

Russell and the Handshake: Greeting in Spiritual Care

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Abstract

One of the most common practices in spiritual care involves welcoming or greeting others. Despite this, there is little literature exploring this practice in terms of how it is experienced by those we greet, how it impacts people and relationships, and how it should occur. By reflecting on several stories of handshakes and greeting, this paper seeks to call to attention the experience, impact, and “how-to” of greeting in spiritual care.

Keywords

Spiritual care, counseling, greeting, handshake

Introduction

Handshaking is a common form of greeting in many parts of the world and across many disciplines. In the realm of counseling, for example, handshaking is among the most frequently used forms of touch (Stenzel & Rupert, 2004). Unlike the plethora of literature that considers handshakes through a lens of ethical use of touch in therapy (e.g., Gutheil & Gabbard, 1993; Smith, 1998; White, 2002; Zur & Nordmarken, 2017), the current paper considers the impact that handshaking and greeting has on the one being greeted. By considering the experience of handshakes as told in several stories, as well as literature exploring the role and experience of handshakes and greeting, this paper challenges spiritual care providers, educators, and non-professionals alike to consider the role of the handshake and, more broadly, the experience and impact of greeting.

Story 1: Russell

He walked across the room and held out his hand. “Hi I’m Russell!” he said as he shook my hand. “Are you new here? I think I’ve seen you around before. Hey, do you want to come over for lunch?! Come on, I’ll introduce you to my family!” Though his exuberance was nearly overwhelming, his smile was disarming and genuine. His handshake was firm. His eyes remained fixed on my own. He introduced me to his wife and children, who smiled politely. He reiterated his invitation for lunch, which I had to decline as my daughter

needed to get home for her nap. I thanked him for the invitation and left. Though I felt somewhat overwhelmed, I also felt welcomed. (Russell’s real name is used with permission.)

The Handshake

Described as “a way of formal greeting in social interactions” (Dolcos, Sun, Argo, Flor-Henry, & Dolcos, 2012, p. 2303) and “a near universal behavior in western societies” (Bernieri & Petty, 2011, p. 78), the handshake has been explored by many. Hall and Spencer Hall (1983), for example, reflect on both the origin and role of the handshake in social interactions. Schiffrin (1974) identifies multiple meanings and functions of the handshake, including how it can act as “brackets around a spate of activity, an occasion, undertaken by several participants, a ‘meeting’, ‘gathering’, and ‘encounter’ ” (p. 190). Baugh (1978) suggests that, in some contexts, a handshake can confirm or deny loyalty or express solidarity with another person or group (as cited in Webster, 1984).

Chaplin, Phillips, Brown, Clanton, and Stein (2000) identify several dimensions related to a handshake, including its firmness, warmth, eye contact, skin texture, length, grip, and how one offers one’s hand, to name a few. Wesson (1992) likewise suggests a handshake is comprised of

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several components, including “Initiation, Execution, Duration, Disconnection and Accompanying Gestures” (p. 43). Other literature explores and even prescribes an ideal handshake. For example, Vanderbilt (1972) argues a “good” handshake is to be “elbow level, firm, and brief” (p. 241, as cited in Hall & Spencer Hall, 1983, p. 253). Likewise, Post (1940) suggests “the proper handshake is made briefly, but there should be a feeling of strength and warmth in the clasp” (p. 23, as cited in Hall & Spencer Hall, 1983, p. 253). Dimensions and aspects of a handshake such as these have a significant impact on how individuals experience a handshake. They also have a significant impact on the experience of greeting and/or being greeted by another.

Story 2: The Arm Shaker

My newborn daughter was swinging in the carrier I held as we walked into the church for the first time. Not knowing anyone, we felt somewhat apprehensive and very much alone. In my left hand I held the carrier; in my right hand, a travel mug filled with coffee. The “greeter” (a term used in some churches to describe one who welcomes church goers, while either remaining stationary at the door or showing visitors to a seat (Morphet, 2010; Rettig, 1994)), a short, middle-aged woman, shook my wife’s hand and then appraised my situation. I raised my hands and smiled in substitution for a handshake. She looked from full hand to full hand and realized that there was no free hand to shake. As I walked into the building, she reached out, placed a firm grip on my arm just above my elbow, and proceeded to shake it vigorously as though she was making up for the lack of a hand to shake. As I walked into the church, though I smiled, appreciating her perseverance and creativity, I also felt a twinge of discomfort.

