Episode Book

EPISODE #5979

Why We Shake Hands: A 2,800-Year History

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SYNOPSIS

The handshake feels eternal, but it isn't. The oldest image of two people clasping hands is a ninth-century BCE limestone relief of two kings renewing a treaty — not a greeting at all. So how did a rare gesture between monarchs become something you do at the school gate? This episode traces the handshake from Assyrian and Roman treaty rituals through the Quakers' radical insistence on greeting everyone the same way, to a Russian Empire that banned handshakes as indecent and prescribed mitten-clad hand-striking instead. Along the way: the gongshou, namaste, the wai, the Japanese bow, and the salaam — gestures with lineages older than the handshake itself. The answer to whether the handshake is a human universal is no. It's a Western export that got very, very lucky.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

There's a thing you do every time you meet someone for the first time, Herman. You do it without thinking. You did it this morning.



Herman

I did. I did do it. To the delivery man, and I want to state for the record that his grip could have cracked a walnut.



Corn

And you never once asked why. Nobody does. It's the one ritual everybody performs and nobody can explain.



Herman

Daniel can't either, which is why he wrote in. Let me hear how he framed it.



Corn

He wants to know how shaking hands became the global symbol for deal-making and agreement. Was it always that way, or did somebody way back start a trend and everyone just rolled with it? And if something did come before it, what was it?



Herman

That's the good version of the question. There's also the part he tucked on the end.



Corn

Which is the one that actually makes it interesting. In societies where a handshake isn't the normal gesture for sealing an agreement, what do they use instead? Because the answer to that tells you whether this thing is a human universal or a Western export that got lucky.



Herman

And it is not a human universal. That's the first thing to get straight.



Corn

So the handshake feels like it's been with us forever. The evidence says otherwise.



Herman

The honest version is that the handshake was never inevitable. It won. And the story of how it won is stranger than the gesture itself.



Corn

Start where the record starts, then.



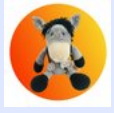
Herman

The oldest image we have of two people shaking hands is a limestone relief from the ninth century before the common era, dug up in what's now Iraq. Two kings: Shalmaneser the Third of Assyria, and Marduk-zakir-shumi the First of Babylon. Right hands clasped. It is not a greeting. It's the renewal of a treaty.



Corn

Two kings, one image, and the whole thing is a contract.



Herman

Right. And that's the pattern you see right through antiquity. The handshake was not how you said hello to your neighbor. It was a special, occasional gesture used by very high-ranking men. Monarchs, ambassadors, generals. And the reason it was reserved for them is precisely that it sidestepped the whole question of who outranked whom. If I bow to you, I've conceded something. If we clasp hands, neither of us has bowed, and the deal still gets sealed.



Corn

So it's a way of getting out of an argument about status.



Herman

It's a way of agreeing without either party having to lose the argument, yes. Which is why you find it at the top of the hierarchy and almost nowhere else.



Corn

There are two theories about where it actually comes from, though.



Herman

There are, and they're not mutually exclusive. The first is the peaceful-intent theory. You extend an empty right hand, and an empty right hand is a hand with no weapon in it. And the up-and-down motion you do, the shake, that was supposedly meant to dislodge a dagger hidden up a sleeve. If something's in there, it falls out.



Corn

That's a very paranoid way to say hello.



Herman

It's a very practical way to say hello if you assume everybody is armed. The second theory is the oath theory. Two clasped hands represent the sealing of a promise. The hands are literally the bond. And Walter Burkert put it better than anybody: an agreement can be expressed quickly and clearly in words, but it only becomes effective through a ritual gesture. Open, weaponless hands stretching toward one another and grasping each other.



Corn

So it's not "hello." It's "I promise," with the hands doing the promising.



Herman

And once you've got that framing, the whole ancient world starts to make sense. In Greece the gesture had a name. Dexiosis. Joining of the right hands. You find it on fifth-century grave markers, and it's not two living friends saying hello. It's the dead clasping hands with the living. It's farewell and eternal bond at the same time.



Corn

The dead shake on it.



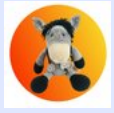
Herman

It's a promise that outlasts the person making it. And then Rome takes the same gesture and attaches theology to it. The right hand was bound up with Fides, the divine force of trust and good faith. And the dextrarum iunctio, the joining of right hands, shows up at weddings and political alliances, and it's linked to Concordia, the goddess of harmony. There are Roman coins with clasped hands stamped on them.



