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A Word to Finns: 'For Your Own Good, Blow Your Top'

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HELSINKI, Finland — Turo Herala is the first to admit that his mission to teach Finns how to get angry and make a scene, or even to feel joy and happiness is, in all likelihood, bound for failure.

Three months ago, Mr. Herala, a theater director with a yen for therapy, took it upon himself to bring "anger venting" classes to Helsinki on the theory that his famously silent and stoic compatriots were about to combust from repressed emotion.

Finland, while infinitely livable and likable, suffers from some of the world's highest rates of suicide, depression and alcoholism. "How to control and express anger safely," read his classified advertisement in a local newspaper.

He has had few takers. An organization that handles domestic violence called to enlist, as did a smattering of individuals. But it was so odd a notion — tutorials in how to get angry — that Mr. Herala made headlines in the largest daily newspaper here.

"Yes, it has been difficult to get people to sign up," he said over a glass of white wine at a local bar, pleased nonetheless at all the attention. "Anger in Finland is a bigger taboo than sex."

Psychologists and academics here said they were not surprised that Mr. Herala's advertisement would attract attention as a novelty, and then go largely ignored.

"Self-control is very important in Finland," said Dr. Liisa Keltikangas-Jarvinen, a professor of psychology at the University of Helsinki. "You cannot show anger; it means you can't cope. If a person is very temperamental and alive, expresses emotions like anger and happiness, the person is seen as infantile."

Even among Nordic peoples, the Finns' stolid nature stands apart.

Ben Furman, a psychiatrist who until recently was the host of a popular, but very serious, television talk show here, was pilloried last year for suggesting that the government should stop paying for psychotherapy sessions. As he prepared to defend himself in interviews, over and over again, Mr. Furman said the one piece of advice he consistently got was "don't get angry, no matter how much you are provoked."

"People would assume I was guilty if I got angry," said Mr. Furman, co-director of the Brief Therapy Institute here. "I had to rehearse and behave in a way where no emotion was shown. A normal person would react emotionally to these charges. If I was in Italy, I believe I would receive the opposite advice. You must be guilty because you are not reacting emotionally enough."

Here, experts say, a car accident brings, not blame and insults, but a polite exchange of information. A bus breakdown causes no complaints; rather, the Finns on the bus will file off and try to push it to the next stop. It is no coincidence that 80 percent of women who give birth here refuse pain-killing epidurals, according to one study. In America, 90 percent of women ask for them.

But Dr. Keltikangas-Jarvinen said suppressing anger in Finland was only one piece of the country's entrenched cultural code.

Here, it is not unusual to walk into a restaurant and spot most people eating dinner in silence, content to chew and not chatter. Silence is a sign of wisdom and good manners, not boredom and half-wittedness.

Some would say this taciturnity has served Finland well, particularly during the cold war, when the Soviet Union was literally a short tank roll away. "For 30 to 40 years there," Dr. Keltikangas-Jarvinen said, "it was politically very wise to be silent."

Finns also cringe over compliments. They don't dole them out and they don't take them in. As part of a group therapy exercise, Dr. Furman asked the participants to name one thing they each could do well, he recounted. No reply. Then, he asked the people in the group to give someone else a compliment. They couldn't.

Stumped, he broke them up into groups and asked them to say one nice thing about someone outside the circle. Finally, they did. "We needed to back up a couple of steps, to teach people how to talk positively about one another," he said.

Ingrained with modesty, Finns are almost physically unable to boast or show off. In an era of unattenuated hype, they cannot self-promote. "It is considered a sin," Dr. Furman said, with a laugh.

Dr. Keltikangas-Jarvinen said she receives American résumés, and sometimes cannot help but view them suspiciously. To her, they throb with hyperbole. "I feel shame when I read these 'excellent' portfolios," she said.

The flip side of this modesty, Dr. Keltikangas-Jarvinen and others say, is that Finns, despite their many advances, particularly in the technological field, seem to suffer from a self-esteem crisis. Theirs is such a consensus-driven, homogenous culture that a free exchange of ideas sometimes proves difficult.

"I mean, the president has something like a 90 percent approval rating — please," Dr. Furman said. "For our country to keep up with competitiveness, we need to respond differently."

Mr. Herala, the "anger teacher," said much would be solved if people could just learn to say what they think and express their emotions, be it "I am angry because," or "I love you because," he said.

"We are," he said, "the Finnish version of the Japanese character."