



Talking to Each "Other"

by Sabina Mäki

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Anna is the Other Mother

"We do talk about getting married. We talk about the colours we will have at our wedding and the food we will serve. We are products of society to the extent that we want to be with one person only. We haven't set the date yet, though, I want to be engaged first," Anna ponders.

Anna Kortesalmi talks about getting married as anyone else. The difference to other people is that registering her relationship has only been possible since 2002, and getting married in a church is still not an option.

"Not being able to get married in a church is a painful topic for religious gay couples. Once at a lesbian wedding, the priest said she didn't have official permission to undertake the ceremony. It's difficult for people to understand why

their love for their spouse won't fit under the same roof as their religion.”

Anna herself has been living together with her first girlfriend, Seija, for more than a year now. For Anna, moving in with Seija also meant becoming a stepmother as they share their home with Seija's 12-year old son and 15-year old daughter. Accepting the new family member has been hard for the children, who are used to living with their mother and father.

“When I went to the parents' meeting at the school for the first time, the older one got very upset and said she could never go to school again. It turned out all right, but she still doesn't really want her friends to see me. I personally believe her friends think our family is sort of cool,” Anna is musing.

Seija's kids differ from the majority of kids in many ways. Their father is Indian, their religion is Hare Krishna and they speak English instead of Finnish because of having lived most of their lives abroad. Therefore, Anna wonders, why having a mother living with another woman appears to be so difficult to accept. A psychologist has however told Anna and Seija that children might feel a new family member to be threatening no matter what their sex is.

Missing the “Girlfriend Cell”

Anna says there is still narrow-mindedness in the society, but generally it is easy to be gay in Finland. The couple recently bought a house and all the practical matters, like getting a loan, went smoothly as ever. All the neighbours have been nice as well.

“I think they might be a bit confused whether to call the kids ours, mine or hers, though,” Anna wonders smiling.

The social system regards Anna and Seija as a couple without any problems, but Anna recalls she had problems with the National Pensions Institute (KELA), when she was living together with a male flat mate. The institute kept insisting they had to be a couple, though Anna said he was not even the right sex for her.

“If you basically only get irritated by some missing cells in forms, things are not extremely bad. It is individual people who are prejudiced and homophobic,” Anna claims.

She sometimes registers that people are staring at her and Seija when they are walking hand-in-hand in the streets. The couple tends to normalize the street

scenario by holding hands and demonstrating that they are gay, especially when they visit small towns.

Anna explains it mostly arouses positive interest, but she also knows some gay couples that wouldn't hold hands in some small, say, Ostrobothnian town. She confesses she also occasionally hesitates to kiss Seija right next to someone else – whether it is someone they know or a stranger.

Homophobia often comes out as an awkward silence or ridiculous jokes. Anna has noticed that many relatives and fellow workers tend to skip normal questions like asking the latest news. Lack of questions and avoiding the subject of homosexuality may also be just a sign of shyness. Anna hints, however, that in a woman, shyness and blushing often makes her wonder...

Another method of dealing with homophobia is joking about the whole subject. Anna often meets situations where people are telling jokes about gay people, expecting everyone else to be straight. "Once I was visiting a family and the parents were making awful jokes about all Swedes being gay in front of me and their own children", Anna reminisces.



Puzzling Stereotypes

The media often portrays gay people, mostly feminine gay men, as funny and laughable. Anna thinks gay men may be seen as a threat, because men are expected to be masculine. "I guess it is easier for female couples. Women tend

to show their feelings more openly, so people are used to seeing girls, friends or sisters walking hand-in-hand in the streets. Sometimes I even wonder whether some girls are a couple or not. Perhaps the relationship between two men is seen as more sexual, because the society is so penetration-centric. People are really puzzled how women can actually have sex,” Anna analyzes.

Having grown up in small towns without any gay role models around, Anna thinks media plays an immensely important role in normalizing homosexuality. Such things as lesbians did not even exist in her world when she was young.

As a freelance journalist Anna has a special chance to influence people’s prejudiced minds. A major part of her articles has some connection to homosexuality, whether it is a critique on a new theatre show or an article about the gay bars in Brussels. And of course Anna also writes for the *Z magazine*, which is published by SETA, the national organization for gay and lesbian people in Finland.



Oriental Finnish or One of a Kind?

Having grown up in between the Finnish and the Palestinian cultures, Aiman Kaddoura has a special view on the type of prejudice and racism different people might encounter in Finland.

“Our home had a very mixed culture. It was a Western home with an Oriental spice. We ate lots of ‘ähläm’ food for example,” Aiman describes his childhood in the 1970s. He clarifies that he likes to use the word “ähläm”, which normally has a degrading meaning in Finnish and is used by some Finns to describe Middle Eastern Muslims and their culture.

