touch on the shoulder as a gesture of respect and affection, although there is always one guy who is still into bear hugs, and another guy who is still into the soul brother grip, although the latter guy also still has a soul patch, which no man should have past the age of 40, unless he is in a jazz band and can prove it with an unexpired musicians' union card;

and the way young women will artlessly happily joyously unself-consciously kiss each other on the lips without the slightest care for who thinks what about what in other contexts would seem to indicate romantic interest but which in their cases indicates a cheerful airy unadorned affection for their friends and sisters and cousins

and old roommates and fellow members of the musicians' union;

and the way that very elderly men and women will, without the slightest discomfort, hold hands, often both hands, with every single person who stands next to them and talks to them and listens to them, and the first time I noticed this I thought maybe it was for personal safety and security reasons, like being worried about toppling, but the more I noticed it the more it seemed to me that very elderly men and women have stripped away all self-consciousness and worry about what other people might think, and they take a deep honest genuine pleasure in touching their fellow beings, and being touched, and they know better than anyone else how ancient and holy and moving it is to touch and be touched, and they are going to touch and be touched as much as possible in the time granted them to touch and be touched; which seemed to me, as I strolled away from the wedding reception late that evening, arm in arm with the woman I like best, immensely wise, and something to aspire to, perhaps even today, perhaps as soon as you finish reading these words.