Greeting

Defined as “the recognition of an encounter with another person as socially acceptable” (Firth, 1972, p. 1), the concept of *greeting* has oft been explored throughout the literature. For example, Webster (1984) suggests that the function of greeting is threefold in nature. First, greetings involve communicating a message about the openness or availability between the participants, and whether further interaction is likely or permissible. Second, greetings communicate information about the state or status of the relationship between two persons involved in the greeting action. The third function of greeting involves maintaining relationships or indicating to another “the channels of communication remain open” (p. 19).

Explorations of effective greetings reveal several skills and behaviors. Hood, Luczynski, and Mitteer (2017), for example, identify a number of such behaviors. When exploring social behaviors for persons with autism spectrum disorder, they identified handshakes, eye contact,

smiles, asking or answering questions, self-statements, non-verbal gestures, and salutations (defined as “a vocal response to recognize the presence of the greeter or to initiate conversation” (p. 465)) as behaviors often used in effective greetings. Vanier (1989) likewise suggests that greeting or welcoming involves listening attentively and giving space to another, both figuratively and literally.

Handshakes and Greetings in Spiritual Care and Counseling

The role and experience of handshakes and greetings has been considered in numerous disciplines and contexts. For example, Brown, Malott, Dillon, and Keeps (1980) explore behaviors used in sales and customer service, including approaching and greeting customers, and demonstrating courtesy. Similarly, Cooper (2009) explores how the process of welcoming might be applied in the practice of counseling psychology. Other contexts in which greeting, welcoming, and handshakes have been explored include business (Wesson, 1992), healthcare (Sklansky, Nadkarni, & Ramirez-Avila, 2014), social skills training, and education (Hood et al., 2017), and even global politics (Kay, 2017).

There exist numerous studies that explore handshakes, greeting, and welcoming specifically in the context of spiritual care and counseling, many of which focus on the use of touch. For example, studies by Pope, Tabachnick, and Keith-Spiegel (1987) and Stenzel and Rupert (2004) suggest that touch is most commonly used by psychologists and other therapists for the purpose of greeting, specifically when offering or accepting a handshake from a client. Likewise, training resources related to spiritual care often connect the subjects of touch and greeting, with many prescribing steps for how and when to use touch when greeting a client or patient (e.g. Powell et al., 2013; Provincial Spiritual Health Care Management Network (PSHCMN), 2017).

In addition to literature exploring the role of touch when greeting someone in spiritual care and counseling, others still have explored its impact. For example, Hunter and Struve (1998) suggest that touch, including handshakes, has many potential therapeutic benefits, including its “propensity to establish, maintain or deepen therapy relationships” (p. 277). Given this, it is suggested that how one greets another can significantly impact not only the persons involved in the greeting, but also the relationship itself.

Story 3: The No-look, Dead-fish Handshake Greeter

It was a typical morning as I walked into the building. Two middle-aged men standing side by side, whom I later learned were the designated greeters, met me at the door. One of these men reached his hand out to shake mine, so I obliged and accepted his hand. Expecting a warm, firm grip, I was surprised

to find a cold hand loosely placed in my own. It reminded me of holding a dead fish. Then he did something that surprised me: he looked away. He neither looked down nor briefly averted his eyes as though he was uncomfortable with eye contact. Rather, he craned his head and looked away to his left as if he was more interested in anything other than the hand he was holding. While still looking away, he mumbled something along the lines of "welcome to _____ . . . nice to see you . . ." and let go of my hand, and then proceeded to greet the next person.

The Importance and Impact of Welcoming and Greeting

As with handshakes, greeting can serve numerous functions including to "reveal information about the state of the relationship, maintain relationships, and indirectly create a symbolic bond between parties" (Webster, 1984, pp. 72–73). Also, like handshakes, how one greets and welcomes another is immensely important. Vanier (1989) suggests that welcoming is vital for community and thereby relationship: "It is a question of life and death and the first welcome is very often the important one. People can flee because it has put them off. Others stay because of a smile or an initial act of kindness" (p. 273). Whether communicating information about a relationship, maintaining a relationship, or creating a bond, how one greets or welcomes others can put people off and make them flee, or put them at ease and make them feel safe.