Aiman grew up in a small town called Vaajakoski in Central Finland. His Palestinian father was a Muslim, but didn’t really practice his religion. Yet, the family celebrated Christmas and Ramadan alike. A bit of Oriental spice was no problem at Vaajakoski, since Aiman does not recall to have met any racism until he was about 20.

“I have been raised knowing my roots, but I don’t represent any bigger culture than myself. I don’t even know what national identity means. Does it have

something to do with national borderlines? And what is Finnish culture? Does it mean going to work, having family dinners and watching television in the evening?”, Aiman asks.

He claims he tries to observe all people as individuals instead of as a part of some bigger group and hopes others to do the same. Nevertheless, Aiman feels sad that people sometimes forget his multicultural background completely, just because he speaks perfect Finnish.

“Once I was working in a factory and as we were having a cigarette break, someone started talking about a new African cleaner. Saying that foreigners steal jobs from Finns was a pretty weird thing to say right next to me,” Aiman recalls with a distressed voice.

Coming from Vaajakoski – Period!

Typical situations where Aiman Kaddoura meets prejudiced reactions have to do with guards and policemen. He occasionally recognizes guards looking at him as a potential thief when he is shopping. Once, he was asked by a policeman whether or not he had a residence permit.

“I don’t feel sad because of these incidents. These sorts of mistakes are human. Instead of talking about prejudice, I prefer to call them presumptions. Presumptions can be either negative or positive,” Aiman considers.

The presumptions that guards and policemen have may be negative and according to Aiman, they sometimes try to hide their presumptions by being overly polite and speaking exaggeratedly slowly. He also easily recalls a special positive incident that happened one rainy day as he was waiting for the streetlights to turn green. A woman standing next to him started pondering whether it rained so much wherever he was coming from. A wide smile passes Aiman’s face as he reminisces how he answered that it rained quite as much in Vaajakoski.

In fact, Aiman has had to develop his answering technique so that people will not ask more clarifying questions after he has already told them that he comes from Vaajakoski. Another example of a positive presumption that Aiman finds very sympathetic is that people often speak English to him even though he answers them in the clearest Finnish.

“My foreign name is something that always shows in phone calls, e-mails and job applications. It may have some sort of effect, but I honestly don’t think it would keep me from achieving things, like a job that I really want to get,” Aiman thinks.

Universal Prejudices

Though Aiman has come across several racist situations, none of the conflicts have ever ended up in fistfight.

“When someone tries to provoke me, I become ice cold and start developing dialogue. Statements like “You steal our work and girls” won’t withstand argumentation. Usually, these guys get frustrated and leave,” Aiman announces victoriously.

He proclaims that all people have similar reasons for racism and gives an example of a Moroccan bar, where men were worrying about similar things as they do in Finland: Loosing their jobs and women to Nigerian men.

“Richness and poverty cause universal fears. The prototype of an immigrant who steals jobs and collective money exists everywhere,” Aiman argues.

He seems to be happy to say that Finns don’t abuse these universal fears to protect and strengthen their national feelings. Besides, compared to other European countries, Aiman thinks Finland’s racism is pretty modest.

“The fact that Finland has been patient in accepting immigrants is good. There has been enough time for integration and it has worked out well. Having only minor differences in income is also a good way of preventing racism. The guy punching a Somali is often also supported by the society one way or another.”



Free from the Social Order

Rafael Lehtinen's first name has an extraordinary history. It was given to him ten years ago by a couple that lived in a commune with him and his family. At the same time, his wife was given the name Unikko, which is a Finnish word for poppy. Now Rafael is sitting in a shopping center in Eastern Helsinki, repeating the story of his unconventional lifestyle.

"I had my last honorable job as a taxi driver in 1992. Due to the depression, my employer reduced my working hours and so I quit the whole thing. Soon after that I met my wife and we started to explore healthy lifestyles together," Rafael starts.

Practicing their new healthy lifestyle did not only mean becoming vegetarians and giving up alcohol and medicine. For Rafael and his wife, it also meant practicing yoga and reading about mental growth.

Rafael explains that they also became consumption runaways, whose aim it is to use as few of the products and services that society provides as possible. Working is also not part of the ideology, unless it is something you really want to do.

“Lots of money and welfare have been produced in the world, but it hasn’t been shared amongst people. The society should look after people’s well-being by disassembling the corporate power and reducing the amount of manufactured goods. People would be content with products manufactured in small, local units,” Rafael is guessing.

Eventually Rafael and his wife isolated themselves from society and had as little contact with the outside world as possible. The dramatic change in lifestyle caused a lot of anxiety among their relatives and friends.

