

COMMENTARY / CULTURE

Hug Me ... or Hug Me Not?



“Terry, you have no idea how much I appreciated the hug you gave me last week,” intimated “Ruth” this morning as she dabbled at her turkey burger and sweet potato French fries.

“As I said, that was my first

venture out after being confined to my house because of COVID and the death of my husband.”

When my friend “Mary” walked into the café recently, her vibe suggested that she longed for a hug. Knowing that the last few years have been emotionally taxing for her, I obliged.

A little more than an hour later, “Mort” and his wife (shamefully, I don’t remember her name) walked in. After Mort and I “fist bumped,” I turned to his wife and, sensing that a fist bump may be inappropriate, asked permission to give her a hug. She smiled and initiated the hug.

Hey, given that we exist in a COVID world these days and may, I’m told, have to deal with a summer surge with another pandemic, it’s wise and respectful to ask before you lurch forward with a hug, yes?

So, let’s not talk about the Supreme Court opinion draft on Roe vs. Wade, Elon Musk, the 1/6 riot at the Capitol, an ex-president, whatever, whatever, whatever. How about with seriousness and levity we talk instead about the implications of hugging in the world these days?

The questions it raises are as many as they are complex, including:

What are the protocols that govern hugging given masking and social distancing protocols related to COVID?

What are the circumstances under which hugs are appropriate or not and

how long can one “hold” a hug before it becomes harassment?

What do you do if you find yourself in the middle of an all-out “hug-fest,” arms flailing all over the place, where some enjoying being hugged and others not?

And perhaps—the thorniest question of them all, if you don’t want to be hugged, how do you ward off that fast-charging hugger headed your way, arms stretched outward, lips puckered and aimed at your cheek without hurting his/her feelings?

Truth is that the hug is the most common of human signs of affection. We bond with a hug and find comfort with a hug. In American culture, a quick hug of not more than a few seconds is often a given, especially between two men.

With respects to hugging, arguably the modern world can be a complex place for many men. The fact is that some cultures and religions prohibit any form of touching between women and men. And aside from hugging each other on the athletic field (and an accompanying slap on the behind), the messages men get are an expectation that they be in touch with their feminine side, but never to the point that it compromises their masculinity.

Now as quiet as it’s kept, some folks just look “huggable.” There’s a “teddy-bearishness” about them. On the other side, some convey a steely “hands off” with their body language.

But huggers, be careful in sizing up candidates for your embrace. Before you lunge forward, understand that not everyone will welcome your open arms and they might not feel comfortable telling you that. That’s the problem.

As a rule of thumb, if you don’t know the person that well, even if they look huggable, or if you are in doubt, don’t hug them. It’s that simple. Otherwise, approach with a flexible stance, one that allows you to fall back on a handshake (or fist bump) if you suspect



that the other person does not desire a hug.

And above all, resist insisting on a hug. When you want one, but the other person extends a handshake or thrusts his/her shoulder between you two, hello, read their cues.

Okay, say that an unwelcome hug is heading your way. The cues are there: the steps forward, the arms open. Time is short. You cannot escape. What can you do short of feinting or running in the opposite direction?

First, rush your hand out quickly while taking a step back and leaning away from the hard charger. It’s important to do this because rejecting a hugger can be awkward and embarrassing. A clear “handshake-only” message can be a powerfully effective hug deterrent. (Stop here and practice your strategy. Go ahead, we’ll wait).

Okay, let’s keep it real. The fact is that we all have someone in our lives who likes to hug, or be hugged, despite a preference for a less demonstrative greeting. And it’s quite probable that someone will stun you with an unexpected hug at some point in your life. It happens. So, before you make an already uncomfortable situation worse, ask yourself if you can live with an

isolated bout of discomfort. I’ve yet to see “Poor Jenny was hugged to death” etched on anyone’s tombstone, have you?

And keep in mind that knowing people want to hug you says more about you than it does about them. The message: You’re really someone special.

In the end, we can reduce the possibility of awkwardness on both sides if we stay tuned into and respect each other’s personal boundaries when it comes to hugging. One way to do that is to fan this column out through your network of family and friends. That way we raise awareness among our chronic huggers, and our “hug-me-nots” will feel less pressure to have to convey an uncomfortable message or, short of that, to duck and run!

