

# Doing It Like the Danes

**Self-improvement**  
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I am of Scots-English ancestry, a breed as common as sparrows, but in America a man can always better himself through marriage, and so a few years ago I married a Dane.

I learned to speak Danish just well enough to get into trouble, and I visit the motherland-in-law whenever possible and try to improve myself.

Denmark is a clean, well-regulated country populated by prosperous, literate people who all vote in elections, live in handsome and modest surroundings and have no hang-ups about sex.

An American can find plenty to learn from here.

Visiting my friends in Jutland, for example, I sit at their dining table in candlelight, eating fish and salad, the conversation winding along in English—I am funnier in Danish, but I don't always get the joke myself—and suddenly, I am struck by the fact that we've had an entire hour of dinner and conversation, three adults and two teenage boys, and nobody has bolted from the table to go play soccer or watch television.

Civilization is what we carry on over lunch and dinner, and in America, where a family can go for weeks and never sit down in one place at one time and say 25 words or more, you sometimes wonder if conversation or stories will exist 20 years from now or if we'll just network by E-mail.

But in this family, thanks to a strong Danish sense of order, the boys were made to sit at the dinner table and take part in conversation until they got old enough to have interesting opinions of their own, which is what makes conversation enjoyable.

The Danish sense of order makes me uneasy, of course. I come from a nation of jaywalkers and sooners. Denmark is a nation of people who wait for the green light before they cross the street, even if it's 2 a.m. and the streets are deserted.

It's a nation of responsible teenagers. No big dreams, no gut-wrenching romance, no urge to rock the boat, just nice kids look-

ing for their niche, building their relationships.

The first Danish Christmas you see is pure magic, a long, lovely play, but by the third or fourth identical one, you wish that it could be rewritten.

Danes are planners. They like itineraries and agendas. My friends have their 1994 summer vacation planned and are working on 1995.

Planning makes Denmark look good. It's why there's no sprawl of junkyards and trailer parks and Mr. Donut drive-ins around Danish towns, why there are pleasant streets and snug brick houses with red tile roofs behind high hedges and, on the other side of the last hedge, a golden wheat field. The ugliness all got voted down in committee.

I take a bite of fish and mention to my friends the story I read this morning on the front page of Politiken, the leading Danish newspaper, which reported the death of the prime minister's young daughter but did not mention the cause of death, which was suicide.

My friends explain that Politiken would not report that fact, because it was a private matter. I cannot believe that any newspaper in the free world would omit such a detail. "And everyone knows from the tabloids that she killed herself," I say.

"Yes, but Politiken is a decent newspaper," they say.

It is a question of order: The prime minister's privacy should be respected, even if everyone knows the secret.

This sense of decorum I find quaint, knowing how frank and honest Danes are. Conversation in America tends to be an ex-

You can talk about death, God, opera, politics, your kidneys, your taste in pornography, anything at all. You can say how boring Denmark is, what a bunch of arrogant drunks they are, how you really much much prefer Swedes, and the Dane will not

blue cheese and coffee.

This sense of order is what makes freedom possible. There are 11 political parties in Denmark because there is only one way to eat lunch.

You don't eat at your desk or as you drive and you don't walk down the street munching a hot dog. You eat at a table with a napkin and a knife and fork and candle.

This gives you the freedom to be a Marxist, if you wish. Go ahead. Be as radical as you like. Your old aunts will still love you. But even as a Marxist you have to remember to send them a card on their birthdays.

Danes can be offended by neglect, by silence, by tardiness, by selfishness, but they are never personally offended by anything you say, so long as it's not about the queen. You should not say bad things about her.

There are, after all, some limits.

If there weren't limits to freedom, how would we know how free we are?

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change of pieties, but in Denmark you come to expect boldness. People tell the truth to their friends.

When you ask someone "How are you?" she tells you.

Everybody ought to have a Dane to have lunch with. He or she will listen to you and not judge you.

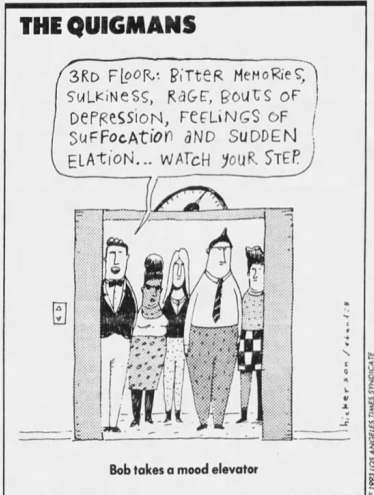
I go to lunch with a friend and conversation starts out in Danish. We talk small talk for a few minutes and then the Dane says, in English, "Your Danish is getting better all the time. You don't really have an American accent at all."

And then we switch to English and go into high gear.

take it personally.

He or she will hear you out and politely tell you you're full of road apples. Or half-full, as the case may be.

The lunch over which this conversation takes place is almost always the same: herring on rye bread with a shot of aquavit, followed by fried fish and a slice of roast pork with a hard salty rind and a glass of beer, then a slice of



Garrison Keillor is host of 'American Radio Company' and author of 'WLT: A Radio Romance' and 'Lake Wobegon Days.' © 1993 The New York Times

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