One need only think about one's own experiences of handshakes and greeting to understand the impact, or more accurately impacts, that greeting can have on a person and relationship. In addition to the stories told above, other experiences of handshakes and greeting in my own life include encounters with patients in my office, attendants at sporting events, sales persons at automobile dealerships, staff at funeral homes, medical students at clinics, counselors in office settings, students in classrooms, and friends in a variety of other settings, to name a few. Depending on several factors, each handshake and greeting impacted my emotions, my relationships with those involved, and my perceptions about the experience and purpose of the interaction.

The impacts of handshakes as a form of greeting have been well established throughout the literature. Burgoon (1991), for example, suggests that handshakes can increase levels of formality and trust within a relationship. Dolcos et al. (2012) likewise suggest "a simple handshake at the beginning of a social interaction has a favorable effect of evaluations of competence, trustworthiness, and interest to pursue future business interactions" (p. 2302). Handshakes and greetings can also alter first impressions of a person or situation (Bernieri & Petty, 2011; Brown et al., 1980; Chaplin et al., 2000). Findings by Dolcos et al. (2012) reveal "a handshake preceding social interactions positively influenced the way individuals evaluated

the social interaction partners and their interest in further interactions, while reversing the impact of negative impressions" (p. 2303).

Despite the often positive impacts of greetings, it is also possible that handshakes and greetings can be improperly given, not given at all, or poorly perceived, all of which have the potential for producing unintended and negative impacts. Whether a handshake or greeting is successful or not, and how a handshake or greeting is experienced, depends on several factors. Mentioned above are examples of such factors, including skin temperature, strength and duration of grip, eye contact, proximity, and so on. Vanier (1989) suggests that in addition to physical factors such as these, greeting is also impacted by one's attitude. Effective greeting and welcoming, argues Vanier, requires a heart that is open to others, "saying to people every morning and at every moment, 'come in' " (p. 267).

When an attitude of welcoming as described by Vanier (1989) accompanies an act of greeting, such as a handshake, it is likely that "the stranger (will) feel at home, at ease" (p. 266). In the story of Russell told above, there was a sense of authentic welcome in his greeting. His body language suggested that, in that moment, I was important to him. His demeanor said "come in." I felt at home and at ease.

In the second story of the arm-shaking greeter, though I smiled at her overenthusiastic behavior and even somewhat marveled at her creativity, I did not feel as welcome as I might have had she forgone the arm-shake and instead welcomed me verbally. I felt as though I had not been given a chance to accept or reject the greeting. Instead of being allowed to raise my hand to accept her offer, touch was made without my consent. Additionally, her actions did not seem to prioritize me as a person, but instead I felt as though her need to greet in a predetermined way was more important than welcoming or putting me at ease.

The third story of the no-look, dead-fish handshake greeter, as one might guess, left me feeling far from welcomed or at ease. Though the greeter technically did his job by shaking my hand and verbally welcoming me, I found myself feeling the opposite of welcomed. Instead of feeling at home, I was very much aware of being in someone else's space. Instead of feeling at ease, I felt on edge. Instead of feeling accepted, I felt like a stranger. Instead of feeling important, I felt as though I was simply a hand to shake instead of a person to welcome.

These stories tell of different experiences of handshakes and greeting. They also tell of the impacts that such approaches can have on the one being greeted. I suggest that the various impacts of greeting, such as those I experienced, are significant. As such, it seems important to consider how one can go about effectively greeting another. This seems especially true in the context of spiritual care and counseling given dynamics such as power imbalances

(DeVaris, 1994; Liégeois, 2014) and client vulnerability (Canadian Association for Spiritual Care (CASC), 2016; Kagle & Giebelhausen, 1994).

