Two True Things

Catherine Stover reflects on her traditional Norwegian upbringing, finding her own sense of quiet exceptionalism within the humble 'Law of Jante'

BY CATHERINE STOVER

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I always assumed that there was nothing special about my family. Growing up on a dairy farm in Wisconsin among other kids from other dairy farms, it seemed as though everyone was more or less the same. The fact that three of my four grandparents grew up in homes where Norwegian was spoken didn't make us unique; it made us similar to the other families who were as apt to say *takk* as they were to say *thanks*.

The words, Don't call attention to yourself, could have been written above our front door, but of course they weren't because that would have called attention to ourselves.

That idea was deeply ingrained in how my family functioned. For example, when I was 10 or 11, I overheard my aunt ask my mother how my brothers and I were doing in school. My mother responded, "Oh, about average, I guess." So, I thought, that's what I am... about average. Not remarkable in any way, surely.

This happened about a generation before the word "snowflake" was coined to describe a child who was unique and perfect. In fact, I was raised to believe I was the anonymous raindrop.

Here's another example: When I went shopping with my mother and we'd go into a dressing room to try something on, I would always try to pull the curtain closed all the way. My mother would say, "No need for that. You're no different from anyone else."

And this: When my family went to the root beer stand, my dad would order exactly the same thing for everyone. When I would say, "But I don't like ice cream in my root beer," nobody responded. An individual preference? Seriously?

I assumed every family was this way. Of course, when I went to college, I discovered that wasn't the case. I went to a huge university in the 1970s, and the phrase "Do your own thing" was making its way through college dorms. But if I had thought about doing my own thing for more than a few minutes, I might have exploded. I wasn't wired that way.

Of course, there had been times when I did something that turned out to be exceptional. I remember telling my parents one night at dinner that I had received an A+ on a paper I'd written about Shakespeare's "Hamlet," and that the professor said he had never seen an idea like mine before. "Hmmm," my parents said. "Pass the potatoes," my brother said. I knew better than to carry on about it, but the thought did occur to me that other families might have responded differently.

As the years marched on, I didn't have much time to think much about how Norwegian beliefs shaped my identity. I was busy with my family and my work and the usual things that resulted in hearing the dryer go off at 10 p.m., precisely at the moment when you don't want to have to take care of one more thing.

In fact, I may have never given it a great deal of thought if it hadn't been for a trip to a family wedding in Norway. About 20 of us decided to meet in Oslo before traveling north to Trondheim.

We were standing in a hotel lobby when a cousin pointed to a sign, which said, in English:

Jante's Law:

1. You're not to think *you* are anything special.
2. You're not to think *you* are as good as *we* are.
3. You're not to think *you* are smarter than *we* are.
4. You're not to imagine yourself better than *we* are.
5. You're not to think *you* know more than *we* do.
6. You're not to think *you* are more important than *we* are.
7. You're not to think *you* are good at anything.
8. You're not to laugh at *us*.
9. You're not to think anyone cares about *you*.
10. You're not to think *you* can teach *us* anything.

"That explains it," one of my cousins said.

We all just stood there for a while before we began to laugh.

This happened in 2019. Since then, I've begun to believe that two things can be true at the same time: My family's "nothing special" ideas are distinctly Norwegian, and this, in fact, does make us special.

I described this to a friend who does not share my cultural background. She said, "But isn't it depressing to think you're nothing special? You don't believe that, do you?"

I said, "It takes some pressure off when you don't have to prove yourself to others."

She looked unconvinced, so I said, "Have you heard of the World Happiness Report? The one from the United Nations?"

"Oh, that Happiness list? I didn't know the U.N. had anything to do with it."

"Yes, they're a sponsor of it, but it's published by Oxford University. Anyway, the point I want to make is that the top five spots are taken by Nordic countries, all of which share this 'nothing special' sentiment."

"Where's the U.S.?"

"Last time I looked, it was number 24."

"Hmmm," she said. "Something to think about."

Because it would have been too much like bragging, I didn't say, "In Norway, healthcare and college education are free. The official workday is limited to seven hours. The idea is to leave work when school gets out so that you can ski every day with your family."

This outlook may never take root in America, and maybe that's OK. I suspect that more people in the United States believe in exceptionalism than in uniformity. I also suspect that both perspectives have merit.

And so, this is where I am now: It's good to know the source of the perspective that shaped me.

It's especially good when it's Norwegian, which is, in its own way, very special. ▼

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