Corn

Concordia on a coin. That's a state putting a handshake on its money.



Herman

Which tells you how seriously they took it, and how much they wanted you to.



Corn

Here's what I want from this, though. You said the gesture can be deceptive. Give me the ugly one.



Herman

Caracalla and Geta. Two brothers, co-emperors of Rome. There's an image of the two of them with right hands extended toward each other in perfect harmony.



Corn

And?



Herman

Caracalla had Geta murdered. Two hundred and eleven.



Corn

Right. So the gesture is a tool for disguising bad faith exactly as well as it signals good faith.



Herman

That's the honest read. A handshake is a claim about intent, not a guarantee of it. And every con man in history has understood that the ritual is most useful to the person who doesn't mean it.



Corn

Which raises the question Daniel is really circling. If this thing existed for a couple thousand years as a king's gesture, how did it end up as mine? I shook hands with the man who fixed the boiler on Tuesday. I'm not sealing a treaty.



Herman

That's the trend question, and there's a real answer. Somebody did start the trend, or a group of people did. Not one inventor. A network.



Corn

Quakers.



Herman

Quakers. Seventeenth and eighteenth century. And they adopted the handshake as a deliberate, principled rejection of the alternatives. They wouldn't bow. They wouldn't curtsey. They wouldn't do what was called hat honour, taking your hat off to your social superior. All of that was, in their view, rank idolatry dressed up as politeness. So they put the handshake in its place and extended it to everybody, regardless of station.



Corn

That's a radical position. Saying good morning to a duke the same way you'd say it to a blacksmith.



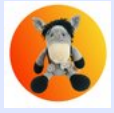
Herman

Radical is the right word. Michael Zuckerman's line is that in their place, Friends put the practice of the handshake, extended to everyone regardless of station, as we do still. Which is a striking sentence, because we do still.



Corn

And I want to head off the thing people always say next, because I've heard it.



Herman

Say it, and then I'll knock it down.



Corn

That the Quakers invented the handshake.



Herman

That is wrong. Explicitly wrong. The Quakers did not invent it. What they did was popularize it on a scale nobody else had managed, and give it high visibility as a statement. There's a scholar, Penelope Corfield, who wrote the most detailed account of how this actually spread, in Urban History. Her finding is that you can't point to one moment. She says no single date can be pinpointed for its first adoption. What you can



Herman (continued)

point to is networks.



Corn

Two of them.



Herman

The first is a mercantile network running through the commercial regions of Europe. Merchants shook hands to confirm a deal. That's the deal-making association Daniel is asking about, and it comes from the counting house, not the throne room. The second is middling-sort Quaker men and women, who shook hands on principle wherever they went.



Corn

Middling sort. Not aristocracy, not peasantry. The middle.



Herman

And that's the part that overturns the usual story. The standard assumption is that manners trickle down. The elite do something, and eventually the masses copy them. Corfield shows the opposite. Handshaking was not an elite practice that trickled down. It spread both upward and downward from the middle class. Merchants and Quakers took it out in both directions at once.



Corn

Up to the lords and down to the servants. Same gesture.



Herman

And here's how you can tell how informal the lot was. The handshake isn't mentioned in the etiquette books of the period. Seventeenth and eighteenth century manuals are still teaching you how to bow and how to curtsey, and they don't cover the handshake at all. So it spread under the social radar of high society. Nobody wrote the rules down, because nobody was keeping score yet.



Corn

The etiquette books were still teaching bowing while the actual culture had already moved on. That's how most of this stuff happens.



Herman

It's how a lot of this stuff happens. And then there's the case that proves the rule by inverting it. Russia.



Corn

Go on.



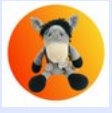
Herman

Handshakes were uncommon in Russia before the nineteenth century. The Empire actually prohibited them. The reasoning given was that skin contact between a man and a woman caused sexual tension.



Corn

The Empire had a position on hand-holding.



Herman

It did. So what did they recommend instead? Something called Rukobit'e. Hand hitting. Men would strike each other's hands. And to avoid the skin contact they were worried about, they did it wearing canvas mittens.



Corn

They beat each other's hands with mittens on to avoid the sexual tension.



Herman

That's the practice. And the word for handshake didn't even enter Russian dictionaries until the nineteenth century. So you have one European society building all of it into the heart of commerce and everyday greeting, and another one banning it as indecent.