The 'How-to' of Greeting in Spiritual Care and Counseling

As noted by Webster (1984), initiating a greeting involves risk, as there is a moment of uncertainty as to whether and how it will be received or reciprocated. Borrowing from Wesson's (1992) components of a handshake, it becomes clear that to effectively greet another, there must be attention given to the first stage of greeting, that which Wesson calls the *initiation component*. This component is "the moment of decision whether the handshake (or greeting) is necessary at all" (p. 43). Wesson continues:

Once a handshake is offered, the communication event is in progress. The other party must now decide whether and how to respond. If no response is offered, there is an aborted event and a flagrant signal that something is wrong. There is so much ambiguity in these situations that the initiator is now in a firmly defensive position . . . Once the handshake is aborted, other mechanisms need to be called into play to negotiate the relationship. Blushing, apologies, stalling manoeuvres and a whole catalogue of activities are called into play. (p. 43)

To simplify Wesson's observations, the moment in which a handshake or other form of greeting is initiated is pivotal. If it is reciprocated in a way that is seen as less than satisfactory to the initiator, or not reciprocated at all, it is possible that the moment will be experienced as awkward if not potentially damaging to the therapeutic relationship.

In their exploration of therapeutic relationships in counseling, Knox and Cooper (2015) encourage readers to consider the following:

Think what you might do if a client arrives for their first session with their hand outstretched. Not shaking it might seem very rude, and yet shaking it might feel more like a business meeting than a therapeutic relationship. Assuming you choose to shake a client's hand, how you do so may also impact on the forming of the relationship. What sort of handshake do you give? For example, a strong, firm handshake might instill confidence in a client, or it may suggest your own arrogance or power. Just as a weak handshake might infer nervousness or a lack of care in the mind of the client, or lead them to feel less intimidated. (p. 62)

From this, it is clear that whether a handshake is given, received, or reciprocated is far from the only factor that impacts the experience of greeting. Rather, a multitude of aspects must be considered when contemplating how to greet another.

Welfel (2013) suggests several factors that ought to be considered when determining the type of greeting a therapist offers a client in counseling. These include client characteristics and experiences, such as family history, experiences of sexual abuse or harassment, and client discomfort. For example, "a client who has an obsessive-compulsive fear of germs may be overwhelmed by a clinician's touch" (Welfel, 2013, p. 214). Other factors include cultural and religious considerations. For example, as noted by Rassool (2016), shaking hands for some Muslims is considered taboo, especially when participants are of the opposite sex.

As many of the variables that can impact handshakes or other forms and experiences greeting cannot be known prior to an initial encounter, I suggest the most effective approach to greeting a person is to take the cue from that person. This approach was first suggested to me in a graduate course on counseling practice. The instructor essentially proposed an approach in which I greet another by, when possible, positioning myself with my arms hanging loosely by my side (as opposed to behind my back or reached out towards the person), maintaining eye contact (as opposed to looking elsewhere), and watching for cues from that person as to how they might like to proceed. I have since taught this same approach in a variety of undergraduate- and graduate-level courses on therapy. I explain that I should look relaxed throughout the process, as opposed to looking like a Western gunslinger ready to "draw" on the person's first move. By maintaining such a posture, and by paying close attention to the person's non-verbal behaviors, it becomes possible to read and then respond more or less accurately to whatever form of greeting they prefer.

The rationale behind this approach stems from numerous elements long considered important in therapy. For example, accepting a client's preferred method for greeting, specifically in terms of whether a handshake should occur, demonstrates various ethical principles including respect, cultural competence, recognition of the autonomy of a client, and both nonmaleficence and beneficence (American Psychological Association (APA), 2016; CASC, 2016; Clinical Social Work Association (CSWA), 2016; College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (CRPO), 2011). By taking my cue from a client in terms of whether or not to shake hands, I am attempting to act in such a way that seeks the best interest of the person.

In addition to it being built on ethical principles, there are several other reasons as to why a "take your cue from the person" approach is recommended. First, experience suggests that this is a safe and effective approach to greeting. Though it does not always produce a picture-perfect moment of greeting, time and again in my own experience it has proven to be generally effective. Some people have initiated a handshake; others have not. Some moments are experienced effortlessly and without awkward pauses;

others are less smooth. Sometimes it has led to discussions about a variety of clinical issues, such as self-determination, expressing oneself in social situations, and dealing with feelings of nervousness, for example; other times it has not led to any discussion.

