Cross–Cultural Journal By: Terah Hennick

My time in Finland has surpassed all of my expectations. I have discovered not only the beautiful places, but also the amazing people that live here. I’ve observed the stylish and clean downtown, the interesting architecture, the naturally beautiful and historical island of Suomenlinna, and the winter wonderland that was Tahko. I have been constantly in awe of my surroundings while in Finland and I anticipate that these feelings will only grow as I visit Lapland and other regions.

In my six weeks here I have found that the American and Finnish cultures are, in many ways, very different. Some differences are a pleasant change and some present interesting challenges for me, personally. Prior to visiting Finland I read that Finns are very quiet. My interpretation was that they are shy, but that is not exactly right. It is less that Finns are scared to speak and more that they only speak when they have something to say. This might seem like an obvious thing, but I noticed that many Americans speak even when they have nothing to say. In the US we have a saying, “if you have nothing nice to say, don’t say anything at all,” but in Finland I think the saying would go, “if you have nothing important to say, don’t say anything at all.” I find the latter mentality refreshing. I am gradually learning to be more content with silence and to choose what a say more carefully, ensuring that I am enhancing the conversation.

Before visiting I was worried that my outgoing personality and way of conversing would not align with the Finn’s more reserved behavior. I am accustomed to a conversation that involves interruption and actively building on what a person says, but in Finland they have a completely different way of speaking. This was hard for me at first; I think I may have given a bad first impression. On the other hand, I have also learned how understanding, genuine, and kind Finnish people are, so it is likely they understood that I am American and that is the way we act.

Observation and Analysis of Events

After a physics guild movie night in the Otakaari 1 basement, Connor and I realized we had left out jackets upstairs. The Finns informed us that the building was closed. We were somewhat frantic. Connor had left his backpack with his coat and his bus pass was it in. It was also pretty cold out, so we asked if there was any way to get upstairs to grab our things. One of the Finns said, "you really aren't supposed to be in the main part of the building after it closes." I then realized he wasn't saying the building was locked, just that it is a rule. The Finn reluctantly granted us permission to run upstairs quickly, grab our things, and run back downstairs.

After learning in class that Finland was ranked as the most honest country, I understood his reluctance to allow us to go upstairs. Honesty is a part of who they are and the rules are not often broken. For the most part, there has really been no need. The rules have resulted in a pretty happy, healthy, and stable country. These things, i.e. questioning whether to follow the rules and be honest, are not choices that the Finnish face day to day. Based on the contrast between Finland and other, more corrupt nations, I think being able to trust one’s government and the people in power that establish rules could lead to the trust and corresponding honesty and obedience observed in Finland.

I noticed that Finns do not seem to be very religious or at least outwardly religious, but still maintain strong moral integrity. When speaking with one of my Finnish friends I asked him the source of Finns’ strong moral integrity, e.g. the low occurrences of stealing, cheating, and lying, relative to other places. He explained that Finns, for the most part, try to think logically about their decisions. For example, he realizes that society won’t function efficiently if rules are ignored and people do not look out for one another.

This made me think of the US and their use of religion as a source for moral guidance. My Finnish friend explained that it doesn’t make much sense because religion is often depicted as black and white whereas decisions are often not black and white. I agree that using a book with multiple interpretations for moral guidance has resulted in much conflict, especially when considering the bipartisan political system in the US with one side strongly adhering to biblical doctrine and the other more loosely interpreting the bible. We are taught in church that faith should be followed blindly, not logically. My Finnish friend made a good point that every day decisions like whether to lie, steal, or cheat, should have some logic behind them. I am slowly beginning to understand Finnish people and to value their way of thinking, acting, and living. I am really looking forward to the months to come and learning as much as I can about this truly remarkable place.