Corn

So the handshake won in Britain, then the West, and from there got exported everywhere. Which raises the obvious question. What was everybody else doing, and what were they doing before it arrived?



Herman

And the answer is that most of the world had a gesture for this already, and plenty of them still use it.



Corn

Start with the one that's older than the handshake as a greeting.



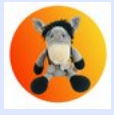
Herman

China. The gongshou, the fist-and-palm salute. And it comes from the Zhou Li, which is second century before the common era. So on any reasonable reading, it predates the handshake as a popular greeting. What you do is put one hand in a half fist and the other open, and you raise both to the forehead and move them back and forth three times.



Corn

So a Chinese person greeting you formally is doing a gesture with a documented lineage older than the thing I do at the school gate.



Herman

Considerably older, in the form that matters. Then India and Nepal. Namaste. Palms pressed together with a slight bow, and the meaning is specific. The Divine within me bows to the same Divine within you. It's in the Rig Veda, and there's sculpture evidence



Herman (continued)

going back to the third millennium before the common era.



Corn

Third millennium. That's not a recent alternative to the handshake. That's the earlier thing.



Herman

That's the earlier thing, yes. Thailand has the wai, palms together with a bow, and the height of your hands carries the meaning. Chest height for a standard greeting, up at the face for a superior, up at the hairline for a monk. And it got a moment during the pandemic, because the WHO's Sylvie Briand recommended it as a handshake alternative.



Corn

A public health official recommending a gesture that's been signaling respect in Thailand for centuries.



Herman

Japan. The bow. Introduced from China in the seventh century, initially confined to the nobility, adopted by the samurai from around the twelfth century, and it spread to commoners after the Edo period. And the depth is the grammar. Fifteen degrees for a hello. Thirty to honor a superior. Forty-five for the deepest respect or an apology.



Corn

So you can bow an apology.



Herman

You can bow an apology, and everyone present knows exactly how deep it was.



Corn

The Islamic salaam is the one I find most interesting, because of the gender thing.



Herman

As-salaam alaikum. And many Muslims will place the right hand over the heart instead of shaking, particularly across genders, because some Hadith forbid touching someone of the opposite gender. So the deferential version of the greeting doesn't involve contact at all. And that's not a workaround. It's a complete greeting in its own right.



Corn

And then there's the wider set, which gets varied.



Herman

The Zambian cup-and-clap. The Māori hongi, the nose press. The Inuit kunik. The Gulf khashm-makh, which is nose to nose. Then the modern additions. The fist bump, or the dap, associated with Black American soldiers during Vietnam. And the Wuhan shake, foot tapping, which showed up during COVID.



Corn

Foot tapping. Two people kicking at each other's shoes to say hello.



Herman

Because it doesn't require you to touch a surface the other person touched. And that gets us to the part of this I find surprising, which is that the handshake works.



Corn

Works how? Works as in it does something, or works as in we've agreed it means something?



Herman

Works as in it measurably changes the outcome. There's a study from Harvard Business School and Berkeley, Schroeder and Risen and Gino and Norton, published in 2019. They took MBA students into negotiation exercises. Some pairs shook hands before they started. Some didn't.



Herman

The pairs who shook hands got better joint outcomes. In one of the studies, seventy-four of a hundred and six pairs who shook hands beat the pairs who didn't. And when they asked the negotiators themselves whether they thought a handshake would affect their result, seventy-one point eight percent said no. They thought it would do nothing at all.



Corn

So most people are running the ritual while believing it's empty, and it's working on them anyway.



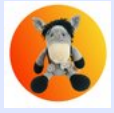
Herman

That's the finding. They underestimate it. And there's a stranger layer underneath. Weizmann Institute, 2015. They watched people after a handshake and found nearly a quarter of them sniffed their own hand afterward.



Corn

Sniffed their hand.



Herman

Which suggests the handshake is also transferring chemical signals, and that there might be an evolutionary reason for the gesture that has nothing to do with treaties. You're learning something about the person. You're sampling them.



Corn

So the gesture I do to be polite might also be me taking a reading.



Herman

Might be. Nobody's proven the mechanism. But it complicates the idea that this is purely symbolic.



Corn

Here's the thing that keeps nagging at me, though. You described it as a deal-sealing ritual, and every few decades somebody tries to kill it.



Herman

Repeatedly. It's been banned or abandoned for hygiene over and over. The Yellow Fever epidemic in 1793. The 1918 flu, when the Soviets banned it and kept it banned into the nineteen forties. H1N1 in 2009. And then COVID.