A third reason as to why a “take your cue from the person” approach to greeting is recommended is that various counseling researchers recommend a similar approach. For example, Rassool (2016) plainly suggests “(t)he counsellor needs to take the cue from the client” (p. 73). Likewise, when discussing touch attunement, which emphasizes observing and responding to nonverbal cues and considering whether touch may be helpful or stressful, Zur and Nordmarken (2017) argue that attuning to a client’s nonverbal cues is of the highest importance. Such literature suggests the importance of paying attention to nonverbal cues when considering how to greet someone.

A fourth and final reason for the recommended approach stems from the discomfort many feel regarding touch and the initiation of touch. As noted by Hunter and Struve (1998), many therapists struggle when considering whether to touch a client. These struggles may stem from a fear of overstepping some unknown boundary, making a client feel uncomfortable, damaging a burgeoning therapeutic relationship, being misunderstood, or even facing a potential lawsuit. By allowing a client to initiate and then respond in kind to the greeting, be it a handshake or not, there is a decreased sense of pressure to “get it right” as the decision of how the greeting will occur is left up to the other person.

It must be noted that there are several factors to consider prior to using the recommended approach. First, this approach supposes that the other person will initiate their preferred form of greeting. Not to acknowledge this is to risk minimizing the power imbalance often present in spiritual care and counseling (DeVaris, 1994; Liégeois, 2014). It is possible some will feel awkward about initiating any form of greeting, lest they be perceived as overstepping their role. It is also possible that, just as spiritual care providers or counselors may feel uncertain and apprehensive about whether or how to initiate a greeting, clients too may fear committing some sort of faux pas and somehow doing it “wrong.”

An additional factor one must consider regarding the recommended approach to greeting involves the likelihood that there will be times when one either misreads or fails to respond appropriately to another’s preferred mode of greeting. Wesson (1992) suggests that such “failed” attempts at greeting can send signals of unfriendliness, whether intentionally or not. As illustrated in the following story, though, moments of perceived failure need not be irreparable.

Story 4: The Awkward Greeting

It was their first date. Though they had known each other for some time, until this moment it had been from a distance; they had not yet met face-to-face. My friend, not knowing how to

best greet her date, raised her hand to initiate a handshake. Her date, not knowing how to best greet my friend, opted to initiate a hug. As they stepped toward each other, her outstretched hand inadvertently met his lower abdominal regions. Needless to say, my friend and her (now) husband each felt embarrassed. They stepped back from each other rather quickly, bringing an abrupt end to an awkward greeting.

Handling a ‘Failed’ Attempt at Greeting

To say the least, the greeting shared between my friend and her husband was an awkward and unrefined exchange. An onlooker might have even described it as a failed greeting. As each was invested in the relationship and possessed a desire to know the other person, though, they chose to laugh about and discuss it openly, thus leading to a stronger relational bond.

In addition to a desire to know another, there exist several attitudes and practices that can be useful when attempting to salvage a less-than-ideal greeting. For example, Benner (2002) and Vanier (1989) both suggest that attitudes of openness and hospitality can help create moments of quiet and peace, which in turn can help create a place where people feel as though they belong. Nouwen (1972) likewise suggests that accepting others as they are, and allowing them “to dance their own dance, sing their own song and speak their own language without fear,” creates a space that is “no longer threatening and demanding but inviting and liberating” (pp. 91–92). Attitudes and practices such as openness, hospitality, acceptance, and presence not only enrich greeting, but can also act as salve to an imperfect or even a failed attempt at greeting.

The story of my friend and her husband demonstrates that less-than-ideal greetings need not be injurious to the relationship. It also demonstrates that such greetings, though potentially embarrassing, can lead to moments one might describe as therapeutic. In this example, what was an embarrassing moment became an opportunity for laughter and greater connection. Likewise, in the practice of spiritual care and counseling, an awkward or even failed moment of greeting with a client might provide an opportunity to discuss therapeutic themes. As mentioned above, in my own practice discussions emerging from instances of both successful and imperfect greetings have included topics such as how to act in social situations, feelings of nervousness, shyness, or uncertainty, and expectations of both self and others. These are but several examples of the sorts of benefits that can come from a “failed” greeting.

