



BIRD'S EYE VIEW: This drone picture brings the best out of nature and impressive marine colours along the Mellieħa shoreline. PHOTO: JONATHAN BORG

Don't stand by me

TALKING POINT

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Strange, isn't it? We are being told that the best way to help each other these days is to stay apart. But the definition of 'staying apart' is cultural and not just medical or physical.

The advice coming from health authorities is unequivocal. The safest way to practise social distancing is by staying at home.

Period. Otherwise, if venturing out is warranted, then stay away from others, including those who may not show any symptoms of being infected. (By the way, the one who may not show any symptoms of being infected could be you.)

The World Health Organisation advises a minimum of one metre between yourself and anyone else; the Netherlands advises 1.5 metres; most countries, including India, Japan, Malta and the UK, are advising two metres.

The (non-metric) US is advising two yards or six feet (1.8 metres). This is now a healthy distance, pun intended.

Now, while the length of a metre (or a yard) is standard in a scientific sense, the practice of social distancing is not scientific. Different cultures develop and nurture diverse sensibilities as to what is the appropriate social distance to maintain between two or more persons sharing the same space.

Get too close and in someone else's face, and the subject becomes anxious and feels threatened. Stay too far away, and the subject feels dismissed and disrespected (well, not these days, of course).

These tensions are compounded when the limited social distance practised allows for physical contact: not just formal handshakes and just-as-formal kissing on the cheeks in various cultures among both men and women, but also tapping on the subject's back, grabbing their arm, fixing their hair.

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Lengthy incursions into private space build tension and can boil over

All this is well meant, of course; but not always appreciated, anticipated or understood. Moreover, the relationship with your subject can also define and determine the expected social distance.

This can range across one of four 'distance zones', as defined by Edward T. Hall in his 1966 book *The Hidden Dimension*: the intimate (embracing, touching, whispering) to personal (for dealing with very close friends and family) to social (for dealing with people that you know) to public (for dealing with strangers). The suitable social distance for such interactions widens out the less intimate the relationship.

These social norms and customs are flexible enough to be tweaked in specific but time-delimited circumstances, such as rushing to board a bus. In normal circumstances, invasions of personal space, including close physical contact, can be tolerated but for brief moments.

Standing in the Valletta Upper Barakka lift when full will oblige some friction and unease for what may feel like a very long few seconds. (Which explains why the lift is not in operation these days; and nor are standing passengers allowed on public buses.)

Lengthy incursions into private space build tension and can boil over. Road rage is a manifestation of this cascade, in circumstances where drivers consider their vehicles to be extensions of their physical persons.

On the other hand, growing up in a culture where personal space is by definition limited builds different thresholds of tolerance.

In heavily and densely populated cities, such as Hong Kong, many urban dwellers will be living normally in what others consider tight and cramped living quarters. In Malta, the recent shift from maisonettes and terraced houses to apartments and flats as standard places of accommodation has led to a reduction in 'living' and personal space.

And even those spaces would need to be shared and negotiated with other members of the household.

A side effect to this recent architectural transition is that whatever little personal space remains, it becomes protected, inviolate, defended to the hilt.

Do you have a 'Keep Out' sign outside your room (if you have one)?

An awareness of proxemics is a powerful tool for people in positions of leadership, education, counselling and those involved in interviewing others.

Which is not to say that we are necessarily victims of cultural mores.

In the age of COVID-19, we may need to break longstanding practices to protect our health and that of others and get our bodies to 'speak' differently in public. Staying away to stay safe. No offence meant: but don't stand by me.

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