“First we thought we abandoned society, but then we realized that society had actually abandoned us. People are like a herd of sheep, who are taught to think in the same way. Different sheep are just not accepted. Everyone is supposed keep up with the enslaving system, to work and to agree,” says Rafael and argues that consensus secures the maintenance of power and of the system.

Life in a Community

In 1997, Rafael and Unikko ended up moving into a commune with a like-minded couple – and their children aged 1 and 8 years. For one year, they lived in a country house in a small town called Puumala, sharing everything: laughter, sadness and even credit cards.

“It was an intensive course in mental growth. We were trying to obtain well-being of mind and body, for example by feeding on organic food which we picked up from a farm nearby. Financially, we were exclusively living on family and unemployment benefits and we thought we were entitled to it, since we considered ourselves as researchers of a new lifestyle,” Rafael tells.

Members of the commune caused a stir in the little town by dressing up as “Indians” and playing drums while walking down the streets. They also enthusiastically told others about their lifestyle and ended up being the topic of several articles at the time.

After leaving the society in Puumala the following year, the Lehtinens visited various communes in Finland. As the weather started getting colder in autumn, the family steered their caravan down south and ended up in Los Pacos in Southern Spain.

“We spent one year in Spain, living in our caravan at a campsite. We never thought about tomorrow, so we often ran out of money. Living in the present alone requires a lot of mind control,” argues Rafael.

Busy with Organizations and Projects

After returning to Finland, the family settled down in Eastern Helsinki. For the past couple of years, Rafael has been working for several organizations, like the union for unemployed people in Helsinki and Väki Vallaton, which provides services for people with low incomes.

“We also turned into active residents. We planned a project that was supposed to increase the happiness of the local people by applying healthy and ecological lifestyles. We didn’t get any funding, though. The officials, who distributed the money, only listened to those with a title or high position and we were treated as inferiors. Inhabitants are not taken seriously nor being listened to in this society,” Rafael claims.



Nevertheless, he later got involved with the Ekoarki project, which set out to bring ecology to the community. First as a volunteer, later as a temporary employee, Rafael took part in setting up a recycling shop and a nature path. “It was something I really wanted to do. The local inhabitants were really being listened to in that project,” the activist is praising.

Lately, Rafael has also taken part in a civil journalism project by web-casting a show on the local radio station, Kontula. He has also worked for a project that

was aiming to employ artists. After becoming unemployed once again one month ago, he has spent his days reading, writing and helping people out at a mental health association called MieTo.

Waiting for Rafael's first unemployment benefit payment seems exceptionally long for the family since they have no income whatsoever up until then. Rafael's wife Unikko has refused to apply for any benefits due to problems with the Employment Service Agency. "We should have a basic income for everyone, because there's never enough work for everyone. People with low income are being bullied," Rafael argues.

Rafael admits that Finns basically have equal opportunities in their lives, but argues that the traditional class division is still alive and well. To him, it seems that the people from the lowest classes are highly affected by their backgrounds and have difficulties improving their lives.

Despite his occasional financial troubles, Rafael explains he is living the sort of life he wants to. He also feels he has set a fine example for his 10- and 17-year old children and hopes for them to copy his lifestyle eventually.

"But no matter where I go, I'm always different and I still keep looking for my own community."



Any Blood Products, Hannele?

On first sight, 26-year-old Hannele Huhtala looks like any other Finn. Because of her ethical conviction, though, she has chosen to belong to a minority – at least from the perspective of the sausage-loving majority of the Finnish people.

“I wanted to become a vegetarian already earlier, but my mother thought it was impossible until I was 16. Later, I think my parents didn’t let me, because they didn’t have the adequate knowledge nor the interest to learn about the vegetarian diet anyway,” Hannele says.

The unjust animal abuse and intensive meat production were the reasons why Hannele decided to become a vegetarian. Many of her friends were like-minded, which made her choice easier.

“Especially veganism was still a fairly unknown phenomena in Finland in the late 1990s. Sometimes, my vegan friends only got a salad for a school lunch,” Hannele recalls. Nevertheless, at the age of 21, Hannele decided to give up all animal-based products, including dairy products and eggs, as she became vegan.

“I had just started my studies and my new school nurse made quite a fuss about my diet. First, she inquired what I actually ate and after I’d gone through a long list of things, she asked me if I ate any blood products! After I had repeated I don’t eat any animal-based products, she started to explain how vital the blood products are. And this was the 21st century,” she remarks.

Hannele’s friend has just started her studies at a vocational school and is required to bring a doctor’s certificate about her diet – a diet, which is not due to an illness or an allergy, but her very own choice.

“The only reason I can think of is that there’s still a strong belief that especially girls and young women become vegetarians or vegans in order to loose weight. By asking for the certificate, the school makes sure it’s not just a temporary diet, but a permanent way of life,” Hannele thinks.