Culture, Gender, and Other Considerations

Though the approach described in this paper is recommended for the reasons discussed above, it is not to be

considered a one-size-fits-all method for greeting a client. Just as the experience of greeting is complex, so too must our approach reflect that complexity. Additionally, the importance of how one goes about greeting another cannot be overstated. Indeed, the literature contains many findings which highlight the importance of not only how one greets another, but even the first few moments of a greeting. Whether it is Willis and Todorov's (2006) study which found that people make specific trait inferences from a stranger's face in as little as one-tenth of a second, or Chaplin et al.'s (2000) findings that "handshaking characteristics are related to both objective personality measures and the impressions people form about each other" (p. 117), it is understood that how one greets another can have significant immediate and longer-lasting impacts on the people involved and the relationship itself. It is suggested, then, that in addition to the abovementioned aspects of how to effectively greet another, several other factors such as culture, gender, power, and context must also be considered.

Culture

It is noted that much of what has been written above reflects practices consistent with northern and western understandings of greeting and other interpersonal dynamics. Further, this approach reflects my own understandings that have been largely influenced by my experiences as a White male living in Southern Ontario, Canada. These experiences are obviously not reflective of all persons or cultures, let alone all approaches to greeting. For example, whereas I live in a culture where greetings typically involve a handshake or wave of the hand, a customary greeting in Japan may not include either action, but instead a slight bowing to another. Likewise, in Belgium, France, or Hungary, common greetings may comprise kissing another on the cheek(s), and, in China, greeting someone for the first time may involve little more than a smile and nod of the head (Diversity Resources, 2019). Assuming a one-size-fits-all approach to greeting not only fails to recognize these differences, but, even worse, risks disrespecting both a person and their culture, and in so doing can damage or even prevent the establishment of a therapeutic alliance.

The knowledge that culture influences experiences of and even approaches to greeting should impact how one considers greeting in the context of spiritual care. Though the abovementioned "take your cue from the other" approach may help reduce the possibility of unintentional harm or offense, this is not the only way of approaching greeting in light of cultural difference. Instead, one can consider cultures and relevant culture-specific practices and norms likely to be encountered in practice. For example, if one were working in Pikesville, MD, it would be worth knowing that this suburb of Baltimore has "the highest percentage of native Russian

speakers in the country" (Abel, 2017, para. 3). While being careful not to make assumptions about residents of this area nor about their particular practices, it might be worthwhile knowing that customarily people from Russia tend to be "more verbose with close friends and peers than with superiors and typically find it inappropriate to converse and to engage in small talk with status superiors" (Shleykina, 2019, pp. 50–51). Hospital- or community-based spiritual caregivers in Pikesville, then, might wish to be intentional about neither emphasizing their credentials nor engaging in "small talk." While it may not be possible to know every norm or practice of other cultures, it is both possible and advisable to become aware of the cultural makeup of one's locale and some of the normative practices associated with those cultures.

Gender

In addition to cultural influences, there are numerous instances in which gender is another factor that can influence experiences of greeting. In Armenian cultures, for example, though two men or two women may greet each other with a hug, a woman wishing to greet a man must wait for him to offer his hand for a handshake (Diversity Resources, 2019). Differences in greeting related to gender are not only experienced across cultures. As noted by Chaplin et al. (2000), within a North American context, "women who are more liberal, intellectual, and open to new experiences have a firmer handshake and make a more favorable impression than women who are less open and have a less firm handshake" (p. 116). Conversely, "more open men have a slightly less firm handshake and make a somewhat poorer impression than less open men" (p. 116). Such findings suggest that gender, whether of the one greeting or the one being greeted, is yet another variable impacting the experience of greeting and therefore must be considered when contemplating how to greet another.

