

Greetings and Salutations

A relaxed attitude and calming a fear of rejection might serve as a good greeting compass

I was on my way into the grocery store the other morning when someone, whom I didn't know, smiled and said "hello" to me.

There was no indication given that this was going to happen. I was in "safe ignoring" mode, wherein I avoid the gaze of others by examining my list, fumbling with my grocery bins or simply appearing to be in a hurry. This person startled me, not only with an audible greeting, but followed it up with a wonderful smile as well. This wasn't fair. We were too close for me to summon up the same reply. I managed a pathetic "heyargh" and an awkward nod with my head that, to someone a moderate distance away, may have looked more as though I've been hit in the side of the face with a pellet or paint ball.

What an ass I was. I should have stopped, turned around and said "hello" back, but I didn't. "Heyargh", indeed. It used to be, in the middle ages, that proper greetings were a product of good up bringing and social rank. To ignore someone was quite rude. Instead, girls and ladies were ready to curtsy and men to bow. There came the tipping of the hat, which has percolated down into the nod of the head.

The wave is rumoured to have originated as a way to show, to your wav-ee, that you had no sword in your hand; this is a friendly visit, at least at the start, and you do not intend to run him through.

These days, a wave shows that you don't have a cell phone in your hand, for the moment, although you could have one lodged in your ear (swords are rare. Most modern weaponry is gallantly stowed in the back side of our saggy jeans, proving that chivalry isn't really dead – it just need a good belt). Yes, things have changed somewhat.

Now, when we say "hello" to someone that we are only slightly acquainted with, if at all, we play it safe. We protect ourselves against the possibility that our greeting efforts won't be reciprocated. We might, instead of a full blown smile, arrange the face into a kind of thought-grimace. This involves keeping the lips pushed together and pressed in against the front teeth. This could be taken as either a kind of acknowledgement verging on a smile, or display of the realization, just then, that you've forgotten to pay a bill.

A nod can be thrown in at the last moment if you become more confident, but this is still subtle enough to mitigate any risk of embarrassment. In comparison, the unaccepted offer of a broad smile on your face with a hearty "hello" and maybe even "jazz hands" (enthusiastic waving with both hands) and you risk public humiliation. You may be asked to leave town. Your fate depends, entirely, how your offer is received. A thought-grimace acknowledged is considered successful. Acknowledgment and return of the broad smile and "hello" with "jazz hands" is also successful, but there hovers the terrifying threat of an ensuing musical. So be careful.

The actual word 'hello' has several permutations, all meaning the same thing, but useful in different circumstances. If we consider "hello" as the most formal greeting (as in "Hello officer") then it is followed by, in order of declining formality: hi, hi there, hey there, hey and "h" (Used by runners).

“G’day” is a colloquial greeting with geographical sensitivities (Australia and Ottawa Valley, Ont.) and suggests certain level of familiarity. You wouldn’t say, “G’day, Prime Minister”, but you might say “G’day, Tom, can I borrow your wheelbarrow.”

Finally, of course, the greeting “heyargh”, is used only by the complete moron. Each one of these greetings, no matter how informal, requires at least a modicum of confidence to present. It is always safer not to say “hello”, but then we risk living alone in a cave with only shoes for friends.

Being in a car presents a unique, sometimes frustrating environment for saying “hello”. It is much easier to play it safe and ignore everyone, especially if your car is outfitted with tinted glass. You can remain a mystery if you so choose, or roll the window down and wave. Those without tinted glass can’t hide. They must be quick, especially if they are greeting someone in an oncoming vehicle.

The most efficient method is to hang a hand over the steering wheel, resting your wrist on the top. This leaves the fingers free, at the last minute, to “feather” themselves up into the air, so the index finger is only slightly higher than the top of the steering wheel. This feathering is often partnered with a nod at the same time, almost as though there were a string connecting the fingers to the head.

This move is subtle, having nowhere near the enthusiasm of jazz hands, but is appreciated by friends nevertheless.

Essentially, what this social function of greeting comes down to is our ability to be gracious and connect with our fellow humans. When we stick our noses up in the air and greet only certain people, we risk covering our shoes in horse manure.

This doesn’t mean that you should walk down the street bellowing salutations at everyone you meet, but I do know people who are so lacking in grace that they will offer a greeting only when in need of a favour.

Perhaps a relaxed attitude and calming a fear of rejection might serve as a good greeting compass. I, for one, refuse to be caught off guard again. I am so ashamed of “heyargh” that I have vowed to ignore my list and the time, instead of that person walking toward me.

If I ever see my mystery greeter again, I will most surely give a hearty “hello” – but I do draw the line at jazz hands.

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Globe and Mail, Friday, September 21, 2007

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