



THIS STORY HAS BEEN FORMATTED FOR EASY PRINTING

DANIEL AKST

The Boston Globe

Kiss that uncomfortable greeting goodbye

By Daniel Akst | September 18, 2006

IT MAY BE a little early to look for silver linings in the advent of bird flu, yet if there can be an upside to the threat of pandemic, perhaps it's this: an end to the confusion and awkwardness surrounding indiscriminate social kissing.

Some health officials, in places where Ebola has erupted, have given up on shaking hands in favor of a more sanitary elbow bump. The threat of tendonitis notwithstanding, kissing hello and goodbye is surely more dangerous than a handshake, and a lot of people will be relieved to see the end of it.

Although not on a par with the affliction of Christmas cards, social kissing is another of those dubious customs that a lot of people feel trapped by. Certainly it is fraught when participants are of the opposite sex, offering every opportunity for embarrassment with little compensating pleasure. It's like being a child and dancing with your school teacher; the best part is when it's over .

At dinner parties, I come away from this uneasy minuet feeling that I've somehow mishandled things or been slighted. A social triple lutz for men and women alike, the whole complex negotiation is a perfect metaphor for the exquisite dance of self-mastery all of us must perform in our relentlessly coed, multiethnic, and hypersensitive society. It's a test, in other words, almost in the way fashion is a test -- a secret handshake by which members of a given tribe recognize one another.

Still, I will be sorry to see it go. Although hugging and kissing as a form of greeting goes back to the Old Testament and beyond, social kissing between acquaintances of opposite sexes is relatively new. Peter Stearns, editor of the *Journal of Social History*, says it arose after men and women in the 1920s started going to more mixed social functions. This was risky. Social kissing evolved as a sign that men and women could control themselves when together.

Sociologist Cas Wouters, who made a study of American and European etiquette guides, finds the practice well enshrined on both sides of the Atlantic. It is seen as part of the breakdown of social distance between individuals and classes. It reflects the need to seem natural and unconstrained at all times, even though of course one's lack of constraint is itself entirely constrained (which is why we have social kissing rather than social fondling).

It's noteworthy that in the 19th century men and women routinely hugged and kissed members of their own sex. That style has persisted among women, who get to kiss everybody. But concerns about homosexuality ended the practice among heterosexual men, who exist today in a physical isolation from one another that would have seemed remarkable to earlier generations of red-blooded males. Barred by convention from hugging their real friends, men instead find themselves conducting highly circumscribed embraces with female acquaintances they barely know but would like to sleep with anyway.

What most of us overlook in connection with social kissing is its role as a social safety valve. Think of it as regulated infidelity -- kind of like bundling among the Puritans, except designed to inoculate against courtship rather than promote it. Humans weren't made to spend this much time in the company of members of the opposite sex who aren't our spouses, who get dolled up before coming to the office, and who inevitably

develop some level of intimacy with us. People need some socially sanctioned system of building immunity toward one another.

An organized system of mortifying the flesh, in other words, may be the price we pay for wanting to live in a gender-neutral society without losing sight of anybody's gender. Compared with, say, hand-kissing, the current convention is also a way for men to acknowledge that they accept women as equals and are willing to live in the resulting more feminized world .

If we could remove the unpredictability -- does she want me to plant an actual kiss? where do my hands go? -- everyone would be happier. So let's just all agree that unless we really know each other we're going to touch cheeks and be done with it. Anyone who objects should make like an economist friend of mine who, when faced with an unwanted kiss, thrusts out her hand preemptively. Just remember that someday, if H5N1 mutates into something humans can transmit from one another , we'll look back in wonder at the time when near-strangers kissed just to say hi.

Daniel Akst is a writer in New York's Hudson Valley. ■

© [Copyright](#) 2006 The New York Times Company