Power

As mentioned above, inherent in many spiritual caregiving relationships is a power imbalance such as is seen between pastor and parishioner, therapist and client, or chaplain and patient. This power imbalance ought to be considered from a number of perspectives when considering how one ought to greet another. One such perspective, as mentioned above, involves recognizing the possibility that some may be hesitant to initiate a greeting for fear of either overstepping their role or even simply "doing it wrong." Another perspective involves the role and ethics of touch given its central role in many greeting behaviors such as handshakes.

Though some forms of touch, in particular those involved in greeting, "are done almost naturally in many helping relationship encounters" (Rovers, Malette, &

Guirguis-Younger, 2017, p. 241), touch is often seen as something to fear. As noted by Rovers, Malette, and Guirguis-Younger (2017), this fear comes, at least in part, from those situations when “two people, especially one with power over the other, touch and both know they are on different pages of life’s acceptable manual, and there are misinterpretations, or worse, violated boundaries” (p. 242). Despite such situations, as “touch is vital to achieving a sense of emotional and psychological health and decreasing one’s feeling of isolation” (Rovers, Malette, & Guirguis-Younger, 2017, p. 240), it is often recommended in spiritual care (e.g., Kiley, 2009; McColl & Ascough, 2009). To this end, one must reflect on ethical principles related to touch and power, such as transparency, respect, and permission (Rovers, Malette, & Guirguis-Younger, 2017), and in so doing consider the use of touch as an aspect of greeting.

Context

One final factor impacting greeting in spiritual care is that of context. Consideration of the context of space, the context of purpose, and the context of persons in spiritual care must therefore be part of any approach to greeting. For example, the context of space will impact how one approaches greeting, as seen when comparing the context of a counseling office with that of a hospital room or penitentiary. In some such spaces, issues of privacy, comfort, crisis, and confidentiality, for example, must be considered, as failing to do so would likely have a significant and possibly detrimental impact on the experience of greeting or being greeted. Likewise, the context of purpose will impact the experience of greeting. For example, visiting parents of a healthy newborn baby or an inmate who has requested a visit from a spiritual caregiver is likely to be a different experience from approaching a grieving family or an involuntarily admitted patient to offer support.

In addition to considerations of place and purpose, the final contextual piece that one ought to consider involves the persons involved in the greeting. Thinking about factors such as age and physicality, for example, may change the approach one takes to greeting. A simple example of this can be seen in the formality of a greeting and even the language used when approaching a young child as compared to an older adult. Likewise, one’s approach may or may not be modified if one or more persons involved in the greeting have had limbs amputated or are visually impaired, for example.

Conclusion

The experience of greeting is by necessity one of complexity. Not only do dimensions of a handshake, for example, such as eye contact, skin temperature, duration of grip, and so forth impact a greeting; so too do many other factors.

Whether it is the attitude of a greeter, the cultural norms of one being greeted, the presence of gender or power dynamics, or one of countless other contextual influences, it is clear that many factors impact how people offer, receive, and experience greeting.

When one considers the many influential factors involved in greeting, it becomes clear that even the best approach, be it “take your cue from the other” or any other approach to greeting is sometimes not enough. Such factors should not preclude handshakes, verbal greetings, or other forms of greeting, but rather they should remind us that there neither is nor can be a one-size-fits-all approach to greeting, including that which has been put forth in this paper. While a “take your cue from the other” has been suggested as an effective way of greeting, it too has its limits. As Rovers, Malette, and Guirguis-Younger (2017) suggest, sometimes it is best to simply ask the question: “Are you okay with a handshake?” (p. 242).

This paper is not meant to ridicule any of the individuals in the stories told above, nor anyone else who struggles with or has exhibited less than ideal greeting behaviors. It is also not meant to minimize what can be a difficult process for many. As noted by Wesson (1992), “for some people and in some social environments or cultures, shaking hands is a daily and universal event. However, others find this form of introduction novel, awkward or even undesirable” (p. 41). Many people, myself included, can find handshakes and other forms of greeting to be awkward.

There are many factors that one ought to think about when considering approaches to greeting. This paper reviews several such factors and recommends an approach to greeting that spiritual care givers, counselors, and lay persons alike might consider using. Whether others use this approach or not, though, what remains important is that each of us considers our experiences of and approaches to greeting. I believe there are valuable lessons to be learned from the literature, from clients, from greeters, and from Russell.

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