Corn

And COVID got the loudest voices.



Herman

Fauci, April 2020. I don't think we should ever shake hands ever again, to be honest with you. And Gregory Poland at the Mayo Clinic, talking to the BBC: when you extend your hand, you're extending a bioweapon.



Corn

A bioweapon. That's a strong sentence about a greeting.



Herman

It's a strong sentence. And here we are, doing it again. Which is where the live disagreement comes in, and it's worth airing rather than settling. There's a paleoanthropologist, Ella Al-Shamahi, who wrote a book on the handshake. Her argument is that the gesture is at least seven million years old, that it predates our species, and that Neanderthals shook hands.



Corn

Seven million years.



Herman

And the Smithsonian folklorists dispute it directly. Their line is that our research indicates the handshake is not as deeply rooted as Al-Shamahi believes. So you have two readings. One says this is deep in the primate line and we've been doing it since before we were us. The other says it's a cultural gesture with a traceable history of a few thousand years.



Corn

I know which one I'd bet on, but I want to hear you commit.



Herman

I'd bet on the shallow one, and I'd say it carefully. It doesn't cost me anything to say the gesture is old and the handshake as a greeting is recent. Those are two different claims and the evidence supports the second one much better than the first.



Corn

So we've got a gesture that was designed to flatten hierarchy, that got popularized by people who wanted to flatten hierarchy, and that today is watched by millions of people as a contest of who's winning.



Herman

The President's handshakes are the obvious example. The fourteen-second one with Xi. The twenty-six-second one with Macron. The grip that gets described as white-knuckled.



Corn

A gesture built so nobody has to bow has become the place where you find out who bows.



Herman

That's the paradox, and it's a real one. The thing that made the handshake spread was that it erased the status question. And now it's the main stage on which the status question gets performed.



Herman

There's a pocket where they still refuse it, though, and it's the one I'd least have guessed.



Hilbert

It's the Inns of Court.



Corn

Sorry, go on, Hilbert.



Hilbert

Barristers in London. They don't shake hands with each other. It's a rule, sort of. You can shake hands with a client, with a solicitor, with a judge if you've a mind to. The story is that the handshake is for strangers, and between barristers on the same circuit it implies you don't trust the man, that you need it in writing. So they nod.



Corn

So the one profession built entirely on trust is the one that won't perform the ritual for it.



Hilbert

That's the idea. I had it explained to me at a dinner in Gray's Inn by a man whose whole job, near as I could tell, was being annoyed about small things. He counted seconds. But he'd a look about him when he was counting, and I watched him do it twice in one evening.



Herman

What was he counting?



Hilbert

Handshakes. He'd a number he considered correct and he'd been tracking everyone against it for what sounded like years. He told me forty had ruined his opinion of the Bench permanently. He wouldn't say what forty referred to. I still don't know. He's dead now.



Corn

Forty what, Hilbert.



Hilbert

I've told you everything I know about it.



Corn

I want to say something, and I want you to know it's genuine, because it's the only thing keeping me from despising this thing entirely. The handshake is a gesture that says the same thing to a king and to a plumber. That's rare. There isn't another one on the list that does that.



Herman

The wai can't. The bow can't. Both of them are graded by rank from the ground up. Namaste is probably the closest, because it's addressed to the divine in the other person and the divine doesn't have a rank.



Corn

But mine is the one I can do without thinking about who you are.



Herman

Which is either the most democratic thing anybody's ever invented or the reason it's so easy to fake. Caracalla's problem was never that the handshake was meaningless. It was that it meant exactly what he needed it to mean right up until the knife came out.



Corn

So if this gesture can be popularized by a specific network at a specific moment, and abandoned for hygiene and then come back every time, is it actually as permanent as it feels?



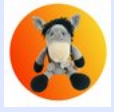
Herman

The history says no. Every default on the list looked permanent to the people using it. Bowing looked permanent to the etiquette books. And they're sitting in a library somewhere, teaching something nobody does anymore.



Corn

Everything on that list is recent if you zoom out far enough.



Herman

And that's the thing I'll be thinking about. Every generation believes its greetings are just how humans are, when really somebody made a decision, and the rest of us copied it. The Quakers made a decision in a meeting house. We're still running their software.



Corn

Thanks as ever to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts.



Corn

If you want to send us something to argue about, the way to do it is the Telegram bot at t dot me slash MWP listener bot.



Herman

See you soon.

SOURCES

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