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This Week in African American History
Helen Williams: First Black Model Paved the Way for Dark-Skinned Women in Fashion Industry



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Helen Williams was the first Black Fashion Model to break color barriers in the 1950’s and to cross over into mainstream fashion. She was triumphant in her career, in an age and era when mainstream beauty and fashion excluded non-white models. Even more so she pushed through colorism within the African American modelling scene where models were required to be light-skinned (just like the African American chorus girls of the 1920’s).

Helen was born in Riverton, New Jersey in November, 1937. At an early age she showed a great obsession for fashion and even began sewing her own garments at the age of 7. Helen studied dance, art and drama before obtaining work as a stylist for a New York photography studio. At the age of 17, celebrities such as Lena Horne and Sammy Davis Jr. began to notice her work and urged her to pursue fashion and modeling.

In the early stages of her career, Helen worked exclusively with Ebony and Jet magazines. However, in 1960 she relocated to France due to the discrimination she faced in the United States. She found success modeling for famous designers Christian Dior and Jean Dessès. “Over there I was ‘La Belle Americaine,’” she recalled. By the end of her tenure she was making a staggering \$7,500 a year working part-time, and had received three marriage proposals from her French admirers, one of whom reportedly kissed her feet and murmured, “I worship the ground you walk on, mademoiselle.”

After Paris, Helen returned to America where the stigma of race was worst especially towards darker toned African American females. As she searched for modelling agencies she was told “No” numerous times. While searching for a new agent in New York City, she was once told by an agency that they already have “one black model already, thanks.” However, she was persistent and would not take No for an answer. “I was pushy and positive,” she recalled. Despite being rejected, she decided to take her case to the press. Two white journalists Dorothy Kilgallen and Earl Wilson wrote about her cause, ultimately bringing attention to the exclusion of black models within the modeling and fashion industry.

Suddenly doors began to open and Helen started getting work. She was booked for a variety of jobs for brands such as Budweiser, Loom Togs, Sears, and Modess, which crossed over for the first time into the mainstream press, in titles such as The New York Times, Life, and Redbook. By 1961, her hourly rate had shot up to \$100 an hour.

Helen was one of the first clients of Ophelia DeVore’s Grace De Marco modeling agency. Ophelia (former model turned agent) was a shrewd businesswoman with keen insight and endless aspirations, who worked to smash stereotypes and empower black women by teaching them poise, confidence, and the courage to get ahead in a world deeply etched by racial discrimination. Through her modeling agency, DeVore helped launch the early careers of many black celebrities, including actresses Diahann Carroll and Cicely Tyson, and actor Richard Roundtree. Needless to say, Helen benefited under her tutelage. DeVore continued to follow Helen’s career through personal correspondence and the press and kept letters, photographs, and press clippings, both positive and negative, in carefully organized binders.

Helen has been credited with breaking down racial barriers. In 2004, Helen was the recipient of the Trailblazer Award by the Fashion & Arts Xchange organization at a ceremony at New York’s Fashion Institute of Technology. Her caramel complexion paved the way for darker-skinned African American models as she broke the tradition of only using white and light-skinned models in mainstream. Although it took some time, this new acceptance eventually resulted in more doors of opportunity being opened for women of color in the world of fashion. Helen created a legacy that gave birth to daughters Naomi Sims, Beverly Johnson, Iman, Naomi Campbell, and Jourdan Dunn. She is the classic example of a black diamond, which is beautiful, unique, and extremely rare.

Helen retired from modeling in 1970 but continued her career in fashion as a stylist. She married Norm Jackson in 1977, whom she had met during her modeling days. They reside in Riverton, New Jersey.



At Jean Dessès Fashion House, Dior's top rival, Helen models exclusive dress with red and pink flowers and green leaves on cream background beneath green gown de Dior's ball gown. Personal Photo, Inc., paid all of Helen's traveling expenses.



Modeling at Dior before critical eyes of fashion fashion house's managers, New Jersey beauty wears modest red and white coat. She explained that she went to Paris to see "whether I would look good in Paris fashions." Fashionists agreed that she did.

Top Negro Model Makes Debut In Paris