

A thought on never shaking

The most significant hand I ever shook belonged to Colin Meads. If I'm honest, he did the shaking. I just shook.

It was over a wire boundary fence in the King Country long ago when I was 17 and staying with a girlfriend on her parents' farm.

We were swimming in the farm dam when a large man appeared on the other side, running up the hill with a wether under each arm. No, I made that last bit up.

"That's Colin Meads," said she. "Want to meet him?" If I'd been religious it was equivalent to asking if I wanted to directly acquaint myself with God. Hell yes.

She called out to him. The arm that reached out contained as much muscle as my entire scrawny frame. "Giddyay." "Pleased to meet you, Mr Meads."

His hand was the size of a front-end loader claw. It crushed, but not maliciously. I was expecting worse, so ensured I got my whole right hand properly into his.

He was unlike some big men who try to intimidate by grabbing the fingers of the timid and trying to break them.

As a journalist I've had other significant handshakes. I've pressed flesh with prime ministers. Charles and Di were interesting. His was firm, hers the briefest touch of a limp fish tail, an obligatory greeting you knew she didn't want to do.

The ones that still surprise me are Masonic Lodge boys. Their thumb is folded into the clasp as a signal they're a member. It's accompanied by a meaningful look.

I read that handshakes may have originated in the 14th century when knights met friends with unclenched hands to indicate they were unarmed. But as the writer said, now the hand itself is the weapon, given it might bear a load of Covid-19.

The question is, do I go to the pub for a beer next Friday or not? Richard Handley will be there and he's one to shake your hand every time you see him. It's simply part of his jovial persona. Will he be crushed if I offer an elbow instead?

You have to feel for the Italians and the French, who are renowned for their warm and highly physical clasps. The Germans will be okay – they once had a hand greeting that avoided the touching bit.

As you can see, I'm more confused than usual about what the world's latest big fright means for our everyday lives in our safe and isolated haven.

I tried a wee experiment during a recent visit to the supermarket, which is one of the few places us retired and supposedly at-risk older people need to visit regularly. I wore gloves, black rubber ones, super-toughened for the likes of clumsy do-it-yourselfers like me.

Nobody else was wearing them that day, apart from staff in the fruit section tasked with creating those pyramids of unwrapped produce.

Two things were revealed. Nobody who noticed my black hands seemed to react, apart from surreptitious looks from the corner of one eye.

The other was more obvious – while staff may pile up the fruit while wearing protection, customers fingering the fruit to inform their choices don't wear anything.

There's irony there, isn't there. Here we all are now, half-trained to despise plastic bags, and along comes a very good reason to use them more.

What do we do about the fruit? Health officials advise us to wash it, but don't go into detail. How do you wash a peach? Hot water will ruin it. Do you run it under the cold tap while singing "Happy Birthday" twice, then dry it with a paper towel?

Common sense says so, but official advice forgets to. A bit like that on hand-washing. You do the happy birthday thing, but then what? I recall broadcaster Paul Holmes once going on about what he reckoned was the most important part of the equation – drying your hands properly afterwards.

Much of the guidance issued by experts in emergencies like this is about as much use as the instructions for assembling a garden shed. Because the experts are locked in their own world of special knowledge, they omit details they assume we'll know. Often we don't.

As for handshaking, I'm like Richard. I'll never remember not to proffer a hand. The barber and I shook hands at the start and the end of my visit this week. We laughed about it. I just hope jocularly doesn't become as sober as it has in Italy.