

What's in a tap?

Phalanx Tapping Ceremony Remarks

Thomas C. Haley Saturday 14 April 2018

Last year, as I watched each of you tapped, I saw some of you stand stoically, some giggle nervously, but I believe all of you had a sense in your bodies that this contact was meaningful, this contact was important.

We in the student counseling trades are known for our “contact” with students. Contact that is typically separated by a classroom, by a desk, by the internet. But I would like to share some comments on real contact.

Our professional contact interactions are most often at the level of a handshake. Those in the arts refer to the handshake as *dexiosis* – Greek for giving the right hand. Artistic depictions of handshakes go back at least 2500 years and show gestures of peace, symbols of unity between city-states, and testaments of love between spouses.

Images are of course powerful, but I'm fascinated by the physical evolution of the handshake. The president of Phalanx, Ms. Anna Thonis, is a biologist, so I will defer to her discipline first by noting the obvious negative side in that a handshake transfers germs, like from the cold that I have today and that you do not want – a hazard of the counseling trade.

On the positive side a handshake is a mechanism for chemosignaling – transferring skin-bound molecules discretely, rather than just walking up to someone and sniffing them the way most other mammals do in greeting -- cats touching noses, bunnies nuzzling and sniffing. Humans just don't do that... or do we? Instead of ruining your next hug or kiss, I'll go back to handshaking.

In the last few years lab studies have confirmed that significant quantities of social chemicals are transferred in a handshake and are detectable by the receiver. When confounding chemicals were introduced on to people's hands, the handshake-receiving subjects reacted differently. As part of their due-diligence the researches investigated the often told practice of “displaying the hand to show you're not holding a weapon”, but concluded that this notion had surprisingly limited scholarly support.

But what about the contact pressure itself – the pressing of the palms, the way a child will repeatedly grasp and release a parent's hand when in an unfamiliar situation. In experiments that restricted chemosignaling, blindfolded strangers from the US were able to convey feelings of anger, fear, and disgust; and sympathy, gratitude, and love; and sadness, and happiness, through touch alone. The expected random accuracy should have been 25%, but the receivers were 78% accurate in discerning emotions from touch alone, far higher than from vocal or facial expressions alone. Similar studies showed that this accuracy rate increased in countries, such as Spain, that are less touch-phobic than the US and UK. The results were further replicated in countries like Turkey and Pakistan, suggesting that communication by touch is universal. It used to be thought that touch amplified the visual and vocal, but now touch is thought of as a more nuanced and precise means of expression.

Many adults instinctively learn the power of touch – the hand shakes and high fives and fist bumps of camaraderie and friendship. And [while rubbing hands, wiping brow, hugging self] many of us have learned the power of firm, confident touch as a coping mechanism in various situations: it slows the heart rate and reduces stress hormone levels.

But did you know that an insignificant touch from a food server will increase the average tip? A touch from a store greeter will increase the average amount of money spent in the store? In team situations, research by psychologists working with the NBA found that early season high fives, pats on the back, etc., predicted improved performance of the individuals and of the teams later in the season, even after adjusting for player salary and status, early season performance, and preseason expectations. Touch can win games. Studies have also shown that when doctors insignificantly touch a patient when giving post-operative instruction, the patient is more likely to comply with the potentially life-saving instructions. Touch can save lives.

All that said, it is crucial, especially in these contemporary times, that I not lend an iota of acceptability to pathological contact. In the student services trades where we serve to counsel students, as in other service fields, the question is simple: “who’s needs are being served?” Any decent human being can figure that out.

I would like to share two more stories of contact as I finish here. This first starts when I was about to receive my PhD diploma. I was a non-traditional student. In getting to that graduation day my advisor had effectively retired twice. My path was odd, my progress was odd,... I was odd. Now, my life has been fabulous, and I have immensely valued and enjoyed all that I learned at Rensselaer – it was truly transformative for me. But I still don’t recommend that sane people follow my path. So I’m waiting my turn to get my diploma, but wondering how significant this moment really is, wondering why anyone else should care. And then someone shook my hand – a friendly, warm, confident, full-eye-contact and engaged handshake. And it was a moment I never forgot. The person didn’t say these words, but the feeling I got was “you deserve this, and we are all better for it. Congratulations.” It was powerful. But nothing worth mentioning here. Except...

Seventeen years later, I’m sitting right there, but with three exceptions. First, last year I had forgotten to bring my jacket. I was so happy when I saw people I knew who also didn’t wear a formal jacket. Until they told me, “yea, it’s because they give us a gold one.” Second, there were ten of us honored last year in honor of the 45th anniversary of this David M. Darrin Student Counseling Award, so at least I could hide. And third – and I hope this is a difference between us – I still wondered whether anyone else should really care. You know: “Me? An award for doing my job?” I mean, look at the other award winners around me, read the names of people who have won before me. I took classes with some of them, and I know they are great.”

Then I walked over here to receive my award, and can you imagine it? There was the same woman waiting to shake my hand. And when I shook hands with President Jackson I swear to you I felt it all over again. She didn’t say these words, but in that handshake I felt it: “you deserve this, and we are all better for it. Congratulations.” Since then I have embraced this, and seen the change. Students, staff, and faculty were comfortable coming to me for advice. But now they knew that wise and thoughtful leaders had agreed that I actually had something useful

to offer, and those students, staff, and faculty confidently told others to seek me out, to heed my counsel. (Then again that's made my life even more hectic, so please don't do it again! But I do genuinely appreciate it, and value it.)

My final story is not mine, so I won't tell you all of it. It comes from a gentleman here today, that I had the pleasure of meeting last year: from Rensselaer's Class of 1952, Howland Adams – a Phalanx member. Again, I will only start the story – I encourage you to meet him too and hear the rest. In his day, anybody who was anybody would show up to the football games. Secretly, at one particular football game, a current member of Phalanx would slowly, slowly sneak up on some unsuspecting student like Mr. Adams,... and grab them by the shoulders, throw them to the ground and yell “you're in Phalanx now!” Now that's a tapping. Except that, like many a Rensselaer student, then and now, Mr. Adams wasn't at the game; he was in the lab getting work done. In stopping there, I'll only mention that we can all be thankful that the Ricketts Building did not burn down that day.

You who are to be the newest members of Phalanx can be thankful that a few things have changed over time. What has not changed is the level of accomplishment that your soon to be fellow members of Phalanx see in you; your integrity, your dedication, your resolve. As leaders of students here, leaders in communities far away around this planet, the future leaders as you choose to shape and define your leadership: no matter whether you are a leader for your children and your communities as a stay-at-home parent, or you lead in changing the world, you have the recognition and the respect of everyone here, who have come to honor you. And part of that honor is bestowed in the form of a tap, for this is a tapping ceremony.

It is meaningful, it is important, it is recognition of your potential, however you choose to pursue it, and that others should watch and take cues from how you go forward. That you are exemplary of what it is to be a Rensselaer graduate.

So what I hope for each of you is that you receive that tap as a touching reminder that:

you have earned this,
that gathered here now, and around the world, now and in the future, we are all better for it,
congratulations!