

Non-Hugger's Survival Guide

By Chris Straw

I'm sorry. I'm not a hugger. If you've never lived on a Gulf Island in British Columbia, that might not sound like a big deal. But believe me, it is. Truth be told, I am more likely to hug a tree than another human being. Not because I am a wide-eyed devotee of Dr. Suzuki (though I could be). But because I see more that I admire in the upright, steadfast, self-reliant nature of most trees than in a lot of humans. My issue, not theirs.

In case you don't know this, not being a hugger when you live on a Gulf Island is akin to living in Switzerland and not liking chocolate, or not owning a pickup truck in Fort McMurray. People hug here at the drop of a batik scarf.

"Seriously, you were first off the ferry this morning? Bring it in. Mmmmmm."

"My god I haven't seen you since the potluck last night. Let me put my arms around you and smell the stale incense in your hair."

"Whaaat? Only four likes for that picture of your dog on the beach? Let me hold you till the pain goes away."

Call me uptight, old-fashioned, not in touch with my true feelings. I confess to being guilty on all charges, Your Honour. Just please don't do it with your arms around me, chest to chest, groin to groin.

The *hardest thing* about living in a village of huggers is not the awkwardness of avoiding hugs. I've mastered that skill. I'm the guy who cowers behind his partner in the foyer of a house party in hopes she will hug all of them enough to get me off the hook. If it doesn't work, I'm not above saying something like, "So good to see you guys. I'd hug you but my stupid Ebola virus is flaring up again."

No, the *hardest thing* is that true huggers see someone like me as a challenge. I don't see it as my job to tell them not to hug other hug lovers. For all I care they can wrap themselves together in burlap and roll around on the floor.

So why do they take it as their sworn duty to convert me? "Just give it a try." "Let yourself go." "You need to embrace....er...embracing."

The worst offenders are the self-declared huggo-therapists, the ones who decide that what I really need is an on-the-spot intervention. Under the powers invested in them by their hugger friends, they take it upon themselves to move in, grab hold and, in a variation of the immortal words of Dan Hill, "hold *me* till the fear in *me* subsides."

How is that not assault? How is that not unlawful confinement? What's wrong with a handshake, fist bump, or a tip of the hat for God's sake?

I have to admit, as the years go by in this beautiful little corner of the world—that I love more than anywhere I have ever lived—the hugsters are wearing me down. Not that I've joined their ranks. But I do confess to resisting less as every encounter goes by. I no longer run away or fake a choking fit or make like an armadillo, armouring myself with my own arms wrapped around me.

Rather, I stand there imagining I am a pole, shoulders in, arms straight, staring blankly into the distance and thinking of England until it's over. It doesn't make me proud, but it seems to satisfy the huggo-therapists that I'm coming around in my own time, in my own way.

It could be worse. To be sure, this form of social navigating is much easier now that I live in the Gulf Islands full-time. There was a time when my working life took me regularly to the decidedly unhuggy, corporate confines of Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal. In the circles I travelled in, there was room for the odd careful embrace, but it was saved for longtime friends you hadn't seen in years, or close colleagues who'd just lost loved ones.

It was the Montreal factor that complicated things. The French, as you know, do this thing they call "la bise." It's basically two air kisses aimed at either side of the face. Either right then left or left then right. I could never remember. Depending on who you are dealing with, this practice when greeting someone is almost as common as the west coast hug.

Suffice to say, I did not saunter through this cultural minefield with much grace. Airports were the worst. More times than I would like to recall, I found myself, carry-on baggage in hand, coming face-to-face with a work colleague just off a plane from Montreal. Our eyes would meet as we approached one another. Hers confident and welcoming; mine already imagining the awkward blue-footed booby dance that was about to unfold. Sticking out my hand for a firm shake would be lame. I could try just standing at a safe distance, but that would seem cold. The Gulf Island full-on hug could be grounds for a visit to Human Resources. So I would default to "la bise." I chose not to lead. I tried to follow and hoped no one got hurt, then would spend the entire cab ride to my hotel trying to put the whole thing out of my mind.

When I think back on those trans-continental, cross-cultural conventions, I realize that things could be worse. I now live full-time in a land of huggers. How is that so bad? Maybe they all just love me more than I care to admit.

Maybe.

But I swear to God, if I catch you smelling my hair like Joe Biden, we're done.