Veganism is a Consumer Choice

Many vegans think that an essential part of the diet is to tell other people that you’re doing it for the sake of the animals. Hannele is also happy to talk about veganism, but she stresses that she doesn’t want to be a messenger.

“Every now and then people ask me if I would hunt down and eat an animal if my other choice was to die. I get pretty annoyed by this sort of confrontation. Veganism is a consumer choice, which is based on voluntariness. Of course, I wouldn’t choose to die,” Hannele specifies. One of her friends tends to avoid the flood of critical questions by telling people she is “only” vegetarian.

Hannele explains that even the most considerate people have trouble understanding the uncompromising diet. By way of example, she tells that well-meaning friends may use vegetarian dough in their pastries. Fixated on their old habits though, they might easily forget that the egg topping is also not allowed in the vegan diet. “Prejudices are not as much generation-linked as they are gender-linked. Usually, it is men who have the hardest time understanding vegans,” Hannele concludes laughing.





At the Edge of the Finnish Art Community

“Many artists, myself included, actually want to stand outside of society, or have at least one foot outside of it. In a weird way, I’m most comfortable in a place I haven’t really melted into. I like the fact that as a foreigner in Finland I never begin a conversation with the assumption that you and I think the same,” says Mark Maher.

Mark is an American artist, who moved to Finland ten years ago after marrying a Finnish woman. Now married to a Hungarian, he has chosen to stay in the country.

“One of the reasons I wanted to move to Finland has to do with how Nordic societies are popularly imagined by the American left: almost as a sort of social pornography, how life might be if America just had better leaders. And of course, when you come here, you realize it really is pretty nice. In Finland, regular people are actually much closer to the decision-making process.” However, Mark points out that there is a trade-off that requires a correlation between self and state. He argues that in Finland, the social contract is based on the notion that everyone holds similar values. Mark talks about the decision between individual freedom and social justice.

According to Mark, Finland has a very transparent culture and it is very fair, relatively speaking. Nevertheless, the society has a very special system of context and connection, which is often particularly invisible for recently arrived foreigners.

“Once we get it, Finland can become an incredibly, almost dangerously comfortable culture to find your place in. The basic trick is to understand the huge meaning and relevance that Finnish society and individual Finns place on the notion of context. Who are you? Where do you come from? What organizations are you attached to here? And what do you represent here? And who has said that you’re ok before I’m even deciding to talk to you? Because I don’t just rely on my own judgement about you, but I rely on my social network’s collective judgement.”

The Problematic Position of Foreign-Born Artists

Mark Maher began his art career as a photographer, yet for many years his art has taken other forms as well. Now, his artistic work continues along with his professional career as a media artist and a copywriter at a digital media company. Despite numerous exhibitions and publications in Finland, Mark still feels ambivalent about his place in the Finnish art community.

“Finns are happy to have foreigners move here to design cellular phones or to clean their toilets. They’re not quite as comfortable to have state art funding go to foreign-born, Finland-based artists. When will the Finnish art community look with pride at how culturally diverse its own resident community of artists is?”, asks Mark.

Over a ten year period, he has been unsuccessful in receiving any significant grants from Finland, and to him it seems that multiculturalism is always seen as a complication, a burden or even as a threat. He acknowledges that art grants are extremely subjective awards to be given, but argues there is a clear bias toward foreign-born artists. The level of grants for foreign residents are embarrassing, according to Mark.

“I meet educated, open-minded Finns who know I’ve lived in Finland for ten years. They know I work and pay taxes. They know I must have permanent legal standing here. And they know I’m a working artist, who’s had some significant exhibitions and publications here, but then they ask: ‘Well, are you allowed to apply for grants here?’ It’s not that they’re against the idea, but they are honestly puzzled whether somebody in my category would be eligible. Funny how no one ever wonders if I have to pay taxes!”

Mark was recently invited to exhibit his work at the Amos Anderson Art Museum in Helsinki – as a first non-Nordic Finland-based artist. Though he doesn’t think his art is closely linked to specific Finnish artistic traditions or schools, Mark feels

it has been strongly influenced by the Finnish landscape and the thoughtfulness of some Finnish artists he has come to know.

The artist acknowledges that art is supposed to express something of the soul of the nation and that the historical artistic traditions play an important role in any society. He points out, however, that Finland has certain insecurities because it is a relatively young and small nation state. According to Mark, there is a lot of anxiety about Finland looking presentable and culturally unique on an international art level.

“A very revealing point about how foreign artists are categorized here is that the only artist’s union I have ever received an invitation to join was called ‘The Finnish Union of Foreign and Handicapped Artists’. I think it managed to insult everyone at the same time,” Mark sums up laughing.