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Finnish-American Identity

"Kysyn sinulta, mitä pidät olostasi siellä vieraalla maalla."

This question is part of a letter, written as a portion of a school exercise. It was written 99 years ago from one of my husband's uncles (Paavo) to his cousin Fredrik, a few years his senior. The older cousin had left for America, leaving his younger family members to envy the adventure but worry about his well-being.

The letter was given to us some years ago, and we have shared it with many other family members "on this side of the Atlantic" and have all marvelled at the exquisite penmanship and careful phrasing of a boy who was then, almost 100 years ago, almost fifteen. The document written so long ago is poignant yet for another reason: the writer did leave Finland for the United States when he was in his early twenties but he disappeared amidst the waves of immigrants all trying to find their own places in this country of promises. It is also sad that the cousin to whom the letter was addressed shared the same misfortune and also disappeared. One wonders what their lives were like and if they lived and died in the company of their

countrymen. What did it mean to be a Finn then? What does it mean to be a Finnish-American now?

The letter is part of Paavo's slim, yellowed copybook from school. He wishes his cousin to know that he is growing up and will soon be a young man. He is attending school along with seven other students at his level. The kind of self presentation, self-image or identity is interesting. Quite clearly Paavo wishes to be considered adult-like ... he even discusses the weather. The first aspect of identity then might be "who one is". The counterpart might then be related to the environment within which one grew and, therefore, gave identity substance and meaning.

The second part in this old letter is called simply "Kotiseutuni" and is a loving but honest and candid description of his birthplace. Paavo writes of the beautiful homeplace, the huge old birch tree that even the oldest do not remember being small, but also admits that the land is rocky and not as fertile as it could be. He admits honestly in the "Kotiseutuni" portion of his writings that his home area is not one of towering mountains although there are a few high hills.

"On täällä jokunen järviikin ja läpi kylän virtaa moniin mutkuiin viuruileva Wääräjoki. Pihamaa on varsinkin keväimin hyvin rapakkoinen. Näköalan tekevät kau-

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niiksi ja viikkoaaksi lähellä olevat puistot ja maantie, jossa alinomaa näkee matkustavia kulkevan. Lähellä kotoani on vanha, suuri koiru, jota eivät iäkkäätkään ihmiset muista sen pienempänä. Kylällä on meidän lehmillämme hyvät laitumet."

He ends his description of his "Kotiseutuni" with the same mixture of love and reality with which it began.

"Oma kotiseutu tuntuu siis kaikista mieluisimmalta; vaikka siinäkin pitää kovalta työllä ruokansa ansaita."

I am sure that the emigrants from Finland would have joined in that judgment. Life was not easy, nor should people expect to find it so.

Paavo's letter from so long ago does provide a bit of insight into how he viewed himself within his surroundings. Naturally, everyone may see things a bit differently. Is there a point of view that was typically Finnish?

Here in the United States, Jerome Kagan (1980) wrote of what he saw as the "requirements for human development". He saw the process of socialization as being successful if young people succeeded at those competencies that a particular culture felt to be important. American identity, he felt, involved individualism and autonomy, the ability to make decisions independently. Identity also involved learning and education, so that one could be employable and take care of themselves financially. Industriousness would certainly be another factor in identity as well as the loyalty to self to try to do the best job that one could. Identity also involved valuing social relationships, family and friends and being valued by them as well. There is, Kagan felt, some kind of ideal best adult in every culture and it was to this goal that children's behavior tended to

be shaped and molded by parents, families and other influences in society.

Identity then is involved at two levels: the question of "who one is" and the corollary of "what does that mean?" As I contrast the values hinted at in Paavo's old letter, I can also hear the voices of my grandparents and parents as I was growing up here in the United States. My parents spoke Finnish at home and I was taught to treasure my heritage. But, in truth, there were no great cultural differences between what my parents had learned about the world when they were children and what I learned during the time I was growing up. There were many similarities between the two cultures. I learned to take saunas, eat Finnish food, go blueberry picking on hot summer days, etc.

I also learned that Finns were loyal, brave, stubborn and had a deep love for the lakes and forests, through which life was renewed and deepened. I saw eyes crinkle up in laughter ... sometimes at a funny story that was told on themselves. I learned that Finns did the best they could and then clenched their teeth and went on with life even when it was hard. My father was 17 when he left Finland but I knew how important education was by the tears in his eyes when I finished my various school degrees.

The world is complicated. Throughout our lives we listen to what is going on in the world. We read newspapers and magazines and books. We watch television and talk to people. We think our thoughts and make choices or have choices made for us. But we are active, thinking beings who can select from the options open to us. Socialization is usually not a random process. We hear what we expect to hear and choose what we see as valuable to teach our young.

The personal qualities described in the preceding paragraphs, I know, are not true of every Finn or every American but they do form an ideal that guides one's behavior.

I grew up and married a man whose parents were immigrants from Finland. Our backgrounds were much the same. My grandmother didn't ask (as she often did when she would hear of an impending marriage) "*Onko se toiskielinen?*" The Finnish families where I grew up usually knew each other very well. There is more diversity now and communities that were predominantly Finnish years ago have had to accommodate to this change. It does make a difference in one's "rootedness" or the extent to which other people know you and your family, etc. Family customs and rituals can be remarkably resistant to change, especially if they are valued and encouraged.

We made our first trip to Finland as exchange students in 1957. Many things about Finland were already familiar to us, since they had been part of our own backgrounds. We contacted relatives we had been told about and were welcomed by them as FAMILY. We have been back many times now and lived in Turku during a Fulbright year. We, in turn, wanted our two children to identify with their Finnish "roots". This meant that they went to a public school, learned the language, sang the songs and played the games. I became very aware that, to some extent, we were "orchestrating"

the experiences that our children would identify as part of their "Finnishness". Our son Eric, aged 9, spent a short vacation with my husband's relatives. On a walk through the woods, he and an older cousin found half of an old, weathered top of a wooden grain barrel. Carved deeply into the top was a "puumerkki" E.T. The date was 1841. After some lengthy and interesting family history (and much coffee) we learned that there had been another Erkki Typpo over a century ago. The old barrel had lain deep in the woods for all those years until this little boy from America, with the same name, found it.

Identification, or the act of creating an identity, involves two processes. The first, as our son learned, is finding the ways in which we are similar to family or culture. We may look to history or folk heroes or heroines. The complementary process is defining those beliefs, qualities or characteristics on which we are different. For Finnish-American children and adults, it is easy to see all the ways in which we are similar to family or culture. In truth, there is much similarity between the American and Finnish "Ideal Adult". The differences may lie in the ways and the extent our two cultures channel the expression of the same qualities.

The United States does not have a similar saying but the ending of Paavo's letter stays in mind: "*Ole aina iloinen, niinkuin pieni perhonen*".

