

# Some Cross-Cultural Observations of a Third-Generation Finnish- American

When our grandparents came to the United States, great pressure was put upon them to conform to the customs of their adopted country. ("When in Rome do as the Romans do" or "Maassa maan taval-la.") Therefore, most customs that differed from those in the "Old Country" were laid aside in favor of American ones. Hence, this paper will compare Finnish and American customs, the latter being essentially synonymous with Finnish-American customs.

The United States is twenty-eight times as large as Finland, and Americans can travel thousands of miles without ever leaving their own country. In fact, many of them never do. This can lead to an inbred society which perceives its way of doing things as the only way and the right way. Finns, on the other hand, have over two dozen foreign neighbors in an area just slightly larger than the entire United States. Finns might be expected to have a more international outlook. Whether this is so, I'm not sure. It is an observed fact, however, that differences in cultural customs can cause friction, misunderstanding, as well as raised eyebrows when Finnish-Americans visit the home of their ancestors, or vice versa, if they have not been coached in the ways of their hosts. Verbal communication is less of a problem, for one can always resort to a dictionary, but where does one find a dictionary of social customs?



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A girl with whom I spoke in Helsinki commented that when she was in the U.S. as a foreign exchange student, she found many cultural differences and had to be careful to say the right things on the right occasion. She observed that Americans

are much more prone to exaggeration and profuse thanks. Finns will mean the same thing, but not be so wordy about it. A Finn may regard the American as insincere, whereas the American, receiving what to him appears "meager" thanks, may wonder whether his gift or deed went unappreciated.

Many have also observed another conversational difference: Americans will engage in casual talk with anyone and everyone, including strangers in a grocery line, at a bus stop, on public transportation, or whatever. Finns don't do this, and can be quite taken aback if a well-meaning American, ignorant of Finnish customs, attempts to initiate a conversation in such a situation.

Conversational topics also differ in our countries. Americans, upon meeting someone for the first time, will often inquire about whether he/she is married, has a family, etc. I am told that this is not to be done in Finland or when talking with Finns. This was brought home to me recently when a Finnish guest and I were in a large group where we shared a table with several others. One of the women in the group, attempting to be friendly, inquired regarding my guest's marital status and whether she had children. I thought nothing of the inquiry, it being a common American conversation-starter; however, my guest abruptly asked that we leave. When we were alone, she commented that she could not stand the inquisitiveness of the woman. I could appreciate her discomfort, but it still amazed me, as she had nothing to hide or be ashamed of. Lesson learned: avoid personal topics in conversations with Finns. It has been my observation that religion and politics should also be avoided.

Pursuing verbal differences further: "bad words" in our cultures differ. Whereas Finnish "bad words" consist of those having to do with the devil, American counterparts have to do with deity, sexual references and bathroom terms. Some-

times in learning the language of another, one inadvertently picks up these terms, not realizing they are unacceptable in polite conversation in the other culture. One would do well to learn what words are to be avoided in the other's culture, as well as what words are sanctioned, so one does not register shock upon hearing what in one's own culture might be inappropriate.

Americans are often initially surprised at the unabashed attitude of Finns toward nudity, elimination, and mixed family bathing in the sauna. This is no doubt a healthy attitude, but we find it alarming, afraid that we will be embarrassed. Americans refer to bathroom functions via euphemisms, and a (false?) modesty governs display of the nude body. An American related this regarding her visit to Finland with her teenage son and daughter: The host family heated the sauna and then announced that it was her family's turn to take a bath. Her son and daughter both protested that they **would not** enter the sauna together, nor with their mother. Each bathed alone. The hostess was baffled by such "foolish" modesty!

"Personal distance" in our two cultures also differs. Whereas Americans in an average stand-up conversation automatically place themselves about 2 to 2 1/2 feet apart, Finns increase this distance by about a foot. This phenomenon is often evident even in photos. Americans "huddle together" in a photo, whereas Finns place some distance between each other. I've found this to be true even of families who "sauna" together! This phenomenon of personal distance also applies to greetings. Whereas the American will often descend upon one with a bear hug, the Finn offers the hand in greeting. The handshake is much more common in Finland than in the U.S. (Would that it were more common here also.)

Finns seem to be more prone to gift-giving, including hostess gifts, than are Americans. The custom of taking flowers

when visiting a home is a charming one which Americans would do well to emulate. Finns, on the other hand, should be made aware of the fact that if an American arrives empty-handed, he is not a social clod, but simply has not learned the custom. The Finnish custom of gifting a (foreign) visitor is also very considerate. However, if a Finn visits in an American home and receives no gift, he should not be offended, for again, this is not our usual custom.

Methods of observing family and personal events also differ in our countries, and some celebrations, such as nameday observances, have disappeared altogether in the U.S. Birthdays might or might not be celebrated, and often the fiftieth birthday, a notable event in Finland, receives no more notice than the forty-ninth. Baptism, funeral, engagement, wedding and funeral customs also have their national variations.

In the U.S., baptism is not considered an occasion of bestowing the name upon the child, nor is the name kept a secret until that occasion. In fact, one of the first questions asked new parents is: "What did you name the child?"

Engagement and wedding customs likewise differ in our cultures. The "engagement trip," (as is the custom at least in northern Finland) is unknown in the U.S. Instead, we have a trip, called the "honeymoon," following the wedding ceremony. Inadvertently-raised American eyebrows, upon first hearing of the "engagement trip," have been known to offend Finnish cousins.

Finnish weddings do not contain the

pageantry often associated with American weddings, where both the bride and groom can have numerous attendants, all in evidence at the altar with the bridal couple.

When a death occurs in an American household, the funeral director is summoned and in a day or two the embalmed remains of the deceased are clothed in "Sunday best" and the body is ready for "viewing" at the funeral home, where friends and relatives gather to express their sympathy amid formal flower arrangements, which have been ordered in advance by friends and relatives, and delivered by the florist. The funeral is held either in a church or the funeral home three or four days after the death has occurred.

In Finland, I'm told, the custom of funeral home visitation is not observed; in fact, no counterpart of our "funeral home" exists. An average of two weeks passes from the time of death to the funeral. At this occasion, friends and relatives present bouquets, the presentation often accompanied by a short eulogy.

Is it any wonder that unrelated cultures have problems understanding each other when we, who are cousins, have our difficulties! Perhaps the most constructive thing we can do is realize that there **are** differences, and keep our eyes and minds open in an effort to discern what they might be. Let **tolerance** be the key word!

(I reserve all right to this article, including the right to publish it in my own publication, **The Fennophile**, or anywhere else I choose.)