A hands-off approach to greeting pregnant strangers

When I shared this (old) news story on my Facebook page, I didn't expect a debate to start. In 2013, a Pennsylvania man touched a pregnant woman's belly after she asked him to stop. She pressed charges, and it is now considered illegal to touch a pregnant woman's belly in Pennsylvania.

"Looks like I'll be spending more time in Philly," I posted, referring to the fact that I like to visit museums and restaurants in the City of Brotherly Love, as well as the fact that I'm three months pregnant (looking more like six)…and I don't like to be touched.

A high school friend, who has a beautiful family composed of homemade, adopted, and foster children agreed, noting that she once touched a man's belly in return after he reached out for hers. Several other friends agreed, but my own mother did not. She said that it's normal for people to feel excited when they see a pregnant woman and that most pregnant women would welcome the attention because they will ultimately miss it. And both sides of the debate raged on.

I can't speak for all pregnant women, but I can honestly say that for myself, pregnant or not, I prefer my interactions with most people, especially strangers, to be hands-off. I don't mind a belly pat or rub from excited family members, good friends, and my first graders, but I would prefer to limit my physical contact with people who don't have a personal relationship with me. It's not that I'm a germophobe or that I am afraid they will try to harm me, I'm just a private kind of person who needs personal space to feel comfortable.

I recognize that people mean only to share in my joy when they reach out for that beach ball I'm hiding under my shirt or ask questions or make remarks, but their attention is not always welcome. You don't pet a cute dog without asking its owner for permission, do you? Just because a woman is pregnant, doesn't mean she's up for grabs or even that she's always up for conversation.

People also have a tendency to forget their manners during small talk with pregnant women. Yes, this is my fourth child. I'm not the first mom to pull it off. Yes, I'm exhausted. Yes, my hands are full — full of love. God sent me each and every one of my children right when I needed them most.

Some women are carrying high risk pregnancies. Most heartbreaking of all, some women are carrying babies who have already died or who will probably die shortly

after being born. Touching them or asking questions may hurt more than you could imagine.

It’s natural to feel a sense of wonder and awe when you see a woman whose big round belly lets you know that a new life is in the making. But, you don’t need to feel it with your own hands to know it’s real. You don’t need to know when that baby is expected to come, whether it’s a boy or a girl, his or her name, and the color of the nursery. The best thing you can do for that mother, her baby, and yourself, is smile. Smiles are always a welcome gift.